

The Ministry of the Keys with Special Emphasis on the Power of the Christian to Forgive and Retain Sins

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When your district secretary extended your invitation to me to present an essay on this subject to you at this convention, he explained, “There was no special reason for choosing this topic, except that we would like to be refreshed on this important teaching of our Lord.”

That this is, indeed, an important teaching of our Lord is certainly evident when we consider, for example, the fact that on three separate occasions He specifically conferred on His disciples the power to forgive and to retain sins and that on other occasions He delegated this authority to them in more general terms when He commissioned them to preach the Gospel and to administer the Sacraments. We remember also that in the Lord’s Prayer He teaches us to pray, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

In the Ministry of the Keys Jesus has given to His Church the awesome authority to act in His name, forgiving the sins of penitent sinners unto them and retaining the sins of the impenitent as long as they do not repent.

All of us stand in need of the forgiveness of sins. As penitent sinners we earnestly desire such forgiveness. We want to be assured, also, that when the forgiveness of sins is announced to us, we actually are forgiven. In every Sunday service we hear the pastor speak to us the words of the Absolution. When we hear these words, we want to be certain that the pastor actually has the power, right, and authority to forgive our sins. A counterfeit twenty-dollar bill is worthless. Forgiveness announced to us by one not authorized or empowered to forgive sins would likewise be worthless. It would, furthermore, be the height of presumption for the Church to claim to be speaking in the name of God if it has no authority or right to do this.

A study of what Scripture teaches concerning the Ministry of the Keys surely ought to be profitable for us, therefore. A review of this important teaching of our Lord ought to increase our joy in our Savior, Jesus Christ, and fortify us against doubt and despair, against temptation and sin. It ought to strengthen our faith and make us more deeply conscious of our privileges and responsibilities as members of Christ’s Church. Such a study ought to kindle in us also a renewed zeal and enthusiasm for the wonderful work of the ministry, the blessed privilege accorded to us as priests of God to use the Keys to open the gates of heaven for sinners by bringing them the glorious Gospel of God’s forgiveness for Christ’s sake. May God richly bless our study to this end!

It may be well to recall at the very outset of our discussion that the so-called Fifth Chief Part of the Catechism, The Ministry of the Keys and Confession, was not originally a part of Luther’s *Small Catechism*. For this reason it does not appear in the *Book of Concord* as printed, for example, in the *Concordia Triglotta*.

In his history of the Catechism, Dr. Michael Rau informs us that “what in the Catechism we call ‘Office of the Keys’ is derived from the Nuernberg Sermons for Children of 1533” (*Luther’s Small Catechism*, Chicago, 1929, p. 44). These sermons were the work of Andreas Osiander and Dominicus Slepner (*ibid.*, p. 61).

Although Brenz’s Catechism of 1535 had two questions concerning the Keys, the Office of the Keys was incorporated as an independent Chief Part for the first time in a catechism published by Caspar Aquila of Saalfeld, Thuringia, in 1538. Aquila drew his material from the

Nuernberg Sermons and placed it between Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Subsequently, his example was followed by other publishers since it was recognized as a valuable addition to Luther's original Catechism.

After this brief historical note we now take up our assigned topic itself, following, in general, the arrangement of the material in our Synod's Catechism. We will direct our attention particularly to the following three questions:

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

I.

What Are the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven?

"The keys of the kingdom of heaven" is an expression taken from Matthew 16:19, where Jesus says 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."

Looking at the context of this passage, we see that Jesus was questioning His disciples concerning the attitude of the people toward Him. "Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?" The views of the populace varied, some thinking that Jesus was John the Baptist returned to life, others saying that He was Elijah, while still others believed Him to be Jeremiah or one of the other prophets risen from the dead.

Probing further, Jesus addressed His disciples directly with the question, "But whom say ye that I am?" Jesus was seeking to clarify and to crystallize their convictions.

It was Peter who unhesitatingly responded with the beautiful and unequivocal confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus accepted Peter's confession and pronounced him blessed. At the same time, however, Jesus reminded Peter that he did not come to this understanding and faith of himself. It was God who revealed this truth to him. We might paraphrase the words of Jesus, in which He makes a striking and effective paronomasia, or play on words, somewhat as follows: "Your name is Peter, which means rock; and it is on this solid rock, the saving truth that I am the Christ, the Son of the living God, that I will build my Church." Peter is to be an instrument of Jesus in the building of the Church. For this reason Jesus 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. Jesus is not speaking of iron or even of gold keys, but of that which in the spiritual realm performs the function of a key in the door of a house. The owner of a house possesses the keys. He has complete authority, therefore, either to admit or to refuse admittance to others.

The keys of the kingdom of heaven are the keys to God's house. Jesus has the keys. He possesses complete authority, therefore, either to grant or to deny entrance to the kingdom of heaven.

Two other passages of 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." As the Conqueror of hell and death, Jesus has the keys to them. He 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 and 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" (Rev. 3:7).

In this last passage Jesus is clearly applying to Himself the words spoken by the Lord through the prophet Isaiah concerning Eliakim, a man whom God calls “my servant” (Is. 22:20). Shebna, the treasurer who was “over the house” of King Hezekiah, was haughty and altogether unworthy of his high office. God announced, therefore, that He would take his office from him and give it to Eliakim, “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” (Is. 22:22).

In the Old Testament 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. Just as Eliakim in his office as the king’s treasurer had complete control over the royal treasury inasmuch as he had the key, so Jesus has complete control over the treasures 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.

In the parable of the ten virgins we are told that the five wise virgins, who were prepared when the Bridegroom came, went with Him into the marriage, “and the door was shut” (Matt. 25:10). When the five foolish virgins, who were not prepared, later came and pleaded, “Lord, Lord, open to us,” He answered, “I know you not” (Matt. 25:11,12).

Yes, Jesus opens, and no man shuts; He shuts, and no man opens. All the treasures of grace promised to David are entrusted to His care. He bestows them where and when He wills (Rom. 9:18; *Augsburg Confession*, Art. V, 2; *Trig.*, 45).

By this time, perhaps, the question has come to your minds, What is the kingdom of heaven to which Jesus has the keys? It is, as Christ pointed out to Pontius Pilate, far different from any earthly kingdom. “My kingdom is not of this world,” He told the Roman governor. 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. In reply to Pilate’s question, “Art thou a king then?” Jesus affirmed, “Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world that I should bear witness unto the truth. Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice” (John 18:36,37).

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, on his functioning as a king.

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. It is, to mention but a few examples, like a man who sowed good seed in a field where an enemy later sowed tares (Matt. 13:24ff.), like a tiny mustard seed, which grows into a tree (Matt. 13:31f.), or like leaven, which permeates a whole batch of dough (Matt. 13:33).

The kingdom of heaven is, then, 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 Satan’s hellish power and brings them under the sway of His saving, life-giving scepter. His kingdom is not a visible realm. He carries on His activity invisibly. “The kingdom of God cometh not with observation, neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:20,21).

Earthly kingdoms confer earthly benefits on their citizens, but Christ’s heavenly kingdom is a spiritual activity that brings spiritual blessings. “The kingdom of God is not meat and drink;

but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost” (Rom. 14:17). Where the Savior’s Word is taught, there He brings men under His gracious influence. He gives sinners who are dead in trespasses and sins spiritual and eternal life. “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly,” He declares (John 10:10). Death itself cannot rob His disciples of the life He gives. He delivers them from its fear and power and opens for them the jeweled portals to everlasting life, eternal blessedness, and heavenly glory. Thus those who once were the servants of sin are forever freed from its curse and dominion, and those who once were the helpless minions of the devil are eternally safe from his cruel domination and the horrifying threat of the fiery pit of hell.

What a wondrous kingdom this is, and what a gracious, benevolent King rules over it! Is it any wonder that the prophet Zechariah exclaims, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation” (Zech. 9:9)? Contemplating the coming of this King, the prophet Isaiah exulted, “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this” (Is. 9:6,7).

It would be a mistake simply to identify the kingdom of heaven with Christ’s Church here on earth. This kingdom has an earthly side and a heavenly side. It is the entire domain in which Christ exercises His saving grace. Here on earth He exercises it by means of His Gospel. In heaven He exercises it by bestowing all the glories of heaven on His believers in the Church Triumphant.

In Revelation 3:7, as we have seen, the metaphor of keys is carried through and unfolded. In Matthew 16 the figure of keys is dropped, and another somewhat different picture is introduced, the picture of binding and loosing. Jesus speaks of binding also in the parable of the marriage of the king’s son. When the king saw the man who had come to the wedding without putting on a wedding garment, he commanded his servants, “Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 22:13).

In Matthew 16 Jesus does not speak of binding persons, but of binding things. “*Whatsoever* thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven,” He says, “and *whatsoever* thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:19). He repeats this authorization in chapter 18, where He addresses all the disciples and, using the plural, says, “*Whatsoever* ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and *whatsoever* ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 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 but drops all figures of speech.

In the evening on the day of His resurrection He appeared to His anxious disciples as they were gathered together behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. Comforting them with His benediction of peace, He removed all their doubts about His resurrection by showing them His hands and His side. Luke informs us also that He proved to them that they were not seeing a ghost by eating a piece of broiled fish and some honeycomb. Then He commissioned them to go out as His ambassadors, saying, “Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.” Thereupon He breathed on them and said, “Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whosoever sins ye

remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained” (John 20:21-23).

Comparing this now with the passages in Matthew, we see that to “bind” means to retain sins, that is, not to forgive them; to “loose” means to remit or to forgive them. A person whose sins are bound is not released or freed from them. They are fastened to him as a heavy load is fastened to a beast of burden. When they are loosed, however, the burden is removed. The sinner is relieved of the entire weight of his guilt and shame.

The binding and loosing is to be carried out with respect to men’s works, with respect to their words and deeds. In binding and loosing we dare not presume to judge a person’s heart. Only God can discern the thoughts and intents of the heart. Only God knows whether faith is present in the heart or not. “Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” (I Sam. 16:7).

The future time of which Jesus spoke when He told Peter, “I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven,” was the time after His resurrection. Then He sent out His disciples to preach the Gospel in all the world. Then He commissioned them, saying, “As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you” (John 20:21). Then He charged them “that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). Then He empowered them to remit and to retain sins.

Now it ought to be clear also what the Keys are by means of which the gates to heaven are opened and shut. They are the Gospel. They are the Means of grace, the Gospel enshrined in the Word and in the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. By the Gospel heaven is opened to sinners. When the Gospel is despised, the doors to heaven are closed to the unbeliever.

Jesus has commissioned His Church to preach the Gospel. “Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature,” He bids us and immediately adds, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16:15,16). Just as a key may be used either to unlock or to lock a door, so the Gospel unlocks the gates to heaven, but when the Gospel is rejected in unbelief, those gates are firmly locked. There is no other key to open them except the Gospel of Christ.

The Gospel announces that God has forgiven the sins of all man for Christ’s sake. He who believes this actually possesses and enjoys this forgiveness. His sins are remitted. They are loosed from him. He who does not believe, however, has no forgiveness. His sins are retained. He must bear the burden of them himself. He must personally suffer the curse and punishment that devolves on those who transgress the holy will of God, 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.

The Keys center, therefore, in the Gospel, not in the Law. In his treatise addressed to the Christians in the city of Prague, *How One Chooses Servants of the Church*, Luther declares:

The binding and loosing is really nothing else than to preach the Gospel and to put the same to use. For what else does “loose” mean than to proclaim that the sins are remitted before God; what else does “bind” mean than to take away the Gospel and proclaim that sins are retained? Therefore, whether they wish it so or not, we maintain that the keys are common to all without exception, since they are nothing else than the office by which one puts the Word to use and practice. (St. L., X, 1580-1581; quoted in WLQ, 1963, p.106).

Looking at the Confessions of our Church, we see that Article XXVIII of the *Augsburg Confession* entitled “Of Ecclesiastical Power,” defines the Keys as follows: “The power of the Keys, or the power of bishops, according to the Gospel, is a power or commandment of God, to preach the Gospel, to remit and retain sins, and to administer the Sacraments” (par. 5; *Trig.*, 85). “This power,” it adds, “is exercised only by teaching or preaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments” (par. 8; *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 brief answer, “The Keys are the Gospel in Word and Sacraments, the means to open the kingdom of heaven” (p. 208).

In his essay “Concerning the Doctrine of the Church” Professor August Pieper defines the Keys as “nothing more than the practical application of the Gospel to the individual Christian, either in the state of repentance or in the state of impenitence—‘he that believeth’; ‘he that believeth not’” (WLQ, 1962, p. 99).

Dr. Francis Pieper speaks similarly in his *Christian Dogmatics*:

Note also that the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” are nothing else, and can be nothing else, than the means of grace, the Gospel. Through the offer of the Gospel, and through nothing else, Christians remit sins and thus open heaven; through withholding the Gospel, they retain sins and thus lock heaven (III, 453).

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 in Bengel’s remark, however, which he makes in his famous *Gnomon* that “the Keys themselves are not said to be two; the same key opens and closes” (*ad Matt.* 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.

Through the prophet Isaiah the Savior Himself describes the twofold nature of His work when He says, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and “a opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God” (Is. 61:1,2).

The Keys function accordingly in two ways. On the one hand, heaven’s gates are opened when the good tidings of salvation are preached to the meek, when those brokenhearted as a result of sin are bound up, when liberty is proclaimed to the captives of Satan, when the prison of sin and death is opened to them that are bound, and when the acceptable year of the Lord’s grace is announced. On the other hand, heaven’s gates are barred when the day of God’s vengeance is proclaimed to all unbelievers. “He that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16:16).

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 man 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” (John 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” (John 3:18). John the Baptist reiterated this testimony, declaring, “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him” (John 3:36). 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. By rejecting the Gospel he refuses the one means of escape that there is from the Law’s terrible threat, “Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them” (Deut. 27:26). He refuses the only means God has provided for deliverance from the just and righteous penalty imposed on every transgressor of the Law, “The soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Ezek. 18:20).

There is no other Savior from sin except the Lord Jesus Christ. “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The Apostle Paul declares, “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). Those who are not “in Him,” however, those who do not believe in Him, will inevitably feel the full force of God’s holy wrath. Despite the claims so frequently heard today, even at times within the Lutheran Church, that those who do their best to live an upright life according to their conscience, be they Buddhist, Mohammedan, Hottentot, or Jew, the testimony of the Scriptures is clear that apart from Jesus there is no escape from the sentence of eternal doom, “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41). The binding key is to impress on the impenitent, on the unbelieving, that as long as they continue in their unbelief they are 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, which is properly the preaching of the Gospel” (F.C., Epit. V,10; *Trig.*, 803). The preaching of the Law is preparatory to the preaching of the Gospel.

The Law serves to reveal sin and to terrify consciences with its demands and threats. Unless the sinner realizes the hopelessness and helplessness of his condition, he will have nothing but contempt for the Gospel. When Jesus sent out His disciples to “teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19,20), He intended, of course, that they should preach “all the counsel of God,” as Paul did (Acts 20:27). The Law is to be preached as a handmaiden of the Gospel.

Thus, also, the binding key is to be used in the interest of the Gospel. In his treatise on the Keys, written in 1530, Luther emphasizes this point.

The purpose of Christ’s binding is to redeem the sinner from his sins. With his “binding” Christ attempts nothing else but to free and rid the sinner’s conscience of sins. It is for this reason that he “binds” and punishes the sinner so that he might let go of his sin, repent of it, and avoid it. (Am. Ed., 40:328).

It is interesting to note, incidentally, that Dr. C. F. W. Walther had a very high regard for this treatise by Dr. Luther on the Keys. Walther tell us, “For myself I must confess that it was

from this treatise that I first learned what the Gospel is, at a time when I thought I knew it, but did not" (*Law and Gospel*, p. 188).

Luther again points to the purpose of the binding in the following paragraph from this treatise:

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, and admonishes him to fear God, and causes him to tremble, and moves him to repentance, and not to destruction. 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. (Am. Ed., 40:372f.).

When Jesus says to Peter, "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven," He obviously implies that the keys are His to give. He teaches us the same wondrous truth when He says, "I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved" (John 10:9), when He calls Himself the Good Shepherd, who gives His sheep eternal life (John 10:11-29). And when He asserts, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me" (John 14:6).

How, we may ask, did Jesus obtain these keys? Scripture teaches us that they are His by virtue of His triumphant victory over sin, death, and hell. He has "the keys of hell and of death" (Rev. 1:18) because He is the mighty Conqueror of hell and death.

The Apostle Paul thrills with joy at the Savior's victory and jubilantly shouts, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:55-57). The Good Shepherd gives His sheep eternal life because He laid down His life for them (John.10:11). He has the Keys of the kingdom of heaven because of His redemptive life and death as the divinely appointed Messiah. He made a complete and perfect atonement for us all by fulfilling all the demands of the Law in our stead and by suffering the penalty for our sins as our Substitute. The perfection and all sufficiency of His work 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 Tim. 1:10).

These truths are summed up by Luther in his explanation of the Second Article in the familiar words that Jesus Christ is my Lord

...who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sin, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood, and with His innocent sufferings and death; that I should be His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness; even as He is risen from death, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.

In Luther's treatise on the Keys he also points out the relationship between Christ's work of redemption and the Keys, by which He imparts the benefits of His work to us:

Christ's keys help in the attainment of heaven and eternal life, for himself calls them keys to the kingdom of heaven, because they close heaven to the hardened sinner and open it to the repentant one. Consequently, there must lie hidden in the keys of Christ his blood, death, and resurrection, by which he has opened to us heaven, and thus imparts through the keys to poor sinners what he has wrought through his blood. The office of the keys is a high and divine office, aiding our souls to pass from sin and death to grace and

life; it grants them righteousness without any merit of works, solely through forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47). (Am. Ed., 40:328).

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 angel guards the gate no more.
To God our thanks we pay. (L.H. 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, but through the word of absolution God Himself actually forgives sins. "Whosoever 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.

Luther reminds us, "The keys or the forgiveness of sins are not based on our own repentance or worthiness" (Am. Ed., 40:364). Those who make the forgiveness of sins dependent on something in man are preaching "another gospel, which is not another" (Gal. 1:6,7), just as the Judaizers did in Galatia. They are, perverting the Gospel of Christ.

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?" (Rom. 3:3). His answer is, "God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar." 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. (Am. E., 40:366f.).

The Ministry of the Keys, therefore, is finally nothing other 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" (Rom. 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" (Rom. 4:25). For His sake we *are* justified. For His sake we *are* forgiven.

Any and every denial of the blessed truth of objective, universal justification is a denial of the Gospel itself. Any impairment of it is an impairment of the Gospel. If the forgiveness of sins would be dependent on what we do in any respect whatsoever, then the certainty of our

salvation would be removed. Then we would be robbed of the comfort and joy of the Gospel because we could never be certain that we had done enough.

Those who refuse the wondrous gift of Christ's righteousness, however, those who do not believe the Gospel promise, do not enjoy its benefits. Reminding his readers of the unbelievers among the Children of Israel who died in the wilderness, the inspired author of the Epistle to the Hebrews writes, "Unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it" (Heb. 4:2).

The sinner comes into possession of the gift of salvation only by faith. "The just shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:17). "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" (Mark 16:15). 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" (Rom. 5:1). The *Formula of Concord*, accordingly, declares:

We believe, teach and confess that poor sinful man is justified before God, that is, absolved and declared free from all his sins, and from the sentence of well-deserved condemnation, and adopted into sonship and heirship of eternal life, without any merit or worth of our own, also without any preceding, present, or any subsequent works, out of pure grace, because of the sole merit, complete obedience, bitter suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord Christ alone, whose obedience is reckoned to us for righteousness.

These treasures are offered to us by the Holy Ghost in the promise of the holy Gospel; and faith alone is the only means by which we lay hold upon, accept, and apply, and appropriate them to ourselves. This faith is a gift of God, by which we truly learn to know Christ, our Redeemer, in the Word of the Gospel, and trust in Him, that for the sake of His obedience alone we have the forgiveness of sins by grace, are regarded as godly and righteous by God the Father, and are eternally saved. (F. C., T. D., III, 9-11; *Trig.*, 919).

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" (Rom. 1:16). "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." as Paul testifies (Rom. 10:17).

As the Savior of the world Jesus during His public ministry on earth 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" (Matt. 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" (Matt. 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 to them He healed the paralyzed man by merely speaking a word. Incidentally, it is important to note also 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.

On another occasion, when a woman who was known as a public sinner anointed Jesus' feet in the house of Simon, the Pharisee, Jesus accepted her act of love as a sign of her repentance. "Thy sins are forgiven," He told her (Luke 7:48).

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, whose piety was a mere sham: “Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?” (Matt. 23:33).

The Scriptures do not leave us in doubt, therefore, as to the fact that Jesus possesses the Keys of the kingdom of heaven. Gabriel’s words to Mary have been fulfilled, “The Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David; and he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end” (Luke 1:33). Jesus has the key of David. He opens, and no man shuts; and shuts, and no man opens (Rev. 3:7).

II.

To Whom Did Jesus Entrust the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven?

In Matthew 16, as we have previously heard, Jesus was addressing Peter when He said, “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” (Matt. 16:19). Jesus promises to give these Keys to Peter. 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: *Whosoever ye shall bind*, etc. And in John 20,23: *Whosoever sins ye remit*, etc. These words testify that the keys are given en 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. All agreed with this confession. None of them disavowed it.

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 Peter any kind of primacy over the other apostles. This point, too, is emphasized in the Treatise of the Power and Primacy of the Pope attached to the Smalcald Articles:

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. (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 that the man who sits in the so-called chair of St. Peter in Rome today is 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.*, Of the Power and Primacy of the Pope, 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 (Luke 24:33). It was to this entire group that He said, “Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained” (John 20:23). It was on this entire group, on His Church, that Jesus laid the solemn responsibility “that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). All of Jesus’ followers were entrusted with the Great Commission, “Go ye therefore and teach all nations” (Matt. 28:19).

For this reason Article VII of Part III of the *Smalcald Articles* asserts,

The keys are an office and power given by Christ to the Church for binding and loosing sin, not only the gross and well-known sins, but also the subtle, hidden, which are known only to God. (*Trig.*, 493)

This point, that the Keys have been given *to the Church*, is made again, in the Treatise of the Power and Primacy of the Pope:

It is necessary to acknowledge that the keys belong not to the person of one particular man, but to the Church, as many most clear and firm arguments testify. For Christ, speaking concerning the keys, Matt. 18,19, adds: *If two or three of you shall agree on earth*, etc. Therefore he grants the keys principally and immediately to the Church. The German text adds:

Just as the promise of the Gospel belongs certainly and immediately to the entire Church, so the keys belong immediately to the entire Church, because the keys are nothing else than the office whereby this promise is communicated to every one who desires it. (par. 24; *Trig.*, 511).

The Catechism, as we recall, also asserts 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. His regeneration was the work 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.

That is evident also from the context of Matthew 18, where Jesus describes Himself as the Shepherd who leaves his ninety and nine sheep in order to go after that which is lost. So also His disciples are to have a loving concern for a brother who has strayed from the fold.

First the one who knows of the fellow Christian's fall 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. 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" (Matt. 18:18).

Yes, Jesus has entrusted His Church with the Keys of the kingdom of heaven. By "Church" He means the believers, those who are gathered together in His name, according to His statement in verse 20, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

When we say that Jesus has given the Keys to His Church on earth, we do not mean the outward organization, to which hypocrites may also belong. We mean the Church in the proper sense of the word, the body of true believers. Luther makes this very plain when he says:

The gathering of all believers in Christ—this alone has the keys, of this you should not be in doubt. And whoever usurps the keys beyond that group is a crafty, sacrilegious rogue and churchrobber, be he pope or whatever he may be." (St. L., XIX, 846:65).

In his treatise addressed to the people of Prague Luther emphasizes the same truth:

The keys belong to the whole congregation of all Christians and to each one who is a member of that congregation, and that not only as to the power, but also as to the use, and that in any manner whatsoever, so that we do no violence to the words of Christ, who straightway and generally says to all: Let him be unto *thee*, etc. Likewise: Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, etc....Likewise, verse 20: Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. In these passages the most absolute right and use is absolutely ascribed and emphasized, that they may bind and loose, unless indeed we wanted to deny to Christ Himself the right and use of the keys when He dwells in the midst of two. (St. L., X, 1580:52).

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, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

We Christians have been elected by God from eternity to be His people. Because of His election He has brought us to faith, calling us out of the darkness of unbelief and despair into the glorious light of His spiritual kingdom. By faith in Christ Jesus we are His children and heirs of eternal life. He has made us kings and priests and prophets. He has made us ambassadors of Christ, charged with the responsibility of administering Christ's word of grace, the Keys of the kingdom of heaven. He has "committed unto us the word of reconciliation" (II Cor. 5:19), sending us out to extend the invitation to sinners everywhere, "Be ye reconciled to God!" (II Cor. 5:20).

What a privilege this is, and what a solemn responsibility! God could very well have used some other method to convey the good news of salvation to lost mankind. But He has chosen to

use us, the recipients of His grace. We, who are ourselves sinners and who have tasted His goodness and mercy and love, are the channels of His grace to others. We are a vital link in the chain of salvation. If we prove ourselves unworthy of this high calling, if we are unfaithful in fulfilling this assignment, God will give it to others. He will carry out His purpose, make no mistake about that! He will gather His elect into His Church from the four corners of the earth. But we will have deprived ourselves of the joy of sharing in the most important work in the world.

As a Christian, each of us possesses the Keys. Each of us has the privilege and responsibility, therefore, of being a personal witness for Christ in his daily life. All with whom we come into contact present us with an opportunity for Christian witness by word and deed. “Ye are the light of the world,” our Savior tells us. “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” is His exhortation (Matt. 5:14,16).

But we also possess the Keys jointly with our fellow Christians. Together with those who are within our confessional fellowship, we will faithfully support the ministry of the Word, therefore, in our congregation and Synod. Is not that the very purpose for which the Holy Ghost has joined us together with like-minded brethren?

At this particular juncture in history our Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod has a great responsibility. Orthodox, Scriptural theology has been abandoned by the vast majority of those who bear the name Lutheran in the world today. They are Lutheran in name only. They have sold their heritage of sound doctrine and confessional Lutheran practice for a mess of pottage, the devil’s stew of modern theology and the practice of expediency. After their own lusts they have heaped to themselves teachers, having itching ears. They have turned away their ears from the truth and have turned them unto fables (II Tim. 4:3,4).

Lutheran churches too, by and large have fallen victim to Satan’s siren song of ecumenism. On the altar of the ecumenical movement they have sacrificed the inspiration, inerrancy, and authority of the Scriptures. Together with a large sector of the Protestant and Catholic world, Lutheran churches are substituting Christ, the teacher of ethics, for Jesus, the Savior from sin. To a large extent they are directing their energies toward the improvement of society instead of toward the evangelization of the world, to social action instead of to missionary outreach. The surrender of church bodies that once were bastions of orthodoxy to the forces of heterodoxy is a tragedy that beggars description. It is a tragedy that makes confessional Lutherans weep.

By the grace of God—and this is no mere pious phrase—by the sheer grace of our merciful God our Synod still possesses the Gospel in all its saving truth and pristine purity. From our pulpits, in the classroom of our schools, and colleges, and seminary, on our mission fields, and through the printed pages of our literature the Gospel of Christ, which is “the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16), is being proclaimed uncorrupted by human philosophy and unadulterated with soul-destroying error. For this gift of unmerited love we can never sufficiently thank our gracious God.

Ours is not a large church body. We represent only about four percent of the Lutherans in this country. We number only about 370,000 souls. Yet God has called us to a large task. He has laid upon us the double responsibility of passing this priceless heritage on to our children and of sharing it with others throughout the world.

The first of these obligations requires of us that we be faithful in heeding the Lord’s admonition to teach the truths of the Gospel diligently unto our children (Deut. 6:7). In the

home, in the Christian school, and through every agency of Christian education at the disposal of the Church we need to implant the Word of life deeply and firmly in the hearts of the young. With the Psalmist we need to dedicate ourselves anew to the task of transmitting to our children those vital, saving truths “which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us.” With Asaph of old we must resolve that regardless of the difficulty and the cost we will not hide them from our children but will show “to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done. For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children: that the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children: that they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments” (Ps. 78:3-7).

The second of the obligations God has laid upon us requires faithfulness of us in carrying out our Savior’s commission to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. Ours is a global mission. God is opening doors of opportunity for us around the earth. He is leading many who are hungry for the Word in its truth and purity to turn to us. From the Atlantic to the Pacific, from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, from Europe and Africa, from Latin America and the Far East the call has been directed to us, “Come over into Macedonia and help us!” (Acts 16:9).

Will we respond to that call? Will we be faithful stewards of the Keys that have been entrusted to us? Will we bring the Gospel in Word and Sacrament to those who will perish eternally without it? Will we bring the Light of life to those who are still sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death? Will we faithfully support the Ministry of the Word as God has prospered us?

God has given us a double blessing. He has given us the spiritual treasure of His Truth and the material treasure with which to publish it to the ends of the earth. He has entrusted us with the Keys of the kingdom and with the currency of kings. We are stewards of God’s Word and of God’s wealth, of the treasures of heaven and of the riches of the earth. And “every one of us shall give account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:12). May we be faithful stewards of God’s gifts -that oft the Day of Reckoning we may hear the righteous Judge say to us, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord” (Matt. 25:21)!

Has Jesus empowered Christians to forgive and to retain sins? He most certainly has! The Scriptures are unequivocal on that point. But how are these Keys to be administered? This brings us to the third part of our essay.

III

How are the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven to be Administered?

The Keys belong to Jesus. He won them by His redemptive work, by His active and passive obedience to His heavenly Father as our Substitute. Through His vicarious atonement He established the Gospel, fulfilling all the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament and making our salvation a blessed and joyous reality.

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 only in accord with 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” (Matt. 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 concerning their faith and whom Paul delivered to Satan that they might learn not to blaspheme (I Tim. 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 did the Pharisees, or despairing, they turn away from the Savior in disbelief, 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. The healed man went with them into the temple, leaping and praising God so exuberantly that a great crowd of people was attracted. The people recognized what a great miracle Peter and John had performed and were filled with astonishment. This gave Peter an opportunity to speak 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. God had raised Him from the dead, however, and Peter now exhorted them, “Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out” (Acts 3:19). Though Peter and John were arrested by the temple authorities, the result of Peter’s preaching was that “many of them which heard the word believed” (Acts 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 administered 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” (Acts 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 (Acts 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” (Acts 13:46). Thus they applied the binding key.

Many a pastor can tell of unsuccessful efforts to persuade someone to leave the lodge with its Christless religion of salvation by works, or to give up Scouting, the lodges’ junior department or farm club, to use a baseball analogy. All who refuse to heed the Savior’s call to repentance, boasting of their own righteousness and parading about with a pretense of piety as the Pharisees did, need to be told, in the words of Jesus, “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20).

In our day when immorality is defended as a “new morality,” when liberty has become a pretext for license, when hedonism, the pursuit of pleasure, is hailed as the, “in” religion for the Age of Aquarius, when lawlessness is justified in the name of the law, when, as recently happened at the Southeastern Minnesota district convention of the American Lutheran Church, a nude couple was given Communion at the Lord’s Table without provoking a cry of outrage on

the part of the congregation—and we and our fellow Christians are not immune to these influences inasmuch as we are children of our time—we need to be reminded that “the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these: Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revelings, and such like: of the which, the Apostle Paul warns, “I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:20,21). To those who fall into these sins and do not repent, the binding key is to be applied. Such sins are evidence of unbelief.

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. It is to be used by us, therefore, only according to His will, according to His directions, not according to our own whims and fancies.

If man attempts to use the Keys contrary to Christ’s will, he cannot succeed. Thus when the pope on January 3, 1521, excommunicated Luther, his attempt to employ the binding key against him failed. The pope’s binding was invalid. 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, the Gospel was the source of 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 by taking an active part in the work of the Church. The Church administers the 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” (Matt. 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 engaged in administering the Keys. Through all these agencies believers, the members of the Church, 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 being administered when the sermon is preached in the services, but also in the sacramental elements in the liturgy, particularly in the Absolution following the Confession of Sins. In the Absolution the pastor announces to us:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, hath had mercy upon us and hath given His only Son to die for us and for His sake forgiveth us all our sins. To them that believe on His name He giveth power to become the sons of God and hath promised them His Holy Spirit. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved. Grant this, Lord, unto us all.

In the Order of Holy Communion an especially solemn form of the Absolution is employed. The pastor addresses the congregation, which has confessed all its sins and iniquities and declared that it justly deserves God’s temporal and eternal punishment. In answer to the people’s plea that God would be gracious and merciful to them for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, 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 command of Jesus, “As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you... Whosoever sins ye remit, they *are* remitted unto them” (John 20:21,23).

Of course, the pastor does not forgive sin 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: and he that despiseth you despiseth me; and he that despiseth me despiseth him that sent me” (Luke 10:16).

The pastor is, therefore, not merely giving an assurance that God has forgiven sins, but through him God actually is forgiving 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” (St. L., XIIIa, 917; quoted by Walther, *Law and Gospel*, p. 183f.).

Since such wonderful blessings are distributed in the public services of the Church, should we not faithfully attend them? Will we not diligently, attentively, and gladly listen to the preaching of the Gospel? Jesus assures us, “Blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it” (Luke 11:28). Will we not then say with the Psalmist, “Lord, I have loved the habitation of thy house, and the place where thine honor dwelleth” (Ps. 26:8)?

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 take it upon himself to preach or teach in the name of a group of fellow Christians. “No one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called” (*Augsburg Confession*, Article 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 attend to the administration of 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” (Acts 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 specially 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... Here belong the statements of Christ which testify that the keys have been given to the Church, and not merely to certain persons, Matt. 18,20: *Where two or three are gathered together in My name*, etc.

Lastly, the statement of Peter also confirms this, I Ep. 2,9: *Ye are a royal priesthood*. These words pertain to the true Church, which certainly has the right to elect and ordain ministers since it alone has the priesthood. (Of the Power and Jurisdiction of Bishops, 67-69; *Trig.*, 523-525).

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” (Matt. 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 of the administration of the Keys to groups of people. We have pointed out that they are administered in this way 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 gatherings 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 had appeared to him (Acts 22:16). Peter assured the multitudes on Pentecost that through Baptism they would receive “the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38).

Equally personal is the forgiveness conveyed to the individual in the Lord’s Supper. In a demonstration of consummate love the Savior in, with, and under the bread and wine gives us His very Body and Blood, the same Body and Blood by 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 participants in the New Testament, according to His promise, “This is the New Testament in my blood” (I Cor. 11:25). What the significance of this New Testament or Covenant is we see from Romans 11:27, where the Lord 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!

The authorization for the use of the Keys in the Sacraments lies in the words of institution. With respect to Baptism we have the command, “Go ye therefore and make disciples

of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost” (Matt. 28:19, a literal translation), and with respect to the Lord’s Supper, “This do in remembrance of me” (I Cor. 11:24).

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 the Fifth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us” (Luke 11:4). That we are authorized to forgive others is clearly implied in Jesus’ words, “If ye forgive man their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 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 from him private absolution. They are administered individually when the pastor visits the sick and comforts them with the Gospel of God’s love in Christ.

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 means of a parable which prompted David unwittingly to pronounce judgment on himself. “Thou art the man!” Nathan then declared, and finally, after more than a year of impenitence, David’s hard heart was crushed by the hammer of the Law. “I have sinned against the Lord,” David was moved to confess. Thereupon Nathan forgave David’s sin, assuring him, “The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die” (II Sam. 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 we are conscience-stricken and 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 thy 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.” Does not Jesus assure us, “Whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 18:18)? Does He not say, “Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them” (John 20:23), and yet again, “He that heareth you heareth me” (Luke 10:16)?

Article XXV of the *Augsburg Confession* rightly states, therefore, “Our people are taught that they should highly prize the absolution, as being the voice of God, and pronounced by God’s command” (*Trig.*, 69).

Hence, Melancthon also writes in the *Apology*:

Moreover, the power of the keys administers and presents the Gospel through absolution, which is the true voice of the Gospel...For when the Gospel is heard, and the absolution is heard, the conscience is encouraged and receives consolation. And because God truly quickens through the Word, the keys truly remit sins before God according to Luke 10,16: *He that heareth you heareth Me*. Wherefore the voice of the one absolving must be believed not otherwise than we would believe a voice from heaven. (Art. V, 39-40; *Trig.* 261).

Article VIII of the *Smalcald Articles* (Part III), therefore, makes the point that “since Absolution or the Power of the Keys is also an aid and consolation against sin and a bad conscience, ordained by Christ in the Gospel, Confession or Absolution ought by no means to be abolished in the Church” (*Trig.*, 493).

When the people of Capernaum heard Jesus forgive the sins of the man sick of the palsy and when they saw Him prove that He had the power to forgive sins by healing the man, “they

marveled, and glorified God, which had given such power unto men” (Matt. 9:8). With them we should never cease to marvel and to glorify God for the gift of the Keys.

Most personal also, finally, is the use of the Keys in the effort to restore a fallen brother. Jesus speaks of this use of the Keys in Matthew 18:15-20, a passage we have previously referred to. Just as Jesus, the Good Shepherd, loves every one of His sheep and does not want to see a single one perish, so also the members of His Church are to 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?” (Gen. 4:9). Rather, if one sees his 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 falls, 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. What joy they will experience 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. There is still another avenue of approach that is open. Perhaps if the whole congregation, the entire fellowship of believers with whom the fallen brother is associated, is drawn in and their assistance is enlisted, the sinner will come to recognize the error of his ways and will 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 yet 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 you, 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, asking 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” (Matt. 18:19).

When the final step of excommunication is eventually and 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” (Matt. 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. (Am. Ed., 40:364f.).

Luther emphasizes this point also in the following:

The key which binds is the power or office to punish the sinner who refuses to repent by means of a public condemnation to eternal death and separation from the rest of Christendom. And when such a judgment is pronounced, it is as a judgment of Christ himself. And if the sinner perseveres in his sin, he is certainly eternally damned. (Am. Ed., 40:372).

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 consequences 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” (Luke 19:10). It is altogether 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 member 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 Tim. 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 did Demas, who, Paul says, “hath forsaken me, having loved this present world” (II Tim. 4:10). Those who have left the Church cannot be put out. They have removed themselves. They on their part have severed the ties 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 put away from among yourselves that wicked person” is Paul’s earnest admonition (I Cor. 5:13).

In his Second Epistle to the Corinthians Paul records the happy outcome of the action which the congregation subsequently took. The excommunication had had the desired effect. The adulterer repented of his sin. Paul now urges the congregation to forgive him and comfort him, “lest such an one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow” (II Cor. 2:7). And Paul adds,

“Whom you forgive, him I also forgive, and what I forgive is forgiven for your sakes in the presence of Christ” (II Cor. 2:10, Berkeley).

We have purposely cited the Berkeley translation of this last passage because it brings out clearly the point that when Christians here on earth forgive sins, they are truly forgiven “in the presence 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. 5:6).

It is a misconceived spirit of love that falls 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 with a self-righteous, holier-than-thou attitude, but in meekness, in humility, and with 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 an unalloyed and sincere spirit of helpfulness and brotherly love.

History teaches us that when congregations and church bodies neglect this responsibility, the doors to spiritual deterioration and decay are thrown open. When churches fail 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. To them the Lord Jesus addresses serious words of admonition: “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!” (Rev. 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 warnings of Scripture and the lessons of history to heart. May God graciously strengthen us through His Word that we do not succumb to the temptation to neglect this vital use of the Keys! May He fortify us to resist the very beginnings of what can quickly become a calamitous toboggan ride down the treacherous slopes of indifference to spiritual disaster!

In the *Augsburg Confession* in a passage quoted earlier in part 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 (Am. Ed., 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" (*ibid.*, p. 373).

Think of it—the Lord Jesus has entrusted to us, the members of His Church, the Ministry of the Keys! He has committed to us His holy Gospel, the Keys to the kingdom of heaven! God forbid that we should be found derelict in our duty or unfaithful in our stewardship of the trust Jesus has committed to us! Must not we, who have tasted the riches of God's grace and experienced the comfort, joy, and peace 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)? Must we not join the apostles in declaring, "We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20)?

Thousands are dying every day without Christ 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 be His ambassadors in bringing to the world His message of hope, "Be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee!"

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