

The Ministry of the Keys - Its Possessors

by Prof. William G. Zell

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When we would speak of those who are the possessors of the Keys which Christ Jesus bestowed upon His Church, i.e., the Keys to open and to close the doorway into His Heaven, it is next to self-evident that we should begin by identifying these possessors. We will be content with the self-evident and name these possessors of the Keys, yet do so very briefly and very simply, for we feel sure that none here today is in doubt on this score. Christ's Church of Believers possesses the Keys; and, the believers in Christ's Church possess the Keys. These two statements say much the same thing, yet in different ways. One speaks of a collective possessing by the one body of the members of Jesus Christ; the other speaks of the individual possession by each single member in the great and timeless congregation of believers in the Lamb. Both of these are true, they are not exclusive one of the other; either approach could serve as a beginning for this essay.

However, since our purpose this morning is to center our attention particularly on that doctrine of Holy Scripture, illustrated so aptly in the parable of the pounds, which declares each single child of God a possessor of the Keys, we will devote ourself in this paper entirely to this one fact. We are confident that the other, the joint possession of the Keys by all believers, as it stems from the individual possession, will not be neglected in this series of essays. We are convinced that all of us have a greater need for a review of our individual possession of the Keys, and that we find it too easy to take comfort in our own carelessness over against the Ministry of the Keys in the Church's Possession of the Keys. We believe too that Almighty God, who "alone can forgive sins," most clearly manifests His might and mercy in making the single forgiven sinner His own representative, authorized to forgive and to retain sins, by contrast with His establishing in the entire church the authority of the Keys.

It is therefore the object of this essay to emphasize in particular the individual Christian's role in the administering of the Keys. How they fulfill their obligations as a Church of many believers we leave to another. Henceforth we here speak especially of the one believer. This is to say we speak about you, here present this morning, and the many others like you scattered across the earth of our day, who confess before God and man: "I believe that Jesus Christ true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord."

I

Every man, as a child of Adam, is by birth and by doing a fragile and sinful human being. That God on high should entrust His precious Gospel, and with it, His priceless Keys, to such a creature so beset with faults and fears and frailties, is completely incomprehensible. That you should possess the Keys is nothing less than miraculous. Nevertheless, as incredible as this is, don't underestimate the workings of God in this selection of possessors for His Keys. Remember that you are not only a child of Adam, you are also a "child of God by faith in Christ Jesus." You are also a "chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people." It is to be remembered that the Lord did not entrust His Keys to just anyone when He selected you for this high privilege. In His grace He chose men, and you among them, it is true; but He also, in wisdom, picked only believing men. This says much. Especially are we interested in that title whereby believers are called by the divine Word "royal priests." Let this apply to you. You have been called by Christ a "royal priest," a kingly priest. This certainly is not news to you, but it is also most certainly a part of your possessing the Keys.

Realize, if you will, what is involved here. You are a *priest* before God, with the rights of a priest by the merits of Him who is the High Priest forever, Jesus Christ. To you directly God has revealed Himself, this in a written Scripture that stands forever as His unchanging testament. You have a direct voice to His ear. You can approach Him "with all boldness and confidence." You require, in no sense any mediator between you and the

Almighty, save Jesus Christ alone. Properly you treasure that right to stand before God immediately as a priest of the most High, thanks to Christ.

No less do you treasure your right as a *royal* priest, a king for Jesus' sake. And a king you are indeed, before whom all the power and splendor of the kings of the earth pale as vanity. Or haven't you ever realized that Christ Jesus made you a king? You are a son of the living God by adoption, an heir of God a joint-heir with Jesus Christ the King of kings. You are a conqueror with Him, a lord over the earth with Him, and one day shall live and reign with Him forever in His heavenly kingdom. Christ Jesus has called you royalty. You are no less than that.

And as kingly priests who confess the Lutheran faith you are characteristically quite ready to resent even the suggestion of an infringement upon your right. Even in our times when men by the millions seem almost eager to forfeit their historic rights of conscience and confession for the salve of some paper unity, you have insisted on your right to hear God speak to you directly in His Word and to stand up alone, if need be, as a royal priest, answerable to none, bound to none, save to your Lord and His truth. Typical of the unyielding convictions of the Lutheran fathers you have insisted on your right to believe and to speak as a royal priest before your God.

Commendable! But ought we not also be consistent in this? If we are going to insist on our right as royal priests, let's not forget to assume our role completely. Not just in one department, but throughout, it is our prerogative and obligation to think and to act as royal priests. In keeping with your high calling your attitude in all points, your actions and reactions, ought be that of royal priests.

Priests! You have direct access to the throne of grace. In His Word He speaks to you; in your prayers you speak to Him. There is no excuse for "slippage" here. This can only mean that when it comes to the Father's business, with such an advantage you cannot fail to be interested, you cannot help but be engaged in it. It is altogether contradictory for a priest in the household of God to ignore the workings in that household, and to withhold wholehearted dedication to the cause of the master in that house. It would be understandable for strangers, or hirelings, to neglect the Father's business. But how this is possible for God's own priests to permit His cause in any way to suffer is beyond understanding. And you are such a priest of God. Let your attitude, your whole approach to His kingdom work be in keeping with your calling.

Furthermore, let your attitude also be that of kings. Under the Lord Jesus Christ, each one of you is a king. This body assembled here this morning is a convention of kings. So think like kings, not in the fear of servitude, but with boldness and authority, to face the responsibilities laid upon you by Him who conquered all, even death, to become the Lord over all, God blessed forevermore.

You are called by Christ "royal priests." To use Paul's words: then "let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." Of yourselves, very humbly beseeching with the publican "God be merciful to me a sinner"; but as royal priests, eagerly and confidently declaring: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."

We are speaking here of an attitude, a mind in the royal priest. Alone, of course, an attitude is a barren thing. But rest assured, in this instance, too, "out of the fulness of the heart the mouth speaketh." The action, the work, will show itself. And our work is to serve Christ Jesus. Our work is that of royal priests. It is the unique work of "the Keys."

Our Lord Jesus Christ placed into the hands of His kings and priests the authority and the obligation to administer "His Keys." We said this before: not to just anyone, but to a special people the Savior gave the task of performing a special work. You need but recall now what the Keys are, what it took to establish them, what they do, how long the results last, to understand what a monumental assignment has been given you. This truly requires no less than a king of the highest order, specially called and fashioned by the Lord for the task. It is a king's work, the work of Jesus Christ. It is a work for kings, the believers in Christ. In this sense the work of the Keys is your work.

And how essential to this work is the priestly office of Christ's people! Now you can see even more clearly the appropriateness of your office as priest, authorized to serve as intermediary between God and

sinner, the bridge across which through the Gospel the grace of God is bestowed upon lost men. Now you can appreciate the more the kindness of the Lord God in preparing in you the agent to lead rejected men through the Gospel back to their Maker.

I've been told there was a time in our Synod a few generations ago when abnormally strong emphasis was laid upon the doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers." For reasons spawned by those former times such an emphasis was no doubt in place. I believe it is likewise necessary today to emphasize that this priesthood is no honorary position. While we rejoice in the special grace of God this right bestows upon us, may no one forget the special authority, God-given, this also invests in us to serve others as His priests. When Jesus Christ calls us priests, royal priests at that, He not only grants a right; He also lays down a duty. Both of these, right and duty, fall to all those who confess His name. Exclusive of no believer, inclusive of every phase of life, let the right be enjoyed and the duty performed by every believer in all areas of his Christian life. Let it be done also here and now among us in this place.

II

The question of where and how the individual Christian, a royal priest of Jesus Christ, by his Gospel witness is to administer the Keys can be answered with few words or many. The two words: "everywhere and always" already constitute an answer. By this we are not referring to the testimony of the Christian's life and conversation, which is indeed a continuing witness to the truth of Christ Jesus. Rather, we are concerned with the believer's "giving an answer to every man...a reason of the hope that is in him." We mean that God's child "everywhere and always" "cannot but speak the things he has heard and seen." The ministry of the Keys on the part of the individual is the "binding and loosing" of the sinner's guilt by the proclamation of the Gospel.

This proclamation everywhere and always logically and essentially starts at home. We think first of all of the fathers - and mothers after them - teaching the little ones to know a forgiving God. This is the Ministry of the Keys. It's the same Ministry of the Keys when the parents keep the older children aware of the gracious Savior whose blood made them heirs of heaven. But isn't it true that between spouses too there is ample opportunity for telling of the pardon in Christ which awaits the repentant sinner! Or who will deny that also the children among themselves have sufficient occasion for telling one another of the blood of Jesus Christ His Son which cleanseth from all sin! The members of a family in their daily association will never want for the chance to speak the Gospel, to administer the Keys.

Furthermore, within the small circle in the home the so-called "family altar" is nothing else but the exercise of the right of royal priests to declare one to another the grace of God in Christ. These daily devotions, Scripture readings, devotional readings, hymn singing, united prayer performed regularly certainly accomplish more than to provide information and inspiration, comfort and encouragement to the family. Their constant repetition of forgiveness to the penitent and their threat of damnation for unbelief are an elementary operation of the Keys opening and closing the door to heaven. To say that such daily devotions are to be encouraged is an understatement. They are essential for any family to gain fully all the blessings God seeks to bestow on this first level of society.

It would be impossible for us to overemphasize the role of the single believer in administering the Keys within the family circle. It is basic to the fulfillment of his responsibility on this level, just as the family unit provides the basic forum for the administering of the Keys. In fact, this comes at the head of the list of the blessings of family life. What a waste of opportunity where the home never hears the name of Jesus from one day to the next! Say what you will, without the Keys, meaning without the spoken Gospel, the family unit cannot fulfill its function. For nothing can fill this void, where it exists. The pastor can't, the teacher can't, the church can't make up for a home life which is without the Word of Christ. They can supplement and complement, but they cannot provide in the same manner the wonderful assurance of God's continuing love, if this is found wanting within the family. If we, therefore, would learn to administer the Keys as royal priests of God, we begin here in the Christian home. From this point, as from our only beginning, we can go on into other areas of life.

The first of these other areas is the Christian congregation. Right here where the families of God's people come together to enjoy, and to support, the public preaching of the Word, right here is the second sphere of activity for the individual's administering of the Keys. For even though already at this point to the exercise of the Keys has been added another forum: that of united action via the call, this does not mean the release of the individual from his personal responsibility in the administering of the Keys. This is an extremely common fault among us, that, because in our congregations we are become one of many, we are thereby relieved of the burden of the Keys and can expect others to bear the brunt of this work of our Savior, has caused untold delay and damage in the building of His kingdom. While *we* wait for our *fellow members* to press forward in the work of the Keys, Satan does not wait. The real truth is that within the life of the Christian congregation the individual believers responsibility in the administering of the Keys increases, not decreases. As the circle of hearers is enlarged from that of the family, so is the opportunity and the necessity increased to speak constantly of the inviting grace of God and the threatening wrath of God. We have more to lose; we have more to do. And the doing must be an individual thing first of all, or there cannot be combined effort. All that happens in any congregation is, and remains, popular opinion to the contrary, individual responsibility.

It is to encourage fulfillment of this individual obligation to take part personally in the ministry of the Keys within a congregation that our congregational stewardship programs are introduced and encouraged. Finally the stewardship effort is nothing else but a planned effort to direct individual members in their personal support in every possible way of the work of the Keys. The encouraging of voting members to do their duty, the recruiting of work forces, the soliciting of Sunday-school teachers and choir members, the pressing into every type of service of all members is justifiable and to be desired for this reason, that every member also within the congregation remains an individual minister of the Keys, and is duty-bound in love to Christ to push His Gospel out into the world. Stewardship work is Keys work. Don't sell it short.

We have right here incidentally, made use of a determining factor to decide the worth or lack of it, of just one phase of congregational activity, one which will also determine the worth, or lack of it in many of the other activities found in our present-day congregations. What contributes to the individual members ministering of the Keys belongs in a congregation, what does not contribute to this, does not belong. Such contributing to the operation of the Keys will be done in different ways, it is true, yet I fear that some of the popular pastimes in our congregations and organizations within our congregations would be hard put to justify their existence as contributing factors in the ministry of the Keys by the individual member of the congregation. It is my contention that we owe it to the Lord of the Church to scrutinize constantly our congregational activities and where necessary to pare away all unproductive elements and strip down this the body of Christ so that lean and unencumbered, it may the better serve its Head. And even this pushing to be what we should be, and to do what we should be doing, as congregations of workers of the Keys, likewise is a personal responsibility. You individually are obliged to be watchful of the flock. Pastor and layman, either or both, what are your congregations doing which adds nothing to your members ministering of the Keys? Where are your people just wasting time? You look; you fudge; you correct where necessary. Don't leave it to another.

This very powerful zeal of members in a congregation to work the work of Christ Jesus in all phases of the congregation's life has a consequence which is both proper and directly commanded by the Lord of the Church. No Christian, whose concern is to work the Keys among his brethren can turn this concern off when he is separated from his brethren. The administering of the Keys, i.e., to witness to Christ's Gospel, very properly will overflow toward all with whom God's child associates. Where the possessor of the Keys is found, there are the Keys. Where these two are in one place, in that place the Keys will be exercised.

By this "administering of the Keys within the community" we do not mean the specialized fulfillment of Jesus' command to preach His Gospel to all people through the called pastor or missionary. This is its own matter. Our essay leaves this for the writer following. We do mean instead the plain and simple telling of the way of salvation by God's saints to the unbelievers with whom they come into contact. Nor are we thinking here of the witness to the truth of a sanctified Christian life, as vital as this is to the Christian's confession. We maintain that it is also part of the Christian's living unto Christ for him to speak of Jesus, for finally it is in this

speaking that the Keys to heaven are turned. It is in this speaking, as the Word declares: "With the heart man believeth unto righteousness, with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" that men learn to know fully of God's grace in Christ.

This personal testimony in the community by the individual possessor of the Keys is also nothing new to you. As in the home it is called the family altar, as within the congregation it is advocated as stewardship, so in the community it is known by the name of "evangelism." We've been speaking of the lay proclaiming of Jesus' Gospel within the immediate area reached by a congregation's own members. Evangelism, planned and programmed, is this very thing, done systematically and according to suggested procedures and methods. When, therefore, materials come to you pastors bearing the name of Evangelism don't throw them away. For they are meant to help individual members of the Lord Jesus tell individual friends and neighbors and relatives of the Lord Jesus. Your members should do this telling. As possessors of Christ's Keys to heaven, they become inexcusably extravagant of a precious right to open heaven to penitent sinners, if they hide their light, bury their pound, pocket the Keys. Let them take part personally in the greatest work this world will ever see.

This suggests a thought which we pass on to you at this point. There is no greater potential in our Synod for widening our ministry of the Keys, and no more wasted strength, than that of our Christian members. What should be an automatic and continuing telling of the mercy of God in Jesus Christ by individuals everywhere has been allowed with complacency to be less than even an attempt to meet this responsibility. It seems incredible, yet it is true, that the possessors of the Keys at this very elementary level, authorized by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and commissioned by Him, are permitted to believe that their obligations are met completely without their making even the slightest move to turn those Keys themselves. Imagine, if you can, the possible effect if only within our own Synod over 300,000 individuals, including older children, would make an effort to speak the Word of Jesus to anyone who will listen to them. Here is why I insist that the full exercise of the Keys by the single possessor should be emphatically regarded as including speaking. The binding and loosing, the forgiving and retaining, the preaching and teaching properly are a verbal witness. That's what we are lacking; that's what we need in these latter days. Our royal priests are equipped to meet this need. Then let them be told to be up and engaged in the task at hand whereby they personally may win men for Jesus Christ.

III

It would be utterly impossible to overemphasize the importance of our singly fulfilling our function as possessors of the Keys, individual royal priests, called by Christ to spread His Gospel not only in all places but in all areas of our daily life. For this obligation, faithfully met by one after another of God's people on the earth is finally the basic function of the Christian Church. How basic, how important, this really is becomes so apparent to us when we realize that, in reality, this injunction to administer the Keys is the only mandate given to the believer in Christ. Our Savior has never told any of us: make a name for yourself, improve the world situation, amass a fortune - nothing of this nature whatsoever. He has told us, however, that we in the course of a life in keeping therewith should preach His Gospel. He has ordained that we be Key bearers and Key users to all men. If you would do His will during the days of your earthly stay, here is where you begin: Teach My Word; tell the sinner of the wrath to come; tell the penitent of the glory to come. Close My door to those who despise My Son; open up My home to those who will take His hand and enter in.

How vital this understanding is to every single child of God we can appreciate by remembering that this is the only means instituted by Christ for the building of His kingdom. Since also the public ministry by called pastors and teachers is an extension of the individual Christian's administering of the Keys, the fact remains that Jesus work was laid only and entirely upon the shoulders of confessing Christians. If Christ's believer does this work, it will be done; if he fails in his duty, the Savior's work will not be done. Translated into personal terms that sounds like this: if you work the Keys of Christ, His work will be done. If you don't, His work remains undone. No matter which way you cut this, the pieces all look alike. Whatever you don't do will not be done. No one else can possibly fill in for you. It's your business. Then do it!

How strongly ought this point be made? What of this claim? The administering of the Keys by the individual Christian alone justifies his length of days on earth. Is this an exaggeration? Absolutely not! His one reason for living on earth to life's end is to exercise his authority of the Keys. Except for this his place is rightly in heaven. While he remains here, according to the word and will of His Lord, he is plainly and simply to perform the work of the Keys. Succeeding in this he has made faithful use of the life God gave him; failure here is failure throughout, all other accomplishments to the contrary. Therefore, even as the authority of the Keys is the prerogative of the believers this at once makes it also the exclusive responsibility of those same believers. Hence what you alone can do, you alone must do. And this in turn is alone the center of your life. It is at once the highest of all callings and the most serious of all obligations. It is no child's play. It is not a matter of whim or fancy. It is not yours by choice or chance. While the earth remains it, too, remains, established by the Word of the Lord Christ.

I maintain it is no oversimplification to say that the response of Christian people to this injunction to devote themselves to this direct exercise of the Keys will tell you as much about what goes on in their hearts as all the verbal confessions ever will. It is much easier to say Jesus Christ is my Lord than to tell another: "Your only hope of heaven is in Jesus Christ." Yet both are necessary. And this latter, too, spells out the strength or weakness of a congregation, or a church body. To be strong, or weak in the Lord will reflect itself at once in this specific obedience to His Word. Everything else that God's people do, and should do, somehow ties in with this one thing. Every aspect of their Christian witness sooner or later supports their personal administering of the Keys.

By the same token when they are faithful in this prime responsibility, all others will be carried along as well. Interest in, and support of, the public ministry will be no problem. Concern for Christian education will take care of itself. Sanctified Christian living? When the mind and heart of man seeks first to speak Christ to anyone and everyone, the life of man will also conform to the will of Christ. Let the believer know that Christ's work is his work, that he is – one at a time – the possessor of the Keys, and even his growth in knowledge and understanding will not have to be pushed on him. He will himself seek out that Word that he may grow thereby.

How imperative it is for us to understand correctly this fact that the administering of the Keys by the individual, which is the personal testifying by mouth to the Gospel of Christ, is not just devoutly to be wished! It is essential to the life of a body of Christians. Our church, too, stands or falls right here on this point. If we are to live and grow as a Synod which contends absolutely for the truth of Holy Scripture, we cannot afford to limp and lag along. Simply put, the pastors and called teachers cannot do it alone. You who are laymen here today, realize well that you are just as obligated to speak of Christ to others as laymen, as is your minister obliged to preach Him as a pastor. And you pastors, make it your business to teach your members this; encourage them to "give an answer to every man," and so fill them with the Gospel of Christ that it will overflow from their hearts and mouths wherever they go. The glory of Christ Jesus deserves no less.

What now of ourselves? Determined by the single-minded purpose of our individual members, is ours a strength or weakness within our church? We are about to find out. In the time that lies before us it will not take long to know whether every single one of us as a possessor of the Keys is ready to use to the full those Keys of heaven.

In a manner which was entirely in keeping with His strange and unsearchable ways our Lord has put us as a synod into a position where our opportunities for sounding forth the Gospel are literally limitless. Not only are we permitted to speak our message – which is to administer the Keys – men are pleading with us to do so. We are literally being begged to do so. Close at home, and afar off, the opening of doors to our preaching of the Gospel is no less than phenomenal. And we by divine decree stand facing these opportunities as royal priests to each of whom God has entrusted His Keys. Not by our choice, or as a consequence of any particular virtue in us, but entirely by the working of God we find ourselves in this totally unexpected position. The question calls for an answer: "What will we do with our opportunity? Better still: What will we do with the Keys?"

My brethren, what we do can only be decided by persons like you. The prime responsibility for seizing upon this God-given opportunity rests with you. You, and your fellow members throughout the Synod, will say yes or no to an all-out program of sounding forth the truth of Christ all over the world. You are constrained to

make decisions, including those reached right here at this convention which you cannot correctly and confidently make, except for the fact that you are royal priests of the household of God entrusted with the Keys of heaven and authorized by Jesus Christ to use them. That authority belongs to each one of you. Those Keys have been placed into the hands of every one of you. Each of you is a possessor of the Keys. All of which means, put in simpler terms, that each of you is qualified to stand up and say: "What are we waiting for?" and then to go home and very seriously ask in your congregations: "And what are *we* waiting for? The Gospel is there to be preached; the Keys are there to be turned. The Savior has told us to turn them. What are we waiting for?"

Dear brethren is this an exaggeration? Apparently our Lord didn't think so. He who made each Christian a member of His Church also made him a possessor of the Keys. As such each believer, singly or collectively, counts it his most precious right and his first duty to speak for, not against, the preachment of Christ's Gospel. You are no different. As long as this is true, in spite of all, among us, too, the Keys will turn. Thank God for that!