

THE DOCTRINE OF THE MINISTRY OF THE KEYS

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The doctrine of the Ministry of the Keys is of special significance to us who have the privilege of serving the Lord in the preaching or teaching ministry. This doctrine involves, among other things, the right of the church to call men and women into the public ministry. Consequently, it involves the authority we have for doing our work. It speaks to us also about the spirit and the manner in which we will fulfill our responsibilities to the Lord and to those who have called us. The doctrine of the Ministry of the Keys is deserving, therefore, of our careful and repeated study.

The importance of this doctrine is evident from the fact that Jesus conferred the power to forgive and to retain sins on His disciples on three separate occasions. In addition, He delegated this authority to them in more general terms on other occasions when He commissioned them to preach the Gospel and to administer the Sacraments.

A review of this important teaching of our Lord ought to kindle in us a renewed zeal and enthusiasm for the wonderful work of the ministry. What a blessed privilege we have! As representatives of Christ and of His church we have been called to open the gates of heaven for sinners by bringing them the glorious Gospel of God's gracious forgiveness for Christ's sake. There is not a more responsible nor a more satisfying calling that one can have in this life. May this study then serve to make us more deeply conscious of our privileges and responsibilities as pastors and teachers in the church of our Lord Jesus Christ!

It may be well to recall at the very outset that the so-called Fifth Chief Part of the Catechism, The Ministry of the Keys and Confession, was not originally

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a part of Luther's Small Catechism. While Luther himself added the questions dealing with Confession, the part we call "The Ministry of the Keys" was derived from the Nuernberg Sermons for Children of 1533. These sermons were the work of Andreas Osiander and Dominicus Slepner. "The Ministry of the Keys" was incorporated as an independent Chief Part for the first time in a catechism published by Caspar Aquila in 1538. Aquila drew his material from the Nuernberg Sermons and placed it between Baptism and the Lord's Supper. His example was followed by other publishers since it was recongized as a valuable addition to Luther's original Catechism. But since Luther was not the author, it was not included in the Book of Concord of 1580.

We turn now to the doctrine itself, following in general the arrangement of the material in our Synod's Catechism. We direct our attention especially to these three questions:

- I. What are the Keys of the kingdom of heaven?
- II. To whom did Jesus entrust these Keys?
- III. How are the Keys to be used?

I. What Are the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven?

In the sixteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew Jesus asks His disciples, "Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?" They answer that some people thought He was a reincarnation of John the Baptist, whom Herod had murdered. Others thought He was Elijah, while still others speculated that He might be Jermiah or one of the other prophets returned to life.

Then Jesus asked His disciples directly, "But whom say ye that I sam?" He wanted to clarify and to crystallize their convictions.

Speaking for all the disciples, Peter replied, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus accepted Peter's confession and pronounced him blessed. At the same time He reminded him, however, that he did not come to this understanding and faith by his own reason or strength. It was God who revealed

this truth to him.

Then, making a striking play on the meaning of Peter's name, Jesus continues in words that we might paraphrase somewhat as follows: "Your name is Peter, which means rock; and I am going to build my church on a rock, on the saving truth which you have just confessed, namely, that I am the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus will use Peter in building His church. For this reason He adds the significant promise, "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven."

The word "keys" in this passage is a metaphor. A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a comparison is made. Jesus is not talking about iron or gold keys, but about something that works like a key. Keys are used to lock or unlock a door. The keys of the kingdom of heaven are the power or authority to open or close the doors to heaven. The owner of a house possesses the keys to the house. So Jesus possesses the keys to God's house. He can open or close the doors to heaven. This power or authority He now gives to Peter.

Two other passages in the Bible speak of Jesus as having keys. In Revelation 1:18 Jesus says, "I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death." Jesus is the Conqueror of hell and death. He therefore has complete power and authority over them.

In the third chapter of this same book our Lord addresses a letter to the congregation at Philadelphia in Asia Minor. He introduces it with the words, "These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth and no man shutteth, and shutteth, and no man openeth" (Re 3:7). Here Jesus is obviously applying to Himself the words spoken by the Lord in Isaiah 22:22. Shebna, King Hezekiah's treasurer, was unworthy of his high office. For this reason God announced that He would take it away from him and give it to a man named Eliakim. Then God went on to say, "And the key of David will I lay upon his shoulder; so shall he open, and none shall shut;

and he shall shut, and none shall open."

David and his kingdom were a type of Christ and His Messianic kingdom. This incident, then, was also typical. The responsibility and control over the affairs of the house of David which God was entrusting to Eliakim prefigured the authority which Christ, David's greater Son, would exercise over David's spiritual house, the church. Just as Eliakim, the king's new treasurer, would have complete control over the royal treasury since he had the key, so Jesus has complete control over the treasurer of heaven. When Jesus opens the gate to Paradise for a sinner, as He did for the penitent thief on the cross, no man can shut it. And when He once shuts the door, it remains shut.

Jesus' kingdom is far different from any earthly kingdom. "My kingdom is not of this world," He told Pontious Pilate (Jn 18:36). His kingdom is not established or maintained by force of arms. It is a kingdom that comes to men through the preaching of the Gospel of truth.

Ordinarily, when we hear the word "kingdom," we think of a king and his realm, including the territory and the subjects over which he rules. As the word is used in Scripture, however, the emphasis is not so much on the king's territory and people as on the king's activity of ruling, on his reigning. In His parables, for example, Jesus often says, "The kingdom of heaven is like...", and then He goes on to describe God's kingly activity.

The kingdom of heaven, then, is the gracious activity which Christ, the heavenly King, carries on in men's hearts wherever His Word of truth is proclaimed. Through His Gospel of pardon and peace He snatches sinners from the clutches of the devil and brings them under His saving, life-giving sway. Earthly kingdoms confer earthly benefits on their citizens, but Christ's heavenly kingdom bestows spiritual blessings on those who come under His gracious influence. He gives them spiritual and eternal life. "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly," He declares (Jn 10:10). Even death cannot rob His disciples of the joys of everlasting life and heavenly glory.

Returning now to Matthew 16, we see that Jesus drops the metaphor of keys and introduces another, somewhat different picture. He tells Peter, "Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:19). In chapter 18 He gives all His disciples this same authority, saying, "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 18:18).

What is to be bound and loosed? Scripture does not leave us in the dark. It interprets itself. In John 20 Jesus speaks of the same matter without using any figures of speech. In the evening of the day of His resurrection Jesus appeared to His disciples and commissioned them to go out as His ambassadors. "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you," He told them. Then He breathed on them and said, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" (Jn 20:21-23).

From this we see that to "bind" sins means to retain or not forgive them; to "loose" means to remit or to forgive them. When they are bound, the sinner is not relieved of the burden on his conscience. But when they are loosed, the entire load of guilt and shame is removed.

Now it ought to be clear also what the Keys of the kingdom of heaven are. They are the Gospel. They are the means of grace, the Gospel in the Word and in the Sacraments.

Jesus has given His church the commission, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature." He immediately adds, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mk 16:15,16). With the key of the Gospel heaven is opened to sinners. When the Gospel is rejected by unbelievers, the doors to heaven are closed. There is no other key to open them except the Gospel of Christ.

The Gospel announces that God has forgiven the sins of all men for Christ's

sake. He who believes this actually possesses this forgiveness. His sins are remitted. He who does not believe, however, has no forgiveness. His sins are retained. He will personally suffer the punishment for his sins, eternal death and damnation in hell.

The Catechism states:

The Ministry of the Keys is the peculiar authority of the Church, given by Christ to His Church on earth, to forgive the sins of the penitent sinners unto them, but to retain the sins of the impenitent as long as they do not repent.

Looking at the Confessions of our church, we see that Article XXVIII of The Augsburg Confession defines the Keys as "a power or commandment of God, to preach the Gospel, to remit and retain sins, and to administer the Sacraments" (par. 5; Trig., 85). Speaking of the Gospel promise, The Smalcald Articles in The Treatise of the Power and Primacy of the Pope define the Keys as "nothing else than the office whereby this promise is communicated to every one who desires it" (par. 24; Trig., 511).

Our Synod's Explanation of Luther's Catechism asks the question, "What is meant by the Keys?" and gives the answer, "The Keys are the Gospel in Word and Sacraments, the means to open the kingdom of heaven" (p.208).

Luther and other fathers of the church sometimes speak of the authority to preach the Gospel which Jesus conferred on His church as two keys, a binding key and a loosing key. This way of speaking is certainly justified. There is also some truth, however, in the remark which Bengel (+1752) makes that "the same key opens and closes" (Gnomon, ad Mt 16:19).

In II Corinthians 2:15,16 the Apostle Paul points out that his Gospel ministry had a twofold result: "For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: to the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life." Where the Gospel was rejected, the Keys served to bind sins and close heaven; where it was accepted in faith, the Keys served to loose sins and open heaven.

When a sinner is impenitent, that is, when he despises the Gospel and

refuses to believe, his sins are retained, that is, he has no forgiveness. On the Day of Judgment Jesus will judge men according to their attitude toward His Gospel. He tells us, "He that rejecteth me and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day" (Jn 12:48).

Unbelief is the one sin that damns. Referring to Himself as the Son of God, whom God sent into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved, Jesus told Nicodemus, "He that believeth on him is not condemned, but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (Jn 3:18). To announce to an unbelieving, impenitent sinner that the wrath of God abides on him - that is to use the Keys to bind.

One who rejects the Gospel remains under the curse and condemnation of the Law. As long as he continues in his impenitence and unbelief, he is without hope.

By emphasizing the fact that the Keys are the Gospel of Christ, we do not mean to say that the church is not to preach the Law also. But the preaching of the Law is, as our Confessions state, in reality a "foreign work of Christ, by which He arrives at His proper office, that is, to preach grace, console, and quicken" (F.C., Epit., VI0; Trig., 803). The Law serves to reveal sin and to terrify consciences with its demands and threats. Unless the sinner recognizes the hopelessness and helplessness of his condition, he will have nothing but contempt for the Gospel. The preaching of the Law serves, therefore, as a handmaiden of the Gospel. The binding Key is to be used in the interest of the Gospel. Luther emphasizes this point in his treatise on the Keys, written in 1530:

The key which binds carries forward the work of the law. It is profitable to the sinner inasmuch as it reveals to him his sin, admonishes him to fear God, and causes him to tremble...The loosing key carries forward the work of the gospel. It invites to grace and mercy. It comforts and promises life and salvation through the forgiveness of sins. In short, the two keys advance and foster the gospel by simply proclaiming these two things: repentance and forgiveness of sins. (LW 40:372f).

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When Jesus says to Peter, "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven," He obviously implies that they are His to give. They are His because of His triumphant victory over sin, death and hell. They are His because He fulfilled all the demands of the Law in our stead and suffered the penalty for our sins as our Substitute. The perfection and all-sufficiency of His work of atonement were attested by His resurrection, God's testimony and seal that Christ "hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (II Tm 1:10).

In Nikolaus Herman's beautiful Christmas hymn "Praise God the Lord, Ye Sons of Men" we sing:

He opens us again the door
Of Paradise today;
The cherub guards the gate no more.
To God our thanks we pay. (LH 105:8)

We need to note carefully that the loosing key actually declares the sins loosed, forgiven. It does not merely announce that God is willing to forgive. Through the word of absolution God Himself actually forgives sins. "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them." There are no conditions attached to this loosing, such as: If you are sufficiently sorry, or, If you believe strongly enough, or, If you live a holy enough life. Any conditions such as these, which men, unfortunately, so often attach to this forgiveness, inevitably overthrow the doctrine of objective justification. Jesus did not gain for us merely the possibility of forgiveness and justification. No, by His vicarious suffering and death He gained a complete and perfect pardon for us, a beautiful and spotless garment of righteousness that fully and effectively covers all our unrighteousness. Those who make the forgiveness of sins dependent on something in man are preaching "another gospel, which is not another" (Ga 1:6,7), just as the Judaizers in Galatia did.

God has actually forgiven the sins of all men for Christ's sake, whether they believe it or not. Paul asks, "What if some did not believe? shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect?" (Rm 3:3). His answer is, "God

forbid!" The fact remains that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them" (II Cor 5:19).

Luther is very emphatic on this point. He says:

Even he who does not believe that he is free and his sins forgiven shall also learn, in due time, how assuredly his sins were forgiven, even though he did not believe it...He who does not believe what the keys give receives, of course, nothing. But this is not the keys' fault. Many do not believe the gospel, but this does not mean that the gospel is not true or effective. A king gives you a castle. If you do not accept it, then it is not the king's fault, nor is he guilty of a lie. But you have deceived yourself, and the fault is yours. The king certainly gave it. (LW 40:366f).

The Ministry of the Keys is, therefore, finally nothing else than the application of objective justification to the individual sinner. Objective justification is the Very heart of the Gospel. It is the amazing and faith-generating truth that "as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life" (Rm 5:18). It is called objective because it is an objective reality, a ready blessing, entirely apart from anything in man. God comes to us and announces the astonishing fact that Jesus "was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification" (Rm 4:25). For His sake we are justified. For His sake we are forgiven.

The sinner comes into possession of the gift of salvation only by faith. "The just shall live by faith" (Rm 1:17). "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" (Mk 16:16). Faith is the hand by which the sinner lays hold of and takes this precious gift of God. "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rm 5:1). This faith is worked by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel itself, which "is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth" (Rm 1:16). "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God," as Paul testifies (Rm 10:17).

Jesus is the Savior of the whole world. During His public ministry on earth He freely offered the forgiveness of sins to all. Without any conditions or qualifications He extended the invitation universally, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28).

To the man sick of the palsy the Lord Jesus gave the comforting assurance, "Son, be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee" (Mt 9:2). When the scribes questioned His authority to forgive sins with the argument, "Who can forgive sins but God only?" Jesus did not deny the validity of their premise. It is true, only God can forgive sins. But Jesus is God, and to prove this He healed the paralyzed man by merely speaking a word.

Incidentally, it is important to note that Jesus did not say to the man, "If you believe, your sins will be forgiven you." He did not make forgiveness dependent on anything the man did. He simply said, "Thy sins be forgiven thee," without attaching conditions of any kind. And the Gospel word itself worked faith in the man's heart.

Yes, Jesus has the Keys of the kingdom of heaven. He has the authority and power to forgive sins, and during His public ministry He freely extended this forgiveness to all penitent sinners.

On the other hand, Jesus also used the binding key, denying entrance to heaven to the impenitent as long as they did not repent. He minced no words in applying this key to the hypocritical Pharisees. Bluntly He rebuked them, "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" (Mt 23:33).

The Scriptures make it very clear, therefore, that Jesus possesses the Keys of the kingdom of heaven. He has the key of David. He opens, and no man shuts; and shuts, and no man opens (Re 3:7).

Jesus is still using these Keys, but He is using them through others. This brings us to our second point.

II. To Whom Did Jesus Entrust These Keys?

In Matthew 16, as we have previously heard, Jesus told Peter, "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" (Mt 16:19). As our Confessions point out, however,

Peter is the representative of the entire assembly of apostles, as appears from the text itself. For Christ asks not Peter alone, but says: Whom do ye say that I am? And what is here said in the singular number: I will give unto thee the keys; and whatsoever thou shalt bind, etc., is elsewhere expressed in the plural, Matthew 18,18: Whatsoever ye shall bind, etc. And in John 20,23: Whose soever sins ye remit, etc. These words testify that the keys are given alike to all the apostles, and that all the apostles are alike sent forth. (Sm. Art., Of the Power and Primacy of the Pope, par. 23; Trig., 511).

Peter's fine confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," was not only his own, personal confession. Peter was acting as spokesman for all the disciples. They all agreed with this confession.

So also the promise which Jesus made to Peter inasmuch as he was a believer was intended also for the others in whose name Peter had made this confession. Jesus was not giving any special right or privilege to Peter. He was not appointing him, as Rome claims, as His vicar and successor here on earth. He was not according to Peter any kind of primacy over the other apostles. This point too, is emphasized in our Confessions:

In these passages Peter is the representative of the entire assembly of the apostles, and for this reason they do not accord to Peter any prerogative, or superiority, or lordship. (Sm. Art., Tract., par. 24; Trig., 511).

Rome claims that Jesus gave the Keys only to Peter, who then handed them over to his successor, and he in turn to his, and so on. So the man who sits in the so-called chair of St. Peter in Rome today is allegedly the sole possessor of these Keys and has supreme authority in the church.

This claim has no foundation whatsoever either in Scripture or in history. Where is the Scripture passage that teaches that Jesus appointed Peter and his successors as His representatives here on earth? Where is the Scripture passage that tells us that Peter conveyed the Keys to a successor? Where is the Scripture passage that supports the claim that Peter held the primacy among the apostles? Does not Luke 22:25,26 teach the very opposite when it says, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so"? History and the church fathers

also testify, as our Confessions show, that the church for many centuries did not acknowledge the primacy or superiority of the bishop of Rome. (See Sm. Art., Tract., par. 12-19; Trig., 507-509).

As we have carried out in the first part of this essay, the Keys actually are the Gospel; and the Gospel, as we know, was not entrusted to Peter alone, nor to the apostles alone, but to all believers, to the entire Christian church.

Not only the eleven apostles but other disciples as well were in the upper room in Jerusalem when Jesus appeared to them in the evening of the day of His resurrection (Lk 24:33). It was to this entire group that He said, "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" (Jn 20:23). It was on the whole group of those who believed in Him that Jesus laid the solemn responsibility "that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Lk 24:47). All of his followers were entrusted with the Great Commission, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations" (Mt 28:19).

For this reason our Confessions state:

Just as the promise of the Gospel belongs certainly and immediately to the entire Church, so the keys belong immediately to the entire Church. (Sm. Art., Tract., par. 24; Trig., 511).

The Catechism also, as we recall, teaches that the Keys were given to the church.

The Ministry of the Keys is the peculiar authority of the Church, given by Christ to His Church on earth, to forgive the sins of penitent sinners unto them, but to retain the sins of the impenitent as long as they do not repent.

As the context of Matthew 16 clearly shows, Jesus gave the Keys to Peter as a believer. Peter had confessed his faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus reminded Peter that flesh and blood had not revealed this to him. He did not come to this faith by virtue of the fact that he was the son of Jonas. It was a gift of God. All those, therefore - and only those - who stand on the rock that Peter stood on, the blessed truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, possess the Keys.

This is evident also from Matthew 18, where Jesus describes Himself

as the Shepherd who leaves his ninety and nine sheep in order to rescue the one that was lost. In a similar way His disciples are to have a loving concern for a brother who has strayed from the fold.

First the one who knows about a fellow Christian's sin is to try to rescue him. If he fails, he is to seek the aid of one or two others. If they also are unsuccessful, finally the help of the entire church is to be enlisted. "Tell it unto the church," Jesus says (Mt 18:17). If the church, too, does not succeed in winning back the fallen brother, then each and every member of the church is to regard the impenitent sinner as a heathen and a publican. The binding key is to be applied. And this is effective, for Jesus says, "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 18:18).

Yes, Jesus has entrusted His church with the Keys of the kingdom of heaven. When He speaks of the "church," He is referring to those who believe in Him, those who are gathered together in His name, for He says, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20).

That the Keys are given to believers and not to anyone else is evident also from John 20. Jesus first says, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost," and then He empowers His disciples to remit and to retain sins.

Every believer is a priest of God, authorized and commissioned to preach the Gospel, or, in other words, to use the Keys. The universal priesthood of believers is clearly taught in I Peter 2:9, "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."

As a Christian, each of us possesses the Keys individually. Each of us has the privilege and responsibility to be a personal witness for Christ in his daily life. We, who are ourselves sinners and who have tasted God's goodness and mercy and love, are the channels of His grace to others. We are a vital link in the chain of salvation.

But we also possess the Keys jointly with our fellow Christians. The Holy Ghost has united us with many brothers and sisters in the faith in our several

congregations and in our Synod. Such groups of Jesus' disciples gather together in His name and have His promise that He is in the midst of them (Mt 18:20). They possess the Keys and are authorized to use them.

This brings us to our final question:

III. How Are the Keys to be Used?

Since the Keys belong to Jesus, and since we Christians have them only as a trust from Him, it is self-evident that they are to be used according to His will. The sins of penitent sinners are to be forgiven, and the sins of the impenitent are to be retained. Heaven is not to be closed to the penitent or opened to the impenitent. Those who feel sorrow and contrition because of their sins are to be comforted as Jesus comforted the man sick of the palsy, "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee" (Mt 9:2). Those who despise God's grace and reject Christ's righteousness are to be barred from the kingdom of heaven, as were Hymenaeus and Alexander, who made shipwreck of their faith and whom Paul delivered to Satan that they might learn not to blaspheme (I Tm 1:19,20).

The Catechism teaches this truth in the familiar words:

The Ministry of the Keys is the peculiar authority of the Church, given by Christ to His Church on earth, to forgive the sins of penitent sinners unto them, but to retain the sins of the impenitent as long as they do not repent.

Penitent sinners are those who recognize their sins, confess their guilt, and cast themselves wholly on the mercy and grace of God. Impenitent sinners either deny their guilt, as the Pharisees did, or, despairing, turn away from the Savior in unbelief, as Judas did.

In the third chapter of Acts we are told how Peter and John healed a man who had been lame from birth. When a crowd gathered, Peter spoke to them about Jesus, in whose name he and John had made the lame man to walk. Peter pointed out to them what a great sin they had committed in killing the Prince of life. He exhorted them, "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out" (Ac 3:19). As a result of Peter's preaching, "many of them which

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heard the word believed" (Ac 4:4). As penitent sinners they embraced God's forgiveness, and their sins were blotted out. In God's name and by His authority the apostles used the Keys to admit them to the kingdom of heaven.

In the tenth chapter of this same book Peter testifies to Cornelius and his house concerning Christ, "To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins" (Ac 10:43). Those who believe are penitent sinners; those who do not believe are impenitent.

The impenitent are to be excluded from the kingdom of heaven. At Antioch in Pisidia, for example, Paul preached the Gospel in the synagogue on the Sabbath day. On the following Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the Word of God (Ac 13:44). This filled the Jews with envy. They contradicted Paul and rejected the Gospel with vehement blasphemy. "Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles" (Ac 13:46). Thus they applied the binding key.

Each key fits its own lock. The loosing key will not work where the binding key is to be used, and the binding key will not work where the loosing key fits. The power in these Keys is Christ's. If man attempts to use the Keys contrary to Christ's will, he cannot succeed. Thus when the pope excommunicated Luther on January 3, 1521, his attempt to employ the binding key failed. What he tried to bind was not bound in heaven because he was not acting in accord with the Word and will of Christ. Luther did not reject the Gospel in unbelief. On the contrary, it was his comfort and strength.

We have noted earlier that the Keys have been committed to all Christians and that they administer them in part through their personal testimony. They also administer them in conjunction with their fellow Christians by supporting and taking an active part in the work of the church. The church administers the

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Keys in a general way by publicly preaching and teaching the Gospel, even as Jesus did when He "went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom" (Mt 9:35). In its public worship, in its Christian day schools, in its Sunday schools and vacation Bible schools, in its Bible classes, in its periodicals and other publications, and in its use of radio, television, and other communications media, the church is using the Keys. Through all these agencies believers are functioning as ambassadors for Christ. He has committed to them the word of reconciliation, and they are now appealing to men, "Be ye reconciled to God!" (II Cor 5:19-21).

Not only are the Keys used when the sermon is preached, but also in the sacramental elements of the liturgy, particularly in the Absolution following the Confession of Sins. In the Order of Holy Communion an especially solemn form of the Absolution is employed. Addressing the congregation, which has confessed its sins and declared that it justly deserves God's temporal and eternal punishment, the pastor pronounces the words of absolution:

Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

Here we see the Keys in use. If the question is asked, "What right does man have to forgive sins?" the answer is found in the commission of Jesus, "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you...Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them" (Jn 20:21,23).

Of course, the pastor does not forgive sins in his own name or by his own authority. He forgives them "in the stead and by the command of" the Lord Jesus Christ. Here the Savior's words apply, "He that heareth you heareth me" (Lk 10:16). The pastor is, therefore, not merely giving the assurance that God has forgiven sins, but through him God actually forgives them. The voice is the voice of man, but the word is the word of God. Luther remarks, "Though you hear, indeed, a man's voice, you do not hear a man's but God's Word and surely will receive the forgiveness

of sins attached to it, if you will accept it by faith" (S.L., XIIIa, 917; quoted by Walther, Law and Gospel, p. 183f).

For the public administration of the Keys God has instituted the office of the public ministry. God wills that all things be done decently and in order (I Cor. 14:40). No one is therefore to preach or teach in the name of a group of fellow Christians unless he is called to do this. Paul enunciates this principle in Romans 10:15 when he asks, "How shall they preach except they be sent?" For this reason the Augsburg Confession declares, "No one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called" (A.C., Art. XIV., Trig., 49).

God has set down the qualifications for this office (I Timothy 3 and Titus 1), and He provides His church with individuals endowed with the necessary gifts. The ascended Christ "gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Eph 4:11,12). When the church calls pastors and teachers, professors and missionaries, executives and officials to administer the Keys in their name, then those who are called may be assured that God Himself has called them. This is clear from the Apostle Paul's words to the elders of the congregation at Ephesus, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Ac 20:28).

Concerning the church's right to administer the Keys by calling workers into the office of the public ministry the Smalcald Articles declare:

Wherever the Church is, there is the authority to administer the Gospel. Therefore it is necessary for the Church to retain the authority to call, elect, and ordain ministers. And this authority is a gift which in reality is given to the Church, which no human power can wrest from the Church, as Paul also testifies to the Ephesians, 4,8, when he says: He ascended, He gave gifts to men. And he enumerates among the gifts especially belonging to the Church pastors and teachers, and adds that such are given for the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ. Hence, wherever there is a true church, the right to elect and ordain ministers necessarily exists. (Of the Power and Jurisdiction of Bishops, 67; Trig., 523).

It is self-evident, of course, that when we are speaking about the public ministry, we are referring not only to the office of pastor, but to every office which the church establishes for the preaching or teaching of the Gospel, including that of the Christian teacher, whether this is on the elementary or on a higher level.

Will not the fact that God Himself has called us through the church motivate and encourage us to be faithful in fulfilling our responsibilities? Will not the privilege that we have in serving as God's spokesmen to those entrusted to our care inspire us to be conscientious and zealous in our calling? Certainly we will not want to look upon our office as a mere job that puts food on our table, clothes on our back, and shoes on our feet. Who are we, unworthy earthen vessels that we are, that God should deign to chose us for such a high calling? What gifts or talents do we have that He has not given us?

If at times it may seem as if the members of our congregations do not appreciate what we are doing, or compensate us as we think they should, or accord us the honor we feel we deserve, is it perhaps because we ourselves have a wrong attitude toward our work? Is ours a mercenary spirit? Have we at times been short-tempered with our pupils or ill-mannered toward our members? Have we at times been negligent in preparing for our classes or other assignments? Have we been unwilling to do more than is specified in our call? Have we perhaps without realizing it communicated the low esteem in which we ourselves hold our office to others? Do we at times perhaps act like hired hands instead of under-shepherds of the Good Shepherd, who "came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28)?

Certainly these are questions that all of us need to ask ourselves and to answer honestly. And I am certain that all of us will have to admit that we have often fallen short of the example of self-sacrificing service our Lord Jesus has set for us. Should not His willingness to forgive our sins and shortcomings in the conduct of our high office prompt us to resolve to serve Him more faithfully, diligently, and conscientiously in the future?

It may happen that hypocrites occupy the office of the ministry. Yet the power of the Keys is not invalidated by their unworthiness. Jesus told the people of His day, "The scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: all therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not" (Mt 23:2,3).

The power of the Keys rests in the Word and promise of Christ, not in the person of the administrator. Therefore the Apology of the Augsburg Confession states:

Neither does the fact that the Sacraments are administered by the unworthy detract from the efficacy, because, on account of the call of the Church, they represent the person of Christ, and do not represent their own persons, as Christ testifies, Luke 10,16: He that heareth you heareth Me. When they offer the Word of God, when they offer the Sacraments, they offer them in the stead and place of Christ. Those words of Christ teach us not to be offended by the unworthiness of the ministers. (Art. VII, 28; Trig., 237).

We have been speaking about the administration of the Keys to groups of people as they are administered in the public preaching of the Word, in the general absolution pronounced by the pastor on the congregation, in the daily instruction in the classroom of a Christian school, in the Sunday school, vacation Bible school, Bible classes, and other gathering of Christians.

The Keys may also be administered to individuals. The Augsburg Confession states:

This power is exercised only by teaching or preaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments, according to their calling, either to many or to individuals. (Art. XXVIII; Trig., 85:8).

Thus, for example, in the Sacraments the forgiveness of sins is given personally to the individual recipient. Baptism, as Scripture plainly teaches, washes away sins. It removes the guilt of all sin, of original sin as well as of all sins of thought, word, and deed. "Be baptized and wash away thy sins," Ananias said to Saul as he sat in blindness in Damascus after Christ appeared to him (Ac 22:16). Peter assured the multitudes on Pentecost that through Baptism they would receive "the remission of sins" (Ac 2:38).

Equally personal is the forgiveness conveyed to the individual in the Lord's Supper. In, with, and under the bread and wine our Savior gives us His very Body and Blood, the same Body and Blood with which He purchased our forgiveness when He sacrificed Himself for us on the cross.

"Take, eat, this is my Body, which is given for you," He says. "Take, drink ye all of it; this cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you for the remission of sins" (quoted from the Catechism). With the gift of His Body and Blood He therefore actually forgives our sins. He makes us sharers in the blessings of the New Testament, according to His promise, "This is the New Testament in my blood" (I Cor 11:25). In Romans 11:27 He explains the meaning of this New Testament or New Covenant when, referring to Jeremiah 31:31-34, He says, "This is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins." What an amazing gift of grace this is, what a wondrous application of the loosing key!

In addition, the Keys are used in an individual way when one Christian forgives the sins of another, as Jesus bids us to do when He teaches us to pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us" (Lk 11:4). That we are authorized to forgive others is clearly implied in Jesus' words, "If ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Mt 6:14,15).

The Keys are administered in an individual manner also when a troubled sinner confesses his sins privately to his pastor and receives private absolution from him. They are administered individually when the pastor visits the sick and comforts them with the Gospel of God's love in Christ. They are administered personally and individually when a Christian teacher assures a repentant student that the sin he has committed is forgiven for Jesus' sake, whether this sin involves stealing, cheating in a test, doing physical harm to a fellow student, or any of the countless other transgressions of God's commandments that a teacher must deal with also in a Christian school.

The Bible gives us an example of the private, personal use of the Keys in the story of Nathan and David. Nathan confronted David with his sins of adultery and murder by telling him a parable which prompted David unwittingly to pronounce judgment on himself. "Thou art the man!" Nathan then declared. After more than a year of impenitence, David's hard heart was finally crushed by the hammer of the Law. "I have sinned against the Lord," David confessed. Thereupon Nathan forgave his sin, assuring him, "The Lord also hath put away they sin; thou shalt not die" (II Sm 12:1-14).

How often we stand in need of such assurance and consolation! What a gracious provision God has made for our need to hear words such as these when our conscience accuses us and we are burdened with an overwhelming sense of guilt! Then our pastor or a fellow Christian can be a Nathan to us and in the name of God say to us, "The Lord hath put away they sin!" And when he so speaks, "this is as valid and certain in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself."

Most personal finally, also, is the use of the Keys in the effort to restore a fallen brother as Jesus speaks of it in Matthew 18:15-20. We touched on this briefly when we spoke of the fact that Jesus has given the Keys to the church. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, loves every one of His sheep and does not want a single one to perish. So also the members of His church will have a shepherd-like concern for every brother. Having the mind of Christ and imbued with His spirit, they will not ask with Cain, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gn 4:9). Rather, if one sees a brother fall into sin, he will go to him, tell him his fault, and call him to repentance. If he succeeds, he will rejoice and comfort the penitent with words of absolution. The lost sheep has been rescued.

If he fails, however, he will not abandon his efforts to gain the brother. He will take one or two others with him, fellow Christians who are equally concerned about the sinner's soul, and together they will endeavor to show him his sin and its dire consequences. How happy they will be if the fallen brother sees his sin, confesses it, and receives their assurance of God's forgiveness with a believing heart!

Should these efforts, too, be without avail, however, the case is still not to be given up as hopeless. Perhaps if the whole congregation, the entire fellowship of believers with whom the fallen brother is associated, is drawn in and their help if enlisted, the sinner will come to recognize the error of his ways and repent. If they are successful, the whole congregation will rejoice together with the angels in heaven that the brother who was dead is alive again, that he who was lost is found.

If, however, the brother disregards their words, clings to his sin, and hardens his heart in impenitence, there is still one final step to be taken, one final effort that love will dictate. "Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." We call this excommunication. The impenitent sinner is to be excluded from the fellowship of believers. He is to be told that his actions prove that he is not a Christian and that the right hand of fellowship is being withdrawn from him until he shows that he has had a change of heart. If he continues in the course he is following, his end will be eternal death and damnation.

Thus the binding key is to be applied. The doors to heaven are to be locked for the sinner. His sins are to be retained. And Jesus adds, "Verily I say unto, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven." In all of this the believers will not have neglected to take the matter to the Lord in prayer. They will ask Him to guide them to speak the proper words and to bless their efforts with success. Jesus promises that such prayers will be heard: "And again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven" (Mt 18:19).

When the final step of excommunication is eventually regretfully taken, the Savior Himself stands behind this action. He Himself is acting through His church, for He says, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20). What is bound on earth is bound in heaven.

Luther draws our attention to the fact that Jesus does not say, "What I bind and loose in heaven, you shall also bind and loose on earth." Luther asks:

How could we find out what God binds and looses in heaven? Never. And the keys would be without purpose and to no avail. Neither does Christ say, you should know what I bind and loose in heaven. Who would or could know that? But he speaks in this fashion, If you bind and loose on earth, I will also bind and loose right along with you in heaven. When you use the keys, I will also. Indeed, if you do it, it shall be done, and it is not necessary that I do it after you. What you bind and loose (I say) I will neither bind nor loose, but it shall be bound and loosed without my doing so. It shall be one single action, mine and yours, not a twofold one. It shall be one and the same key, mine and yours, not a twofold one. While you do your work, mine is already done. When you bind and loose, I have already bound and loosed. (LW, 40:364f).

It is vital to note the purpose of the binding. It is a final call to repentance. It is intended to impress most forcefully on the impenitent sinner what the consequence of his impenitence, of his unbelief, are. Love motivates the use of the binding key. The Savior-love which prompted the Good Shepherd to lay down His life for the sheep motivates His believers every step along the way as they seek to recall the erring sheep to the fold of the Good Shepherd.

The Son of Man came "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Lk 19:10). It is unthinkable, therefore, that the church, through which He carries on His work of seeking and saving here on earth, should excommunicate an impenitent sinner in a spirit of anger, revenge, or spite.

The Savior authorizes His church to take the final drastic step of removing the impenitent sinner from the fellowship because He wants to win him back. The congregation carries out the removal sadly, prayerfully, and in love. Excommunication is its final act of love toward the former brother, a final testimony, a final preaching of God's Word. Thus, when Paul delivered Hymenaeus and Alexander, who had fallen from the faith, to Satan, he stressed the purpose of his action, "that they may learn not to blaspheme" (I Tm 1:20).

It is obvious, of course, that only impenitent sinners who want to be recognized as brethren can be removed from the brotherhood. Despite their manifest unbelief, they claim all the rights and privileges of fellowship. There are others who of their own volition leave the church. They withdraw from the fellowship of

believers, as Demas did, who, Paul says, "hath forsaken me, having loved this present world" (II Tm 4:10). Those who have left the church cannot be put out. They have removed themselves. They on their part have severed the bond of brotherhood.

The Bible presents one case of excommunication in detail, the case of the man in the congregation at Corinth who was guilty of incest. In his First Epistle to the Corinthians Paul reprimands the congregation because they were aware of this man's sin, yet did nothing about it. They tolerated it. They showed no concern for this man's spiritual welfare. Paul urges them "to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (I Cor 5:5). Furthermore, if this situation were permitted to continue uncorrected in the congregation, the leaven of wickedness would spread unchecked through the whole lump. Therefore Paul admonishes them, "Put away from among yourselves that wicked person" (I Cor 5:13).

In his Second Epistle to the Corinthians Paul records the happy outcome of the action the congregation subsequently took. The excommunication had the desired effect. The adulterer repented of his sin. Paul now urges the congregation to forgive and comfort him, "so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow" (II Cor 2:7, NIV). And Paul adds, "If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven - if there was anything to forgive - I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake" (II Cor 2:10, NIV).

As these words indicate, when Christians here on earth forgive sins, they are truly forgiven "in the sight of Christ." Jesus has authorized His believers to act in His name, and when they bind or loose, this is as valid and certain in heaven also as if Christ had done it Himself. The sins we retain are retained by God. The sins we forgive are forgiven by God. As the German text of the Apology teaches, "Here on earth sins are truly canceled in such a manner that they are canceled also before God in heaven" (Art XII, 40; Trig., 261).

It is essential to the life and health of the church that we do not make the mistake of the Corinthians and become negligent in the exercise of church discipline. Paul warns, "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (I Cor 4:6).

It is a misconceived spirit of love that fails to admonish the erring. A genuine, Christ-like love will heed the words of Leviticus 19:7, "Thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him." It will administer the rebuke not in a self-righteous, holier-than-thou spirit, but in meekness, in humility, and with a manifest concern for the sinner's salvation. Recognizing their own sins and shortcomings and turning daily to the Savior for forgiveness, Christians will seek to recall the erring from the broad path that leads to destruction in a sincere spirit of helpfulness and brotherly love.

History teaches that when congregations and church bodies neglect this responsibility, the doors are thrown open to spiritual deterioration and decay. When churches neglect to exercise Christian discipline, the leaven of ungodliness quickly spreads. The maggots of falsehood and error begin to multiply. The rot of indifference begins to gnaw at the vitals of the body, and the process of spiritual debilitation and disintegration soon threatens the life of the entire organism.

The church of the Laodiceans was a congregation which had lost its first love for the Savior and had succumbed to the spirit of indifference. In the Book of Revelation the Lord Jesus addresses words of serious admonition to them: "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth...As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent!" (Re 3:15-19).

How quickly the neglect of conscientious Christian discipline can become a precipitous plunge to spiritual ruin! The recent history of the Lutheran Church offers other tragic examples.

May we then take the warning of Scripture and the lessons of history to heart! May God graciously strengthen us through His Word so that we do not succumb to the temptation to neglect this vital use of the Keys! May He help us to resist the very beginnings of spiritual indifference lest we suddenly find ourselves tobogganing down its treacherous slopes to spiritual disaster!

In the Augsburg Confession the fathers of our Lutheran Church declared:

Our people are taught that they should highly prize the absolution, as being the voice of God, and pronounced by God's command. The power of the Keys is set forth in its beauty, and they are reminded what great consolation it brings to anxious consciences; also, that God requires faith to believe such absolution as a voice sounding from heaven, and that such faith in Christ truly obtains and receives the forgiveness of sins. (Art. XXV, 3,4: Trig., 69).

We, the spiritual children and heirs of the Reformation, will surely want to prize the absolution just as highly as the Christians of Luther's day did. We, too, will want to treasure the Keys as "the holiest and noblest of the jewels of God, of Christ, and the church," as Luther called them (LW, 40:369). With Luther we will also want to recognize that "both of these keys are extremely necessary in Christendom, so that we never can thank God enough for them" (LW, 40:373).

Think of it - the Lord Jesus has entrusted us, His disciples, with the Ministry of the Keys! He has committed to us His holy Gospel, the Keys to the kingdom of heaven! And He has entrusted us who have been called into the preaching or teaching ministry with the public use of these Keys as representatives of His church. God forbid that we should be found derelict in our duty of unfaithful in our stewardship of the trust Jesus has committed to us! Will not we, who have tasted the riches of God's grace and experienced the comfort, peace, and joy of His forgiveness, join the Apostle Paul in asserting, "Necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel! (I Cor 9:16)? Will we not join Peter and John in declaring, "We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Ac 4:20)?

Thousands are dying without Christ every day, and consequently, without the hope of salvation. We possess the Keys with which to open to them the gates to eternal life. We have them as a sacred trust. Jesus has commissioned us to bring to the world His message of hope, "Your sins are forgiven" (Mt 9:2, NIV).

God make us faithful stewards of those Keys in these last evil days before our Lord's return in glory!

Wilbert R. Gawrisch

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