

The Doctrine of Confession and Absolution

From the Papers of Siegbert W. Becker

Introduction

Judging by the requests for conference essays over the years, I would conclude that many of our teachers find some difficulty in presenting the doctrine of the ministry of keys and confession, or as I am accustomed to calling it, the office of the keys and confession. When I look back to my own days in the parish ministry, which is now a long, long time ago, it seems to me that I can recall having a certain feeling of dissatisfaction with my own presentation of this subject to my confirmation classes. In the Missouri Synod, and I think that this is true also in some areas of the Wisconsin Synod, and occasionally also in the writings of Dr. Martin Luther, the discussion of the office of the keys centered chiefly on the practice of excommunication, often as something divorced from and totally distinct from the ordinary preaching of law and gospel. Both the intersynodical catechism and the Gausewitz catechism are written in a way that would tend to discourage such an emphasis, but in my younger years my own attention tended to be focused on the words “I believe that, when the called ministers of Christ deal with us according to His divine command, especially when they exclude manifest and impenitent sinners from the Christian congregation, and, again when they absolve those who repent of their sins and are willing to amend, this is as valid and certain, in heaven, also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself.”

The word, “especially” in that sentence ought to alert us against the danger of limiting the discussion of the ministry of the keys to the subject of excommunication of the manifestly impenitent and the absolution of those who repent after falling into manifest sin. It seems to me, however, that the tendency to do this stems from a conscious or perhaps even an unconscious awareness of this that the basic subject matter of the fifth chief part has already been treated in great detail in the first and second chief parts of the catechism. The forgiveness that is spoken of in this part of the catechism is essentially no different from that which has already been treated in detail in the second and third articles. The retention of sins discussed here is in essence no different from the message proclaimed in the first chief part.

The same thing can be said also in regard to confession. When the pastor speaks the word of absolution in private, individual or general confession, he is not manufacturing a new kind of forgiveness, different in some way from the forgiveness proclaimed in the preaching of the Gospel. While the confessional booth and the general atmosphere in the church edifice may add to the solemnity of the rite, yet the forgiveness given here is no more real and no more efficacious than it would be in totally different circumstances or in a much less formal outward context.

The History of the Fifth Chief Part

Perhaps it would be of help to review the history of the fifth chief part of Luther’s Small Catechism. Luther began work on the catechism early in his career as the reformer of the church. Between 1520 and 1525 he produced several books intended to be instructional aids for both children and adults. In these he treated only the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer. Later in 1528, he preached three series of sermons on the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. The material which he had produced in these sermons became the basis of the Large Catechism which he issued in the following year, and it is interesting to note that in the Short Preface he speaks of the Large Catechism as “this sermon.” It is of some interest to us also in connection with the subject of this essay to note that the Large Catechism to this day contains only five chief parts, the section on the ministry of the keys and confession being omitted.

The first edition of the Small Catechism also contained only five chief parts. And when a section on confession was first added it was part of what we today think of as the appendix to the Catechism. In this

appendix the form of confession was printed together with the litany. It seems obvious that Luther at first added this liturgical form of confession to the catechism as a part of the liturgy of the church by which the people were to be guided in making their confession to the pastor. It is also rather obvious that the confession spoken of here was the formal, private confession to the pastor, which has in large measure disappeared, at least in any fixed liturgical form, from our section of the Lutheran Church. Whether this is good or bad must be a matter of private opinion since it is not commanded by God.

It was not long, however, before Luther added doctrinal instruction on the nature of confession to the catechism, and this, together with the earlier form of confession, which might be called the liturgy of confession, was inserted between the sections on baptism and the Lord's Supper. Of this form of confession nothing survives in the intersynodical catechism and only a small fraction in the Gausewitz catechism, namely, the wording of the absolution pronounced by the pastor.

The section on the ministry of the keys was not added by Luther and to this day it is not printed in the Small Catechism as it appears in the Book of Concord and is therefore not a part of the Lutheran confessions. These three questions and their answers, however, very correctly reflect the teaching of the Bible and Luther's theology, accurately reproducing thoughts of Luther expressed elsewhere. But they were not formulated by Luther in the form in which they appear in the Small Catechism we use today. There is a certain overlapping in the two sections of the fifth chief part, and as a result it is not surprising that the retention of sins or excommunication should be stressed in dealing with the first section, dealing with the keys, and the forgiveness of sins or absolution should be emphasized in the second section which deals with confession and absolution. It may be that this also contributes to the difficulty of teaching this part of the catechism, for we are really not presenting something new in the section on confession which has not already been treated in the section on the ministry, and yet it only seems natural to expect something different, since it appears as a separate topic.

The Definition of the Keys

The term "ministry of the keys," or "office of the keys," as you are all aware is based on the promise of Christ to 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). This is the only passage of the Bible that speaks of the keys of the kingdom. However, the Savior gave the office or ministry of the keys to all the apostles and to his whole church on earth when He said, at the conclusion of His instructions regarding our dealing with the brother who has sinned against us, "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

When the Savior here speaks of binding and loosing, He is speaking of the power to forgive and retain sins. Luther demonstrates that very clearly in his essay on the keys in which he shows how untenable is the papistic claim that to bind means to give commands and to loose means to excuse from obedience. Even the Roman church agreed that the keys included the power to forgive and retain sins. And even if some may find these words unclear, yet all doubt as to the Savior's meaning is surely removed by the passage quoted in the Small Catechism: "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them: and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."

It might be pointed out in passing that the passage does not say, "Whosoever sins ye remit, they will be remitted unto them," as though the forgiveness somehow followed the word of absolution. The phrases "they are remitted" and "they are retained" are perfect tenses both in the original and in the English text, even though some may in English mistake them for a present tense.

Why the power of forgiving and retaining sins should be called "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" is surely clear to all of us. Adam and Eve were driven out of paradise and reentry was barred by the angel with the flaming sword that turned every way as a result of the fall into sin, giving concrete expression to the declaration of the prophet Isaiah, "Your iniquities have separated between you and your God" (Is. 59:2). The door of

heaven is still closed and locked to everyone whose sins still rest on him. But the door of heaven is unlocked and opened wide to all those whose sins are forgiven.

The Nature of Forgiveness

That the door of heaven stands wide open is true for all men, also for those who refuse to enter because of unbelief. We will never understand the true nature of the ministry of the keys unless we first have a clear understanding of the nature of God's forgiveness.

The forgiveness of sins is not a potential fact that becomes a reality only when it is proclaimed in the Gospel and accepted by faith. This ought to be crystal clear to all members of a church in which the doctrine of universal, objective justification has been so definitely and emphatically proclaimed as in the Wisconsin Synod.

When the Lord Jesus Christ came out of the grave into which his dead body had been laid on the first Good Friday He "was raised for our justification," or, as we might paraphrase the last prepositional phrase, "because we had been justified." His resurrection was the solemn, formal declaration of God that all the sins for which He had suffered and died had been fully expiated and atoned for, that the debt which mankind had owed to God was fully paid by the holy life and innocent death of God's own Son, that God's wrath was appeased and that His justice was satisfied.

St. Paul reminds us of this again in 2 Corinthians 5, where he writes, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them, and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation." In Christ, God has truly forgiven the sins of all men, and by committing the word of reconciliation to us, He gave us the right, the authority and the duty of proclaiming the full forgiveness of God to all the world. The proclamation of the "word of reconciliation" and the ministry of "the keys" are essentially two terms denoting the same thing. Christ gave the same assignment also to the apostles when He told them to preach the Gospel to every creature, to teach all nations, and to preach repentance and forgiveness to all nations beginning at Jerusalem (Mt.28:19; Mk.16:15; Lk.24:44).

"To preach the Gospel" – that phrase at its very center denotes the proclamation of the good news that for the sake of the bitter sufferings and death of Christ, God has already long ago forgiven the sins of all men. If men are lost it will only be because through their unbelief they have denied themselves the comfort, the hope, the joy and the rest that only the message of the Gospel can give.

The Binding Key

Our sinful reason may ask, "If it is true that God has indeed forgiven the sins of all men and there is no man on earth whose sins are not covered by the righteousness of Christ, then why does the Savior still speak of retaining sins and why does He say, "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven."

For those who understand the proper distinction between law and gospel this question presents no problem. When God revealed His glory to Moses at Mt. Sinai He proclaimed that He was the God who forgives all sin and the God who punishes all sin. And only those who have in faith stood at the foot of Calvary's cross and at the open grave in Joseph's garden where God punished and forgave at one and the same time and in one and the same act can begin to understand how He can do both.

And to this day God remains the same God that appeared to Moses, the God who forgives and the God who punishes. Because of that He wants His messengers, and especially those whom He has called into the ministry of the Word in church or school, to proclaim not only the forgiveness of sins but also the retention of sins. In the terminology of the Lutheran confessions this is what is meant by "preaching the Gospel." The Apology of the Augsburg Confession says, "The sum of the preaching of the Gospel is this, namely, to convict of sin, and to offer for Christ's sake the remission of sins and righteousness, and the Holy Ghost, and eternal life, and that as regenerate men we should do good works" (XII, 29). Yet Melancthon goes on to say that when the Word which convicts of sin is taught alone, "it is the doctrine of the law, not of the Gospel" (XII, 34).

Martin Luther speaks in the same way. He writes, “To bind and to loose is clearly nothing else than to proclaim and apply the gospel. For what is it to loose, if not to announce the forgiveness of sins before God? What is it to bind, except to withdraw the gospel and to declare the retention of sins” (LW 40, 28). But to “withdraw the gospel” is to proclaim the law.

If they are not to forget how much they need the forgiveness of sins freely offered in Christ, all Christians need constantly to hear the law which reminds them daily of the hopelessness of their lives apart from Christ. Because of the coldness and indifference of their sinful hearts and the utter and total depravity and perversity of their old Adam they need to be constantly reminded of the wrath and punishment of God that strikes all sinners.

When we remind the Christian of this fact that He is a sinner and that he has as such deserved the wrath and punishment of God we hardly sense that we are in essence employing the key that binds. A sinner whose sins are truly forgiven is from the standpoint of the Gospel, no longer a sinner but a saint. Yet even though he is a saint, a sanctified person, a holy person, a person without sin, yet he is still a sinner, and he must be told again and again that he is a sinner.

For human reason this creates a problem. To speak of a sinning saint or a holy sinner is, in one way, just as illogical as it would be to speak of a square circle or a round square. Yet Luther was right when he said that the Christian is “simul justus et peccator,” at one and the same time righteous and sinful, innocent and guilty,—innocent because he is “in Christ” through his baptism, guilty because he still lives in the sinful flesh, which is never converted and can only be drowned by daily contrition and repentance.

When a Christian is told that he is a sinner, he does not object, for he knows both from Scripture and from the testimony of his own conscience that this is all too true. Moreover, he knows that it is good for him to be reminded of this, and to be reminded also of the fearful punishment he has deserved by his sins, for it makes him appreciate so much more fully and deeply the glorious message of forgiveness in the gospel. Preached and heard in that kind of context it really belongs to the preaching of the gospel, as the Apology says. Yet, strictly speaking, it is the key that binds, and the Savior Himself promises to stand behind our preaching of the law as He promises to stand behind our preaching of the Gospel, when He says, “Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.”

Very briefly then we may summarize by saying that in giving us the key that binds the Savior gives us the right and the authority to preach the law and in the key that looses He gives His church the right and the authority to preach the Gospel. In His words about the keys the Savior teaches us that He is not far removed from the preaching and teaching of the church. He promises to stand behind the words that His messengers proclaim. As Luther says, “He wants to have their words honored and not scorned, as though He were speaking personally from heaven” (LW 40, 315). And if the words are honored and not scorned they will have an effect on the whole person of man, his intellect, his emotions, and his will, for the message is a personal message that brings a man face to face with the issues of life and death. The message of the law cannot be believed without bringing fear; the message of the Gospel cannot be believed without removing fear. Luther says, “The intention of the, key which binds is that we heed its threatenings and thereby come to fear God....The intention of the key which looses is to make us believe its consolation and promise, and so learn to love God and receive a joyful, confident, and peaceful heart” (LW 40, 376). And even though Luther usually speaks of the keys in connection with excommunication, yet he demonstrates clearly that he understands the general nature of the keys as affecting all Christians when he writes, “He has given us this remedy, the key which binds, so that we might not remain too confident in our sins, arrogant, barbarous, without God, and the key which looses, that we should not despair in our sins. Thus aided we should stay on a middle road, between arrogance and faintheartedness, in genuine humility and confidence” (LW 40, 373).

The Place of Penitence

While it is true that the office of the keys, the ministry or power of the keys, is exercised by us whenever the law and the Gospel are being preached and taught, yet in the fifth chief part of the catechism special emphasis is being laid on the individual personal application of law and gospel to the penitent and impenitent sinner.

It is very important to understand the place of penitence or repentance in this whole process. It hardly seems necessary in a group such as this to repeat that repentance consists of contrition, or terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin, fear of God's wrath and punishment, and faith in Christ by which that fear is overcome. At times, however, the term repentance may denote either of its two parts, either contrition or faith.

Repentance literally is a change of mind. Contrition may be defined as a change of mind about sin. The sinner, as sinner, always sees sin as something attractive, as something that will bring him profit of some kind, as Eve saw that the tree was a tree to be desired to make one wise. The contrite sinner, however, has had a change of mind about sin. What he once saw as a source of pleasure or profit, he now sees as a source of punishment and grief and loss, as something by which he has brought the judgment of eternal separation from God down on his own head.

Faith, on the other hand, may be described as a change of mind about salvation. At its very heart it may be described as that change of mind that takes place when the sinner who wanted to be saved and thought that he could be saved by his own works recognized that he can be saved only by the free grace of God in Christ.

Neither contrition nor faith, however, dare ever be viewed either as a cause or a condition of salvation. God does not forgive men because they are sorry for their sins or because they believe. Nothing on our part is necessary to move God to forgive us. He has already done that long ago, long before we were born, before we were sorry, before we believed, as Luther says, before we ever thought of this. And in applying the keys we must be careful not to leave the impression that by his penitence or by his faith the sinner somehow has earned God's forgiveness, or had at least made it possible for God to forgive him. In fact, we ought to go out of our way to make this clear to those whom we teach, because Lutherans too are born with the *opinio legis*, with the idea that there is something in us which moves God to be merciful to us and to forgive us. The last good works a Lutheran is tempted to offer to God as a meritorious effort on his part is his contrition and his faith.

Contrition, however, is important and necessary. It is not necessary to make us worthy of forgiveness nor to make God love us. But it is necessary to make us realize how much we need the forgiveness offered to us in the Gospel. It is necessary to make us desire and yearn for the forgiveness won and merited for us by the work of Christ. The man who does not realize that he is a sinner and who does not understand that by his sin he has deserved the eternal damnation of God, cannot know how important it is for him to find a Savior. To know this is to know the {terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin,} of which the confessions speak. This need not be an emotional storm or neurotic fear, in fact, in normal Christians, and even in normal unbelievers it will usually not be that kind of terror, but it will nevertheless be a true consciousness of need. While the Roman Church did Luther a great disservice by hiding the message of the Gospel, we ought not to forget that it did him a great service in teaching him to ask day and night, "How will I ever find a gracious God?" It was out of such experience that Luther learned to write later, "The key which binds carries forward the work of the law. It is profitable to the sinner inasmuch as it reveals to him his sins, admonishes him to fear God, causes him to tremble, and moves him to repentance, and not to destruction" (LW 40, 373).

If we understand this clearly we will also know how unnecessary it is, from the point of view of man's need, to ask whether our "sorrow" over our sins flows from the fear of punishment or from love of God. We are not concerned here with human merit or with what ought to be. The Roman Church may say that there is little merit in sorrow that flows from fear of punishment and that only sorrow that flows out of love is truly meritorious. Even though the Lutheran Church has once and for all rejected that soul destroying heresy in the confessions of our church, yet again and again we hear also Lutherans express the Roman opinion that if we truly expect to have forgiveness we must be sorry out of love for God. With the Lutheran confessions we might well ask, "Is this not teaching uncertain and improper things concerning repentance?" (Apol. XII, 9; Trigl.

p.255). Sorrow out of fear serves as well as sorrow out of love to make the sinner understand his need for a Savior and to long for forgiveness and to ask with Luther, “How shall I ever find a gracious God?”

And faith, too, is a necessary part of the process, yet, again, it is not necessary to bring forgiveness into being. We need clearly to remember that the word of forgiveness both brings faith into existence and is accepted by faith. As an objective truth to be proclaimed to all men, saints and sinners, believers and unbelievers, forgiveness does not depend on faith. In our teaching we must guard against leaving the impression that forgiveness becomes a reality only for the believer. On the other hand, it must also be made clear that only those who believe have this forgiveness as a personal possession. Only those who believe the message of the Gospel will find relief from the terrors of conscience in the proper, God-appointed way. Only those who believe will find comfort and hope and joy and finally eternal peace and rest with God in the message of God’s free and full pardon in Christ. When we ask the penitent sinner whether he believes in Christ, we ought not to ask this as a condition that must be fulfilled before his sin can be forgiven but as a reminder that it is only by believing the message that the blessings offered there become his own. And if he does not believe it before the absolution is spoken, we hope and pray that he will believe it after the forgiveness is announced. In that spirit Luther writes, “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” (LW 40, 373).

In applying the keys, therefore, we must always take care that those to whom our ministry is extended are not taught to look into their own hearts to find there the ground of certainty concerning forgiveness, life, and salvation. As Luther says, “The keys or the forgiveness of sins are not based on our own repentance or worthiness, as they (that is, the Romanists) wrongly teach” (LW 40, 364). The certainty which is truly Christian faith must always rest only and alone on the words and promises of God.

The Application of the Keys in Confession and Absolution

If the doctrines of the Bible regarding forgiveness, contrition, and faith are already understood, the practical application of the keys should not present a problem.

Our assignment as pastors and teachers, to whom the public administration of the keys has been committed by the call of the church, is to proclaim both law and gospel as clearly and as forcefully as we possibly can. Luther says that the keys “apply to the needs of despondent and proud sinners” (LW 40, 54). And since we cannot look into the hearts of sinners to see whether they are despondent or proud, we can in most cases not know the spiritual needs of each single child in our classroom or of ever parishioner in the pew.

We know, however, that all of them are sinners who can easily become guilty of pride, and we know also that they easily become prey to despair. To keep them from going off into the ditch on either side of the road we simply teach and preach both law and gospel side by side and leave it to the Holy Ghost to apply the message to the heart.

For this reason also we for the most part in our church employ the general confession of sins and the general absolution. Nowhere has the Lord commanded us to pry into the secrets of the hearts of our fellowmen. From the beginning the Lutheran Church has opposed every effort to force the sinner to recount and reveal all the specific details of his sinfulness in auricular confession. Even when private confession was maintained and the sinner was encouraged to speak of the specific sins that troubled his conscience, it was not made a law that every known sin must be confessed nor was a complete and detailed confession ever made a condition of forgiveness. In the early days of the Wisconsin Synod when attempts were made by some conservative Lutherans to impose the practice of private confession on the church, our Synod resisted these legalistic attempts. It may be true, as is charged by some, that we have at times been guilty of what is called a “cavalier treatment” of private confession, but that charge has a hollow ring to it when it comes from men who would seek to entangle us again in this yoke of bondage.

In the formal worship and liturgy of our church, therefore, we in our Synod have usually been satisfied with the general confession in which the assembled Christians confess their sins to each other, to the pastor, and

to God in either the lesser confession or the greater confession which is used in the communion service. In many of our congregations even the custom of asking the assembled congregation whether this is a sincere confession has been dispensed with, and the pastor pronounces the general absolution immediately after the confession has been concluded. All this is also an example of the office of the keys being applied.

There are, however, instances when we are called upon to deal with individual members of the flock, whether in church or school, and with specific manifest sins.

While the formal use of private confession as a part of our liturgical practice is very rare in our church and perhaps non-existent, yet there is and there ought to be a great deal of informal private confession and absolution. Children in the grade school and high schools of our church ought to be free to discuss their private problems and concerns with their pastors and their teachers. (It goes without saying that it must be kept in mind that the ministry is a united ministry and that it would be the height of disorder if the servants of the Word are played off against each other. But that is another problem). What is today called pastoral counseling is in large measure, where it is properly engaged in, essentially the same thing as private confession and absolution. And where the pastoral relationship between pastor and people and also between teacher and pupil are what they ought to be, there will be many cases of such private, person to person, one to one dealings, and for the most part we will be using the loosing key that assures the individual of the forgiveness of his or her sins.

Excommunication

There will also be times when it will become necessary to use the binding key in an individual case. Just as at times a specific sin will trouble a Christian and move him to confess that sin to his pastor or to one of his fellow-Christians, so it becomes the duty of a pastor or any Christian at times to call some specific manifest sin to the attention of a guilty fellow-Christian. At first such a reminder will be intended to call the sinner to the realization that his sin poses a real danger to him and may well lead to eternal damnation in hell. If this verbal application of the law fails to have its desired effect, a pastor may conclude that the correct pastoral action would be to suspend such a person from the Lord's Table. By this action, which ought never to be taken lightly or imposed arbitrarily, the preaching of the law becomes very concrete and practical. It is one way in which the seriousness of the situation may be emphasized.

If even this does not have the desired effect of bringing the sinner to a confession of his guilt and to repentance and a desire for forgiveness, the pastor and the congregation will, if they truly have the welfare of the sinner at heart, proceed to declare that the sinner by his manifest sin and manifest impenitence has shown that he is no longer a believing child of God and that by his unbelief he has made it impossible for the Christian church to recognize him as a fellow-member of the body of Christ, that he is, in other words, a "heathen man and a publican."

This is the harshest proclamation of law which a Christian congregation can use. It, too, is intended to bring the sinner to a confession of his sin and arouse in him a desire for forgiveness. It is therefore a lack of Christian concern to let such a serious matter drag out so long that the sinner becomes even more hardened in his impenitence and unbelief and no longer cares whether he is recognized as a Christian or not. The congregation and the pastor apply the binding key in a formal way by threatening the "hardened sinner with hell," as Luther puts it (LW 40, 329), in the hope that thereby the "terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin" might be aroused in his heart and that he be driven by his fear to the cross of Christ where alone forgiveness is to be found.

It happens at times that a sinner being dealt with makes it impossible for the pastor and the congregation to carry a case to its conclusion. He may refuse to meet with the pastor or the church elders or he may even announce his own withdrawal from the congregation. If all that occurs in a setting that makes it clear that the action is a manifestation of unbelief and a lack of contrition, we often say that the person involved has excommunicated himself. To tell him this is in essence to use the binding key once more and where it is possible for us to tell him this, it is for all intents and purposes exactly the same thing that we do when we

excommunicate him. Really the only difference is that the person by refusing to discuss the matter at all has speeded up the process. Where it becomes impossible for one reason or another to tell him anything, it is, of course, impossible to proclaim either law or gospel to him, and the exercise of the keys ceases. We can then only hope and pray that some other Christian will have the opportunity to take over and make the matter his concern.

Another type of suspension has become a matter of concern for some of our Wisconsin Synod people because of unusual circumstances. We know that it is God's will that Christian congregations should be united in doctrine and also that Christians should not continue to listen to or to support false teachers. When members of a congregation or of a Synod falsely accuse the congregation or the Synod of false doctrine and refuse in spite of all admonition to retract the charges, it finally becomes necessary to apply Romans 16:17, which tells us to avoid those who teach falsely. It ought to be self-evident that Christians ought not to desire to belong to a church which they accuse of acting and teaching contrary to God's Word. And while it is our duty as Christian congregations and a Lutheran Synod to listen to admonition and to test our doctrine again and again by God's Word, yet such charges if sustained and unretracted must lead to a break in fellowship. When those who make such accusations do not withdraw from the congregation voluntarily, but actually wish to continue their membership in the congregation and thereby keep the congregation in turmoil and harm the cause of the Gospel, they must be told finally that the bond of fellowship has been broken. We may not be ready to say that they are manifest and impenitent sinners. We may even recognize that they are people with an honest, even though misguided, zeal for the Word of God, and for that reason will not be ready to declare that they are impenitent sinners, but we must recognize that church fellowship between us and them is impossible. This action is then called suspension of fellowship, and the word suspend is used in preference to severance of fellowship to indicate our hope that fellowship might be reestablished.

However, it should be noted that all these terms, suspension from communion, excommunication, and suspension from fellowship are ecclesiastical terms and their use or non-use ought not to become a matter of dispute. So long as the keys are used and used properly we ought not to demand that the ecclesiastical forms employed be everywhere alike. Also in this matter it is true that there are no ceremonial laws in the New Testament.

Transfer and Release

In using the ministry of the keys Christian pastors and congregations must always bear in mind that no congregation of the Christian church exists in a vacuum. When Christians move to another area where their former congregation can no longer serve them with the ministry of the keys, the congregation will desire to do its utmost to see to it that they are served and served well with both law and gospel. Therefore we recommend them and transfer them to another congregation in fellowship with us, or, if there is no such congregation accessible to them, we ought to urge and encourage them to establish an orthodox congregation.

If for some reason or other they cannot or do not wish to join another orthodox congregation we are faced with a problem. If it is a matter of deliberate disregard of God's Word we should exercise that degree of church discipline possible under the circumstances. If it is a matter of ignorance or weakness that we are not able to correct, and they request dismissal from membership, we usually grant such people a release. Personally, I would prefer it if we would not call it a release, but that we would tell such people that they are endangering their souls and the souls of their children by cutting their ties with an orthodox church. I believe that we are going too far, however, if we say that the only way one can be separated from an orthodox congregation is by death, by transfer to another orthodox congregation, or by excommunication, and that we must therefore excommunicate all those who leave our fellowship to affiliate with a congregation not in confessional fellowship with us.

One more point should be considered. We must recognize a proper excommunication from any Christian congregation, even if it is not in fellowship with us, as valid, and we have a right to expect this also from them

that they will recognize our congregation's excommunication. It seems to me that we owe it to them at least to notify them in some way that our former members were not under church discipline at the time they withdrew from membership. If this is the only purpose the so-called "release" serves, it might be justified but I still wish that we could find some other, more accurately descriptive term.

Conclusion

In all these matters we must bear in mind that our aim in exercising the keys is always to promote the soul's welfare of those whom we serve with law and gospel. To convict them of sin and to bring to the contrite sinner the full assurance of complete forgiveness is the very heart of our ministry of the keys. God grant it may always be so. Amen.