

# The History and Import of the Fifth Chief Part

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## Introduction

As the title of this essay indicates, we are concerning ourselves with a part of Luther's Small Catechism, that gem from the Reformation which we hold dear to this day because we remain convinced that it is still the best tool we have with which to teach our children the basics of Christian doctrine. As we teach Luther's catechism in confirmation class, we are very conscious of the fact that what we teach must be a solid doctrinal foundation, otherwise our children will not have a firm base on which to build as they seek to grow in faith and Christian living. Therefore, though we may have recently studied the catechism in our schooling, or though we may have taught the catechism many times over the course of a lengthy ministry, we recognize how valuable it is to review both the content and the method of teaching various parts of the catechism. Your program committee requested, and your essayist will attempt, such a review of the fifth chief part. This review will be the content of those portions of the essay which deal with the import of the Ministry of the Keys and of Confession.

A review of the history of the fifth chief part is also necessitated by the fact that the Ministry of the Keys, as we know it, was not part of Luther's *Enchiridion* of 1531 which also became the essential text of the *Small Catechism* incorporated into the *Book of Concord* (1580). It is also important for us to remind ourselves that the full text of what Luther wrote about confession does not appear in the *Small Catechism* as we print it today.

As the outline indicates, our procedure will be to treat the two divisions of the fifth chief part separately. We will summarize the history of each and then review the import of each as it relates to our teaching of the catechism to our children.

## The History and Import of the Ministry of the Keys

In his Historical Introduction to the Symbolical Books, Dr. Bente begins his remarks on the Office of the Keys this way: "The three questions on the Office of the Keys. . . form the most important and independent addition to Luther's Small Catechism" (*Concordia Triglotta*, p 88). The history of how this "important and independent addition" came into being and became a part of the catechism is a complex story.

Bente oversimplifies a bit when he says that the three questions on the Office of the Keys appeared in the Nuremberg *Text Booklet* of 1531 and thence were taken over into the Nuremberg Children's Sermons of 1533 as a substitute for Luther's form of Confession. Schaff (*Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. I, p 248) says the origin of the Office of the Keys might be traced to Luther, Bugenhagen, or Knipstro, but most likely it began with the popular Catechetical sermons prepared for public use in Nuremberg and Brandenburg in 1533. With this latter supposition Schaff is closer to the truth, but his suggestion that Brenz may have been the writer of these sermons is mistaken.

Dr. Reu, in his book on the history of Luther's Small Catechism, gives us a more complete picture of the development of the Office of the Keys. His conclusions are documented in his eight volume set of original writings from the years 1529-1600. What follows is basically the result of his research which suggests that there were three different forms of the Office of the Keys from three different sources.

One form was that in Pomerania. In the Pomeranian Agenda of 1569 Luther's catechism was printed with a sixth chief part. This part consisted of six questions and answers on "Confession and the Keys of the Heavenly Kingdom." (*Von Beicht and Schluessel des Himmelreiches*). The Pomeranian form went like this: 1) What are the Keys of the Heavenly Kingdom? The Keys of the Heavenly Kingdom are that power instituted by Jesus Christ on earth in the Gospel to remit the sins of the penitent and to retain the sins of the impenitent, according to the words of Christ, 2) Which are these words? Those which our Lord Jesus Christ speaks, John 20 "As the Father hath sent me, etc," 3) What benefit do the Keys confer? These words also show that "Whosoever sins ye forgive, they are forgiven them, etc." 4). How can a man remit sins? 5) Whose sins are to be remitted? 6) Whose sins are to be retained?

It becomes readily apparent that the formation of these questions is an attempt to parallel the pattern of Luther's questions and answers on Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Under the leadership of Dr. Knipstro, the Pomeranian synod of 1554 adopted this form. It was also used in Mecklenburg sporadically, but it had little if any influence on the form of the Office of the Keys as we know it in our catechism.

Another form is found in the catechism of Brenz (1535). It consists of two questions and answers: 1) What are the keys of the Heavenly Kingdom? The, preaching of the holy gospel of Jesus Christ. 2) Where has Christ instituted such a preaching office? In Luke 10 Christ says, "He that heareth you. . rejecteth me." In Matthew 16, Christ says to Peter and in his name to all the Apostles and preachers of the Gospel, "I will give to you the keys...shall be loosed in heaven." In John 20, "Receive ye the Holy Spirit, . .retained unto them.." . It is immediately clear that this form is not the one we know either. The form with which we are familiar developed in stages beginning with the *Nuremberg Sermons* of 1533 until it reached its final form in the catechisms of Saxony and Thuringia in 1582.

In 1531, the Nuremberg *Text Booklet* (which contained only Luther's Catechism) inserted John 20:22ff between the Lord's Prayer and Baptism under the title "Of the call and office of the Word and the keys." In 1533, Osiander and Sleupner wrote and published *The Nuremberg Sermons for Children*. Each of the sermons in this series expounded a portion. of Luther's catechism. Osiander and Sleupner chose a Scripture text on which the exposition of each part of the catechism was based. Every sermon concluded with a brief summary of the main thoughts of the sermon in the words of Luther's Enchiridion.

Between the sermon on Baptism and the Sermon on the Lord's Supper the Nuremberg Sermons have a sermon on the Office of the Keys. The text of this sermon is John 20:22-23. The summary of the sermon is this: I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, especially when they exclude manifest and impenitent sinners from the Christian congregation, and again, when they absolve those who repent of their sins and are willing to amend, this is as valid and certain in Heaven, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself.

*The Nuremberg Sermons for Children* were very popular and their use spread widely throughout Germany. This explains why the summary of this sermon (as given above) was also used many places in catechetical instruction. The fact that this summary paralleled exactly the summaries of the other sermons (which were taken from Luther's Catechism) led many to assume that this too was a part of the catechism. Even in Saxony, where the Nuremberg Sermons never were officially sanctioned, we find this summary of the Office of the Keys in use.

In 1538, Caspar Aquila published a catechism in Thuringia which was based on the Nuremberg Sermons and contained the Office of the Keys as one of the chief parts. It was placed between Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The first three questions and answers were these: 1) What are the keys of the Heavenly Kingdom? They are a loosing or absolution of all the sins of the penitent who desire it and believe in the precious Gospel of Christ their Redeemer; also, a binding of all the sins of the impenitent, or putting under the ban those who are not willing to amend. 2) Where is this written? .The Lord Jesus, as it says in John 20, breathed on his disciples. ...they are retained. 3) How do you understand these words? I believe, that when the called ministers of Christ, etc.

As far as we know; the first attempt to combine the (gradually developing text of the) Office of the Keys and Luther's questions on Confession was made by George Karg of Ansbach (1556). He wrote a catechism based on the Nuremberg Sermons in which he placed the Office of the Keys and Confession as a sixth chief part after the Lord's Supper. This part is divided into four sections. The first reads: "What is the Office of the Keys? The Office of the Keys is a spiritual power which Christ has given to his churches and ministers, in the power of his godly Word and the sacraments, to absolve or loose the penitent people from their sins, and to bind the impenitent. Where is this written? In John chapter 20 Christ says to his disciples, 'Receive the Holy Ghost, etc.' How do you' understand these words? I believe that when the called servants, etc." The second portion consists of a question on absolution and another on the ban. The third section has Luther's three questions on Confession: The fourth contains some practical advice on confession patterned after Luther's advice in the Large Catechism.

In 1582 an edition of the *Enchiridion* for Altenburg was printed which inserted the Office of the Keys between Baptism and Confession. It has the form which prevailed for several centuries in Saxony and Thuringia: "What is the Office of the Keys? It is the peculiar (*sonderbar*) power of the church, which Christ has given to his church on earth to forgive the sins of the penitent sinners, but to retain the sins of the impenitent as long as they do not repent. Where is this written? John 20. What do you believe according to these words? I believe that when the called ministers of Christ, etc."

There were many other catechisms and *Kirchenordnungen* appearing in the 1540's and 1550's which also have a paragraph on the Office of the Keys and on Absolution: Willich's in Frankfurt on the Oder, Lossius in Lueneberg, Spangenberg's; Aepen's in Hamburg, and Bugenhagen's in Schleswig-Holstein. All of these, however, seem to be independent of the Nuremberg Sermons and so do not compare with the wording with which we are familiar.

To sum up, then, we could say that the third question (What do you believe according to these words?) on the Office of the Keys originated with the summary of *The Nuremberg Sermons for Children*. The first two questions (What is the Ministry of the Keys? Where is this written?) developed in areas in which the Nuremberg Sermons were used and assumed several very similar forms. The one chosen for use in our catechism is the form used for many years in Saxony and Thuringia. The idea to combine the Office of the Keys with Luther's three questions on Confession in one chief part was quite widespread; our catechism's placement of this as the fifth chief part before the Lord's Supper (instead of after the Lord's Supper as the sixth chief part) is consistent with the arrangement in those sources from which the wording stems, namely, the Nuremberg Sermons and the catechism of Saxony and Thuringia.

The many wordings of the Office of the Keys reminds us of another fact about Luther's Small Catechism which we ought to keep in mind in our day when we consider changes both in the translation and the wording of the *Enchiridion*. Reu, in a chapter on the expositions of Luther's catechism from 1530-1600., notes the many changes in wording in various parts of the catechism and then makes this statement: "Thus it is evident that the Small Catechism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century has often been treated, even by staunch Lutherans, with a liberty few of us would dare to exercise today. The change in attitude took place when the Small Catechism acquired the character of a confessional writing, but even then only very gradually."

Why were there so many variations in the wording of the *Enchiridion* in the 16<sup>th</sup> century? Surely one cannot ascribe it to a lack of respect for Luther or the confessional writings, or to carelessness, or obstinacy, or to trying to be different. What then? In looking at the variations which Reu mentions it seems that the one thread which runs through most of them is an attempt for greater clarity. This also explains why Luther did not object to "tampering" with his wording in the Catechism unless it changed the substance in such a way as to introduce or allow false doctrine. In his preface to his Small Catechism he emphasizes that a preacher avoid using many kinds or various texts of the catechism but rather choose one and stick with it year by year because the "young and simple must be taught by uniform, settled texts and forms, otherwise they easily become confused when the teacher today teaches them thus, and in a year some other way, as if he wished to make improvements and thus all effort and labor which has been expended in teaching be lost...Hence, choose whatever form you please, and adhere to it forever." (*Triglotta*, pp 533, 535).

But back to the Office of the Keys. The fact that this part of the catechism is not Luther's wording raises the question, "What did Luther say and teach on this subject?" A look at Luther's writings will readily assure us that though the wording in our catechism is not Luther's it is "Lutheran."

### **Some thoughts from Luther on the Office of the Keys**

In the Smalcald Articles, Article VI, Of the Keys, Luther writes, "The keys are an office and power given by Christ to the Church for binding and loosing sin." In Article IX, Of Excommunication, he says, "The true Christian excommunication consists in this, that manifest and obstinate sinners are not admitted to the Sacrament and other communion of the church until they amend their lives and avoid sin." If we had no more than these two statements it would be enough to show that the Office of the Keys was taught by Luther.

Much of what Luther wrote about the Keys is addressed to the abuse of this truth under the Papacy. The Roman Catholic Church denies that the Keys are given to all believers and limits the authority of the use of the Keys to the Pope and the bishops; the lower clergy receive the authority to use the Keys from the bishop through the sacrament of ordination. The Roman doctrine does not treat the Keys as Gospel but as Law. The loosing key is made dependent on the works of penance done by the sinner; the binding key is used to terrorize consciences (and to uphold the Papacy's claim to temporal power) with threats of interdict, ban, excommunication and purgatory.

In a treatise "Against the Roman Papacy, An Institution of the Devil" (Am. Ed., Vol. 41, pp 315ff) Luther speaks about the purpose why God gave the Keys. He states that God did this so that those who "preach the Gospel before the world and govern on the basis that Christ Jesus is the Son of God" might have "their words honored and not scorned, as though God were speaking personally, from heaven." But Luther denies that the Keys were established by God to give power to the leaders in the church: "The keys and power to bind and loose sin was not given to the apostles, and saints for their sovereignty over the church; but solely for the good and use of sinners." By this Luther does not deny the need for discipline: "There must be discipline and punishment in the church for the sake of the wild, impudent people; but also hope and consolation for the sake of the fallen ones."

In this treatise, Luther also shows how the Roman doctrine of the Keys teaches self-righteousness. "He (the Pope) and his school teach that this key does not loose and sins, are not forgiven where repentance, confession and atonement are not present; thus he points us away from faith to our works."

In another treatise, *The Keys* (Am. Ed., Vol 40, pp 325ff) Luther stresses the saving purpose of the Keys. "Any reasonable person must admit that in the text (Mt 18) the Keys are not associated with the performance of any works. They enjoin and command nothing, but threaten and promise. . . To threaten and promise are not the same as to command. The intention of the key which binds is that we heed its threatening and thereby come to fear God. He who believes: the key which threatens has satisfied it before and without performing any works. The key does not demand any other work. Afterward such faith will indeed perform works."

For this reason Luther stresses that one key should not be taught without the other: "One should point a sinful conscience to the consolation of the other key and not only to the fear produced by the binding key, for repentance 'should also arise from joy and love. . . Who can repent gladly and joyfully without having the certain consolation and promise of grace? . . This sort of repentance . . . loves and praises God . . . It stems from joyful fear and trembling (Ps 2:1). This fear pleases God and is of lasting value, bringing forth a new and different man and imparting a true hatred for sin. This can never be achieved by reflection on one's own trespasses, by the fear of hell, or by papal penance."

Luther summarizes the two keys in statements such as these in this treatise on the Keys: "God gave the key which binds so that we might not remain too confident in our sins, arrogant, barbarous, and without God; and the key which looses, that we should not despair in our sins." "The key which binds is the power or office to punish the sinner who refuses to repent by means of a public condemnation and separation from the rest of Christendom. The loosing key is the power or office to absolve the sinner who makes confession and is converted from sins, promising again eternal life." "The key which binds carries forward the work of the law. It is profitable to the sinner inasmuch as it reveals to him his sins, admonishes him to fear God, causes him to tremble, and moves him to repentance and not to destruction. 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." "To bind and to loose clearly is nothing else than to proclaim and to apply the gospel. For What is it to loose if not to announce the forgiveness of sins before God? What is it to bind, except to withdraw the gospel and to declare the retention of sins?"

In this treatise Luther also stressed very often the two facts that all believers hold the office of the keys and that when the keys are administered according to Christ's command it is as valid and certain as if Christ dealt with us, himself. Luther paraphrases Jesus words of Matthew 18:18 this way, "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 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. Here then we have the true significance of the keys. They are an office, a power or command given by God through Christ to all of Christendom (Note!) for the retaining and remitting of the sins of men.”

Finally, Luther also stressed in this treatise that the effectiveness of the keys are not limited as to numbers or time,” Christ clearly declares the key’s work to be limited by neither measure, number, nor time when he says, “Whatever you bind and loose.” He does not refer to several things but to all, comprehended in the word ‘whatever.’ So the office of the keys covers every quantity, size, length, and form of sins, whatever their names may be. For he who says ‘whatever’ makes no exception.”

It should be clear from these statements by Luther why he never objected (so far as we know) to the addition of the Office of the Keys to his catechism. This addition stated and taught only that which he himself had stated and taught many times on the basis of Scripture.

### **The Import of the Office of the Keys**

Since Luther did not include any questions and answers on the Office of the Keys in his *Enchiridion* is the subject important enough in teaching our children the fundamentals of Christian doctrine that we should include it? Or to put it negatively: Would the omission of this doctrine have any serious consequences as far as our children’s faith is concerned? Before we attempt to answer this question, we should take a look at the Scripture passages which have to do with the Keys and the doctrinal truths which are based on these passages. Then we will be in a better position to make a judgment as to the importance of including the Keys in a child’s instruction course.

The first passage we will look at is John 20:22-23. In the verses which immediately precede, John informs us that on the evening of His resurrection Jesus appeared to His disciples with the greeting “Peace be unto you!” (v 19). Jesus also showed them His hands and His side and so filled them with gladness by this proof that He was truly alive again (v 20). In verse 21 Jesus again repeats the statement, “Peace be unto you!” so that its full meaning might penetrate those hearts which after the crucifixion had been so clouded with doom and despair. Then He tells them of the important commission which He wanted them to carry out, “As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.” God had sent Jesus to redeem the world; that task was accomplished. Now the joyous message of salvation had to be carried to the four corners of the earth; Jesus had chosen and trained these disciples to carry out this task. That this is what Jesus meant by these words is assured by Luke’s account where on that same evening he tells us that Jesus said to his disciples, “Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things.”

Then (in Jn 20:22-23) come the words which are quoted in the catechism, “He breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.” However, the words which begin verse 22 ought not be overlooked, “And when he had said this” (i.e. as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you). By this John is reminding us that verses 22-23 are closely tied to Jesus commissioning of the disciples as his world-wide preachers of ‘repentance and remission of sins. In commissioning them to carry out this task Jesus also gives them the Holy Ghost. We need not wonder what the difference is between the Holy Ghost given here and on Pentecost. It is the same Holy Ghost; here Jesus is commissioning, there he is empowering (cf Lk 24:49; Ac 1:8; 2:4). Jesus breathes on them to impress on them by this outward sign what was taking place, that is, that their reception of the Holy Ghost was not something which happened by mere chance but was a gift consciously and directly bestowed on them by Jesus. But what he particularly wishes to stress on this occasion is the authority they would have as Christ’s ambassadors, namely, the power to forgive and retain sins.

We should note (as the Greek indicates) that Jesus speaks in the plural when He says “Ye remit” and “Ye retain.” This makes it very clear that the keys were not given just to Peter (as a cursory reading of Mt 1:19

might seem to indicate). Also, Jesus does not use the metaphor of giving a key which looses and binds, but He uses the direct terms “remit sins” and “retain sins.”

The Greek words used by Jesus here for these two concepts are very meaningful in themselves. To “forgive” is the Greek word (*aphhieemi*) which means “to send away, to dismiss.” By this word we are reminded that what Jesus is bestowing here is the authority to send sins away as far as the east is from the west (Ps 103:12), to drown them in the depths of the sea (Mic 7:19) to remove them from God’s memory (Jr 31:34). To “retain” is the Greek word (*krateoo*) which means “to hold on tightly to.” . When used in contrast to “send away” its meaning is that the sins of the person are not in any way removed from him but instead cling tightly to, him. The perfect tense used in the verb “they are retained” also is quite significant. It indicates an act which when completed continues in effect. Thus, if the person dies in those sins, God will not change His mind like some kindly old man and eventually forgive. No, the announcement of the retention of the person’s sins will continue in effects God will repeat it once more on the Last Day to the sinner’s eternal doom.

The John 20 passage, then, teaches three things; 1) The Ministry of the Keys is part and parcel of Christ’s commission to preach the Gospel. 2) It is an authority to forgive and retain sins. 3) When believers use this authority their action is Christ’s action.

At least two other passages also deserve our attention, Matthew 18:15-20 and Matthew 16:18-19. In Matthew 18 Jesus stresses the saving purpose of the Ministry of the Keys. This is obvious, first of all, from the context of the whole chapter in which these verses appear. In the early verses of Matthew 18 Jesus stresses that the soul of a child is so precious that it is a serious sin to cause any child to stumble in faith. Then Jesus warns every believer about things in the world which might cause him to stumble in faith and directs that hand or foot would better be cut off and eye plucked out than that the person be cast whole into hell-fire In verse 11 come the beautiful words, “For the Son of Man is come to save that which was lost.” This truth, that it is God’s will that everyone be saved, is then underscored by the parable of the lost sheep which concludes with the words, “Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.” Next come the verses which we will look at shortly, followed by Peter’s question how often he should forgive; Jesus. answers “until seventy times seven.” The chapter concludes with the parable of the unforgiving servant climaxing in Jesus words, “So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you; if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.”

Thus the whole chapter breathes Gospel love: the love which prizes as highly as God the value of every soul, the love which gladly forgives the sins of penitent sinners without end,,, and the love which seeks to lead the impenitent sinner to repentance, that he might not lose Gods salvation.

The loving steps Jesus instructs us to take in dealing with the impenitent are familiar. If a brother is living in sin and I know about it, I will go to him and admonish him. I will not make it public knowledge, but make it a matter strictly between me and him alone. At the end. of verse 15 Jesus adds, the all-significant words, “if he hears you, you have gained your brother.” Gaining the brother, that is both my motivation and my goal in undertaking such brotherly admonition. If he repents of his sin, I can immediately forgive his sins in the name of Jesus for Jesus adds in verse 18b, “Whatsoever ye shall loose (*luoo* = untie, set free) on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

If he will not listen to my admonition, love for his soul will lead me to strengthen my witness to him by taking one or two other Christians with me that together we might convict him of the punishment which every sin deserves and lead him to embrace God’s free forgiveness in Christ. If this also is of no avail, finally it must be made a matter of concern for the whole congregation. The whole congregation will bring its witness to bear upon the erring person that he might be won, but if its loving and patient admonition is not heard, he must be declared “a heathen man and a publican.” This action is necessary as a final step to impress upon the impenitent sinner that his soul belongs to Satan. The purpose of this action too is still love, for we “deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:5).

By excluding him from the Lord’s Supper and by avoiding any intimate acts of friendship which might undermine the declaration which the congregation had to make to him (1 Cor 5:9-11), we are bringing the strongest testimony we can to him. If he understands this testimony correctly then he will know that we in love

.have been seeking to save his soul, but unless he repents he stands condemned before God because Jesus also declares of this action of the congregation, "Whatsoever ye shall bind (*deoo* - tie, fasten) on earth shall be bound in heaven."

In verses 19-20 Jesus underscores that in this passage He is speaking of the action of all believers, for He says that every matter which two Christians agree to ask of God will be done for them by the heavenly Father because whenever two or three people gather in Jesus name, there Jesus is in their midst.

This Matthew 18 passage, then, stresses two of the truths of the John 20 passage (i.e. that the Ministry of the Keys is the authority to forgive and retain sins, and that when believers use this authority their action is Christ's action). It also teaches several additional points: 1) The binding key is used only after repentance has been sought by loving and patient admonition. 2) The Ministry of the Keys is granted to all believers (not just the clergy).

Finally, we come to Matthew 16:18-19. We purposely left this passage until last because it is the passage which has led to the most misunderstandings about the Ministry of the Keys. All such misunderstandings disappear when Matthew 16 is interpreted in the light of other Scripture passages, especially the two we have just considered.

Peter had just confessed his faith that Jesus was both true God and the promised Savior (v 16). First, Jesus reminded him that such a faith was not the result of his own deep human insight but that it was the heavenly Father: who had revealed this blessed truth to him. Then comes the declaration that it was on the rock of such faith in Jesus' person and work (which God had worked in Peter) that Jesus would build His church. That Peter's person or office is not meant by the "rock" is evident both from the word itself (*petra* is a feminine noun while *petros* is masculine) the immediate context (in which Jesus questions the disciples about His own person and work and later addresses Peter as Satan when he opposes Jesus' passion and death), and the wider context of Scripture which teaches that what makes us living stones in God's spiritual house (1 Pe 2:5-6) and fellow citizens with the saints of the household of God (Eph 2) is faith in Jesus as true God and our Savior.

This truth is also underscored by the fact that the authority which Jesus gives to Peter (the keys of the kingdom of heaven) is exactly that which the two previous passages have shown is given by Christ to all believers: "Whatsoever thou (singular) shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

The one thing which this passage adds to our study of passages on the Ministry of the Keys is the use of the term "keys" as a metaphorical expression for the authority to forgive and retain sins. Every figure of speech in Scripture is intended to simplify a spiritual truth for us by comparing it with something we know from our everyday experience in life. In interpreting a figure of speech we ought not press its meaning beyond the one point of comparison which is being made between the figure and the spiritual truth it is intended to clarify. If the key to a prison is given to me by the government to let out certain prisoners and to lock up others, the prisoners whom I let out know that they will not be hunted down again because, if I let them loose, they know that the government has acted and they are free men. Those whom I lock up know that this is not a personal grudge of mine which led me to do this, but that my action is the government's action, and therefore, they will not get out until their sentence is completed or commuted. Such is the authority vested in every Christian, by Christ, in the loosing and binding keys. When a Christian uses the loosing key this is an act of God which means that the one who has been set free no longer will be hunted down by God for punishment of his sins. When the Christian uses the binding key this is an act of God which means that the one who has been bound will not escape God's eternal punishment in hell.

Perhaps this is the point at which it is best to interject the misunderstanding of the terms "bind" and "loose" in the Roman Catholic and in many Reformed churches. Luther often refers to the false idea that with the words bind and loose Christ gave the Roman Church the authority to make many new spiritual laws (bind) and to set aside spiritual laws which no longer are needed for spiritual discipline in the church (loose). In his own inimitable way he also chides the Papacy which continued to lay ever new and heavier burdens upon the consciences of sinners by such an interpretation and use of the binding key; but only on a very rare occasion, if ever, used the loosing key to remove any of this worthless but crushing baggage. This mistaken Roman idea

about binding and loosing is, of course, partly a result of the other mistaken idea in the previous verse that Peter's person or office is meant by the rock.

Many Reformed churches understand the terms bind and loose in the same sense as the Roman Catholic idea just mentioned:, but with a totally different result. They understand the terms bind and, loose to mean to forbid or to permit certain actions and beliefs. In addition, some point to the fact that the tense of the Greek verbs in the expressions "shall be bound in heaven" and "shall be loosed in heaven" is not future as the KJV might suggest but rather future perfect. They say the meaning can be paraphrased something like this: Any action or belief forbidden by the church on earth must be something which already has been forbidden in heaven, and any action or belief which is permitted on earth must be something which already has been permitted in heaven.

We have no argument with the truth which is the outcome of their exegesis, but we cannot agree that this is the truth which is taught in Matthew 16:19. The same verb tenses are used in Matthew 18:18; there it is not actions or beliefs which are spoken of in the context but sins. We suspect that this interpretation on the part of many Reformed theologians is an attempt to avoid the truth of objective justification which must be what the future perfect tenses teach when sin is what is being spoken about with the verbs bind and loose. That this is exactly what both Matthew 16 and Matthew 18 mean is made unmistakably clear in John 20 as we noted earlier.

This little tangent about the different understanding of the metaphor of the keys has led us to a truth which needs special emphasis. The use of the keys is nothing other than the proclamation of objective justification to the individual sinner. By objective justification we mean, of course, the scriptural truth that Jesus' life and death redeemed all men, not just the believers (John 3:16; 2 Cor 5:19; 1 John 2:2). In using the loosing key we announce to the penitent sinner the sweet truth of the Gospel that his sins are all forgiven in Jesus. (cf. *Apology, Triglotta*, p 261 "The power of the keys administers and presents the Gospel through absolution which is the voice of the Gospel.") No conditions such as "if you are sorry enough, or if you believe enough, or, if you now live holy enough" dare be added, otherwise the, truth of objective justification is overthrown. In using the binding key we, announce to the impenitent sinner that because he despises the Lord who bought him he forfeits his redemption and so must suffer the eternal punishment for his sins.

One matter which we have not touched on yet is why our catechism also speaks of the called ministers of Christ as administering the Office of the Keys. To deal with this involves the necessity of discussing the interrelationships of the universal priesthood of all believers and the office of the holy ministry.

All believers are royal priests who are to show forth the praises of him who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9). The field in which they are to proclaim the Gospel is the world (Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15). With this commission goes hand in hand the Ministry of the Keys (John 20:21-23). Thus all believers have the authority to use the Keys.

God in His wisdom also ordained the office of the ministry so that as the church spread across the world the groups of believers which gathered around His Word in various places might be provided with spiritual shepherds (Eph 4:11-16). The apostles received the office of the ministry by direct call from God. Others such as Silas, Timothy, Luke and Titus were assigned by an apostle to carry out the work of the public ministry in various places at various times. Some, such as the elders of the congregations in Galatia were chosen by the congregation at the suggestion of the apostles (Acts 14:23). Some, such as Apollos at Corinth, were chosen by the congregation according to need and upon recognition of the necessary qualifications in a man. No matter which way God used to call them into the ministry, they were to be recognized as ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. (1 Cor 4:1) and men whom the Holy Ghost had made shepherds to watch over and to feed His flock (Acts 20:28).

Scripture stresses that a man who desires the office of the public ministry must have the necessary qualifications (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1). Scripture also teaches that congregations are to see to it that everything is done decently and in order (1 Cor 14:40). For these two reasons a congregation will call only a qualified man to carry out the public ministry in its midst, and will carefully delineate what his responsibilities are to be as their shepherd. According to Scripture his primary task will be to feed the flock. with God's Word. Since this



necessarily means the proclamation of the Gospel, a call into the public ministry also includes the public administration of the Keys. The congregation asks its pastor to pronounce the absolution in the public worship service and to strengthen the sick and the dying, the shut-in, and those with troubled consciences, with the special comfort of the loosing key; it also asks the pastor to publicly pronounce God's condemnation on any impenitent sinner and to exclude him from the Sacrament .of Holy Communion (which it has also asked the pastor to administer).

Thus just as every believer by Christ's commission to preach His Word has the authority to use the Keys, so every pastor who has been called to publicly proclaim the Word in the congregation also is called to carry out the public Ministry of the Keys. All believers have the authority to use the Keys immediately from Christ; a pastor has the public authority to use the Keys mediately by his call from a group of believers. Only the pastor has the authority to publicly administer the Keys in the name of and for the benefit of the congregation; for the sake of decency and order (1 Cor 14:40) no one will assume the public administration of the Keys in a congregation without a call to do so from that congregation.

### **A Sample Lesson for Teaching the Office of The Keys**

Before we go to the method of teaching this part of the catechism, let us briefly review by some short statements the basic content of what we are to teach.

1. The Ministry of the Keys is an authority given by Christ to believers.
2. It is the authority to forgive or retain sins (absolution and excommunication).
3. The loosing key is to be applied to the penitent, the binding key to the impenitent.
4. The application of the binding key in to be motivated by the desire to bring the impenitent to repentance.
5. A congregation entrusts the public Ministry of the Keys to a qualified pastor by a call.
6. The use of the Keys when carried out by a believer individually or a pastor publicly is one and the same as Christ's action.

It seems obvious that there is easily enough material here for two lessons. However, since this material builds very much on what has been taught about the church in the Third Article, it could conceivably be taught in one lessor if the children are well grounded in those portions of the Third Article which are pertinent. Therefore we will present two approaches: one which teaches the Ministry of .the Keys in one lesson, the other in two lessons. In the first approach we will go into detail; in the second approach we will present only a general pattern.

### **Sample Lesson Plan for One Lesson**

#### **Introduction**

First, review the pertinent parts of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Article by questioning.

- How does the Holy. Ghost work and preserve faith
- What is the Church?
- What is the most precious gift bestowed on the Church by the Gospel?
- Who only has the forgiveness which Christ won for all men? Then, use these discussion questions to introduce the lesson.
- Who forgives our sins every Sunday morning? Agree or disagree= Our pastor forgives sins instead of God. Lead to the stated aim.

#### **Stated Aim**

Why does God give the authority to use the Keys to men?

## **Development**

Mark 16:15: What commission did Christ give all believers?

John 20:21-23: When Jesus commissioned His disciples, what authority did He give them?

Matthew 18:18-20: Who today has this right and power?

1 John 1:8,10: To whom should we announce forgiveness

1 John 1:9: To whom should we refuse forgiveness?

Luke 18:10-14

#1. God gives believers the authority to forgive penitent sinners and to refuse forgiveness to impenitent sinners.

Matthew 16:19 Why is this authority called the keys of the kingdom of heaven?

Psalms 38:1-7 Why does God want us to announce forgiveness to the penitent?

Psalms 100

Romans 8:38-39

Matthew 18:15-17 Why does God want us to refuse forgiveness to the impenitent?

1 Corinthians 5:5

#2. Since this is done by God's authority it is either a great comfort or a serious warning.

1 Corinthians 14:40 How does the calling of a pastor help to do things decently and in order?

1 Corinthians 14:34-35 Whom may we call to be our pastor?

1 Timothy 3:1-7

Acts 20:28 When we call a pastor, what do we ask him to do?

Hebrews 13:17

1 Corinthians 5:13 How does the pastor use the Keys publicly?

2 Corinthians 2:8,10

#3. A congregation calls a qualified pastor to use the Keys publicly. (Absolution, excommunication).

What is the relationship of #2 to #1?

What is the relationship of #3 to #1 and #2?

## **Fulfilled Aim**

God gives believers and the pastor the use of the Keys to comfort the penitent and to earnestly warn the impenitent.

## **Application**

(Several ambiguous discussion questions to test the children's understanding and to lead them to see the important meaning of this doctrine for their lives.)

A. Agree or disagree? When a pastor uses the Keys, he does so in the name of a group of believers.

Therefore his use of the Keys is more powerful than the use by an individual believer. (#1)

B. Agree or disagree? Since the liturgy is the same every Sunday, the announcement of absolution by the pastor can become rather meaningless. (#2a)

C. Evaluate this situation. St. Paul's Lutheran congregation voted to excommunicate Mr. Smith. When Mr. Jones told his wife about it, he said, "We voted to kick Mr. Smith out of the congregation last night." (#2b)

D. Agree or disagree? A boy must be almost a perfect saint and a very good student in order to be qualified for the ministry. (#3)

E. Evaluate this situation. Phil said to his classmate, "I don't know why we spend any time studying the Ministry of the Keys. It's not as important as the Commandments or the Articles." (FA)

F. Agree or Disagree? Pastors use the Keys' very often; individual Christians use them very seldom.

### **A Sample Lesson Plan for Two Lessons**

#### **Lesson I (The use of the Keys by believers)**

Introduction: Ask the class to discuss what responsibilities God has given them in regard to the Means of Grace.

Stated Aim: Why does God give the authority to use the Keys to men?

Developments:

1. God gives men the authority to forgive or not to forgive
2. This authority is given only to believers.
3. When believers use the Keys according, to Christ's command, their action is one and the same as Christ's action.
4. Believers are to use the loosing key to comfort penitent sinners.
5. Believers are to use the binding Key to earnestly warn impenitent sinners and try to lead them to repentance.

Fulfilled Aim: God gives believers the use of the Keys to comfort penitent sinners and to warn impenitent sinners.

Application:

- A. Same as C above in the one lesson plan (#5)
- B. Agree or disagree? Believers seldom use the Keys. (#4 & #5)
- C. Agree or disagree? Mr. Jones repented of his sins and asked Mr. Brown for forgiveness. Both are members of a Christian congregation. Since Mr. Brown refuses to forgive Mr. Jones, Mr. Jones is not forgiven by God either. (#3)
- D. Agree or disagree? If God had not given believers the authority to use the Keys we would still have forgiveness. So the use of the Keys is not very important.

#### **Lesson II (The use of the keys by called pastors)**

Introduction: How would our congregation be affected if our pastor were to move away or to die? How would we get a new pastor? Why?

Stated Aim: Why did God ordain the office of the holy ministry?

Development:

1. God ordained that there should be special offices in the church.
2. Only men who are qualified may enter these offices.
3. A congregation calls men to these offices under the guidance of the Holy Ghost.
4. The chief thing a pastor is called to do is to publicly teach God's Word to us and to administer the Sacraments.
5. Thus the pastor is also entrusted with the public use of the Keys (absolution, excommunication).

Fulfilled Aim: God did this so that every congregation might have a qualified pastor to be its spiritual shepherd.

Application:

- A. Same as A. B. & D in the one lesson plan.

- B. Agree or disagree? Paul's words about women being silent in the church reflects the attitude of society in his day. As our society gives more and more rights to women it will also be permissible for women to be pastors.
- C. Evaluate this situation. First, Smith is very angry with Pastor Carr because he excommunicated her brother. She will not go to his church any more she says.
- D. Agree or disagree? Since a parochial school teacher is called by the congregation, he also has the use of the Keys.

### **Points of Interest in the Treatment of the Ministry of the Keys in Catechisms of our Fellowship.**

In the original Gausewitz catechism of our synod the section on the Ministry of the Keys is introduced by the question, "Which is the second means of grace?" (N.B. Baptism is introduced as the first means of grace, the Lord's Supper as the third means of grace.) While calling the Keys the second means of grace may have been done as a teaching device to interrelate the last three chief parts, it seems best that this approach is no longer used in our catechism because the ministry of the keys also involves the administration of the sacraments.

In the present ELS catechism it was interesting to find that the third question on the Office of the Keys (i.e. What do you believe according to these words? I believe that when the called ministers of Christ., etc.) is Omitted. The matter of the public administration of the Keys and excommunication are treated in questions 353-356 under this section, however. I do not know any reason for the omission of the third question and answer; if I were to guess, I would suppose that it was because the omitted section focuses the attention too heavily on the use of the Keys by a pastor.

In the new wording of the Enchiridion proposed in our synod, there are a number of noteworthy changes. 1) The "Office" or "Ministry" of the Keys is changed to the "Use" of the Keys. 2) "Peculiar authority" is changed to "special power and right." 3) "Retain the sins of" is changed to "refuse forgiveness to" 4) The whole third question and answer are recast to take the emphasis off the pastor's use of the Keys and to emphasize the congregation's use of the Keys. 5) A fourth question and answer quoting Matthew 18 is added.

The first three changes were made, I surmise, for the sake of clarity. "Office" or "Ministry" perhaps make children today think too readily of the clergy instead of all believers. "Peculiar" in the vocabulary of our day connotes "weird" to many people. "Authority" is explained by the dual expression "power and right." "Refuse forgiveness" might come closer to the idea of the Greek verb *krateo* than "not to forgive," but since the committee chose to use the NIV translation of "not forgive" under "Where is this written?" I personally wish they had used "not to forgive" in the preceding answer just to make the memorization of this whole section more uniform. But this is a minor point.

The fourth change is a little more complex. The committee has attempted to make a change which I suspect most of us will agree is necessary, but we might disagree whether the change is a total success. The necessary change to which I refer is the fact that in our present catechism the answer to the third question did not track completely with the Scripture quotation (John 20) and the exposition of this text which is given in the answer to the first question. More precisely, the third question (What do you believe according to these words?) and the answer ("When the called ministers of Christ deal with us...") seemed to give a high church meaning to the Ministry of the Keys. From a simple reading of these words the implication is given that though we have said in the first question and answer that the keys are given by Christ to His Church, we really understand from the words of John 20 that it is only the called minister who has the Office of the Keys. While this implication was probably never meant to be given by this third question and answer, nor does our catechism expound these words with any such overtones, nevertheless the understanding these words gave to me as a child before I went to confirmation class, together with the understanding given to children in my confirmation classes, (and even on an occasion to a Sem student in my class who had these words for a catechesis) leads me to be very sympathetic with the necessity of a change for the sake of clarity in the doctrine we wish to summarize for children with these words.

Did the committee succeed in eliminating the problem by its change in wording? By the change in the question to “How does a Christian congregation use the Keys?” and the recasting of the answer to follow this question, any high church misunderstanding has been eliminated. However, some of you may share the feeling with me that though this change is commendable because of the problem it eliminates, the change may have gone a little too far in downplaying the office of the holy ministry as far as the use of the Keys is concerned. The subject throughout this question and answer is the congregation; perhaps it would have been better to retain the minister of pastor as subject since the keys are administered by a congregation in its midst . through its called pastor. Perhaps something of this nature might have been better: How does a pastor use the Keys? A called pastor uses the Keys in the name of the. congregation and in accordance with Christ’s command to forgive those who repent of their sin and to exclude from the congregation those who are plainly impenitent, that they may repent. I believe that, when he does so, this is as valid and certain, in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself.” Or, if the present wording is retained; the changing of the preposition “with” (“A Christian congregation with its called pastor uses the Keys”) to “through would better emphasize that a pastor’s use of the Keys is by the authority of his call from a Christian congregation.

Undoubtedly we should leave this point since we have spoken on it at some length and we ought not make this paper a forum for changes we would like to see in the proposed enchiridion. We have made the observation that a change was probably necessary and that while the suggested change is acceptable, it still lacks some clarity. Perhaps what you choose to discuss in the time allotted for reaction to this portion of the paper will indicate whether you have any further interest in this subject or not.

### **Conclusion**

We asked the question earlier whether Luther’s failure to include the Office of the Keys in his catechism was an indication that we might also omit it in our instruction of children in Christian doctrine. We hope that everything which has been presented has made it clear that our answer to such a suggestion should be in the negative.

If we still need encouragement in that direction from Luther himself, listen to these words of his (Am. Ed. pp 373-377) “Both of these keys are extremely necessary in Christendom, so that we never can thank God enough for them ...We should value dearly from the depth of our heart these two keys as indescribably precious treasures and jewels for our souls ...I maintain one should restore and exalt the teaching about the two keys. Many believe they are experts on this matter, yet they do not understand it. The papists pay little attention to it.” Surely there is a great deal here that is important for our children to learn with understanding: the great comfort God gives our repentant hearts by the application of the loosing key to us by our pastor or a fellow Christian, the misguided love which fails to admonish and discipline the erring with the binding key, a proper view of the pastor as our spiritual shepherd. Who would want to omit any of this? If this review of the. history and import of the Office of the Keys has reminded us of the importance of this doctrine and renewed our zeal to teach it, the purpose of this portion of the paper will have been served. We pray that our effort in some small way has helped to this end.

## **The History and Import of Confession**

### **The History of Confession**

The portion of the Small Catechism on confession, was the last part that Luther himself added to the catechism. The first charts of the Catechism had only the first three chief parts. By the time Luther wrote the Large Catechism he had added two more parts on the sacraments. The first time Luther added a portion on confession seems to be with the second Wittenberg edition of the Large Catechism in 1529. Luther had noted that, since compulsory confession was abolished, there was a tendency for the people in their new-found freedom to belittle Confession and reception of the Lord’s Supper. To counteract this tendency he added an exhortation to use confession in this second edition of the Large Catechism.

In this exhortation Luther warns the people not to misunderstand their freedom from the Pope's tyranny as though there was no need any more to make confession. He recounts for them the blessing of being able to make confession and receive absolution. He tells them how to make a proper confession. In his closing words he writes, "We are compelling no one...If I exhort you to make confession, I do it in no other way than that I am exhorting everyone to be a Christian. For whoever longs for this that they gladly be pious Christians and be loosed from their sins and have free consciences, have the right hunger and thirst... as Psalm 42 says, 'As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee; O God.' That is, as heavily and anxiously as such a one longs for a fresh spring, so fearfully and anxiously I long for God's Word or absolution and sacrament." (Mueller, *Symbolische Buecher*, pp 777-778).

In the Small Catechism of June, 1529., Luther-included a "Short Form for the Unlearned to Confess to the Priest." This was not in the earlier editions of the Small Catechism of that year, and even in this edition it was not a part of the catechism proper. It consisted of two suggested liturgical forms in which confession could be made. (Weimar Ed. 30, I, pp 343-345).

The edition of the Small Catechism in 1531 was the final form of Luther's catechism. It was this edition which was used in the Book of Concord. The most important addition was the section placed between Baptism and the Lord's Supper and titled "How the Unlearned Should Be Taught To Confess." You will note that our synod's catechism has used only the catechetical portion (i.e., the first three questions and answers) and omitted the liturgical portion. The entire section from the Book of Concord reads as follows:

### **How the Unlearned Should Be Taught To Confess**

What is Confession? – (Answer)

Confession embraces two parts: the one is, that we confess our sins; the other, that we receive absolution, or forgiveness, from the confessor, as from God Himself, and in no wise doubt, but firmly believe, that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.

What sins should we confess? -- (Answer.)

Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even of those which we do not know, as we do in the Lord's Prayer. But before the confessor we should confess those sins alone which we know and feel in our hearts.

Which are these? -- (Answer.)

Here consider your station according to the Ten Commandments, whether you are a father, mother, son, daughter, master, mistress, a man-servant or maid-servant; whether you have been disobedient, unfaithful, slothful; whether you have grieved any one by words or deeds; whether you have stolen, neglected, or wasted aught, or done other injury.

Pray, Propose to Me a Brief Form of Confession.

Answer,

You should speak to the confessor thus: Reverent and dear sir, I beseech you to hear my confession, and to pronounce forgiveness to me for God's sake.

Proceed!

I, a poor sinner, confess myself before God guilty of all sins; especially I confess before you that I am a man-servant, a maid-servant, etc. But, alas, I serve my master unfaithfully; for in this and in that I have

not done what they commanded me; I have provoked them, and caused them to curse, have been negligent (in many things) and permitted damage to be done; have also been immodest in words and deeds, have quarreled with my equals, have grumbled and sworn at my mistress, etc. For all this I am sorry, and pray for grace; I want to do better.

A master or mistress may say thus:

In particular I confess before you that I have not faithfully trained my children, domestics, and wife (family) for God's glory. I have cursed, set a bad example by rude words and deeds, have done my neighbor harm and spoken evil of him, have overcharged and given false ware and short measure.

And whatever else he has done against God's command and his station, etc.

But if any one does not find himself burdened with such or greater sins, he should not trouble himself or search for or invest other sins, and thereby make confession a torture, but mention one or two that he knows. Thus: In particular I confess that I once cursed; again, I once used improper words, I have once neglected this or that, etc. Let this suffice.

But if you know of none at all (which, however, is scarcely possible), then mention none in particular, but receive the forgiveness upon the general confession which you make before God to the confessor.

Then shall the confessor say:

God be merciful to thee and strengthen thy faith! Amen.

Furthermore: Dost thou believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?

Answer: Yes, dear sir.

Then let him say:

As thou believest, so be it done unto thee. And by the command of our Lord. Jesus Christ I forgive thee thy sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. Depart in peace.

But those who have great burdens upon their consciences, or are distressed and tempted, the confessor will know how to comfort and to encourage to faith with more passages of Scripture. This is to be merely a general form of confession for the unlearned.

We have given the entire text to make the point that what Luther wrote on confession in the Small Catechism is not meant to apply to confession in general but specifically to private confession, the confession of sins which the believer makes to his pastor in order to receive private absolution. before attending the Lord's Supper. This did not mean that Luther wanted to exalt private confession above the other types of confessions he merely addressed himself to the custom of private confession which had been continued after the break with Roman Catholicism because it was considered, good, and beneficial. Perhaps a few quotes from Luther's other writings will help make this point.

### **Some Thoughts from Luther on Confession**

In his treatise "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church" (1520) Luther (B1) wrote, "As to the current practice of private confession, I am heartily in favor of it, even though it cannot be proved from the Scriptures. It is useful, even necessary, and I would not have it abolished. Indeed, I rejoice that it exists in the church of Christ for it is a cure without equal for distressed consciences." (Am. Ed., Vol. 36, p 30ff). Those of you who are familiar with this well known treatise may remember all the abuses of private confession in the Roman church which Luther condemned in this writing, but this little paragraph at the beginning of his discussion of confession indicates his personal fondness for this custom.

In that same year (1520) Luther wrote a letter to Dr. Chrosner at Altenburg on "How Confession is to Be Made." (Am. Ed., Vol 39, p 30ff). He writes, "Faith in this promise (forgiveness) is the first and supreme necessity for whoever is about to make confession, lest he boldly presume that it is his own diligence, his own recollections, and his own powers which move God to the forgiveness of sins. Before someone confesses to the priest, the 'vicar,' he should certainly first confess to God himself, the 'prince.'" Luther advises that the willingness to amend should be part of confession; if anyone does not have such intention "he should freely ask God for what he feels he does not find in himself, until the idea of a better life seriously and truly begins to please him and his own life begins to displease him." Luther also discusses the enumeration of sins: "If secret sins of the heart are to be confessed at all, confession should be made only about those which involve full consent to the deed. If all mortal sins are to be confessed, it should be done with a brief word (e.g. Ps 143:2)." He suggests that the people be taught that even after they have made every effort they will have confessed only a minor part of their sins. They should be told that it is sufficient that they wanted to confess everything if they had known and been able to because "a long catalogue of distinctions results in this that after being absolved he rejoices more about his final liberation from this tormenting misery of how he should make confession than about his absolution." Luther also makes it clear that private confession is not to be made a prerequisite for reception of the Lord's Supper. In fact he advises that a man at times should go to the sacrament without confessing "so that one learns to trust God's mercy more than his own confession or effort. For not enough can be done against this accursed trust in our own works ...A person can hardly celebrate (mass) without sinning if he goes there with greater certainty because he has confessed rather than because God is merciful."

In 1522, in a sermon on private confession (Am. Ed., Vol 51, pp 97ff) Luther lists the many other absolutions we have other than private (i.e., Gospel promises, Fifth Petition, Baptism, Lord's Supper) and says "God is not so niggardly that he has left us with only one comfort or strengthening for our conscience." He objects to it being made mandatory as the Pope does but says: "Nevertheless I will allow no man to take private confession away from me, and I would not give it up for all the treasures in the world, since I know what comfort and strength it has given me ...but I will not have anybody forced to it, but left to each one's free will."

In his treatise "The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ Against the Fanatics" (1526) Luther speaks of three kinds of confession: before God, to one's neighbor (Mt 5:23-25; 6:14-15; James 5:16), and private confession. He then adds (Am. Ed., Vol 36, pp 359ff), "Concerning this last confession let me say this: if those other two kinds of confession take place in public, one is not obligated to make this last kind...Yet for the sake of those who would like to make use of it, private confession is by no means to be rejected. The reason is this: there is much that is beneficial and precious in it." He then lists its benefits: 1) The comfort to a burdened conscience to be absolved by the pastor in God's stead. 2) The opportunity to instruct the simple, childlike people who hear sermons and learn little or nothing. (Luther in this connection insisted that no one ought to be given the sacrament unless he was able to explain what he was receiving and why he goes to the sacrament. This, he said, could be determined most conveniently in confession). 3) The opportunity for anyone who had a desire or need and would like advice to ask for advice from his pastor since God's Word gives advice in times of need. In spite of these great benefits, Luther still opposed mandatory confession. "It should be done willingly and freely. If you come of your own accord and recount your sins, if you seek consolation and strength, then it is beneficial and salutary. Children and simple people ought to be urged to do this. It should be taught, but with kind words and not with coercion."

Perhaps the best summary of Luther's thoughts on Confession are found (B5) in his "Confession on the Lord's Supper (1528)" (Am. Ed., Vol 37, p 368): "I have a high regard for private confession for here God's Word and absolution are spoken privately and individually to each believer for the forgiveness of sins...Thus it is a precious and useful thing for souls, as long as, no one is driven to it with laws and commandments but sinners are left free to make use of it, each according to his own need, when and where he wishes; just as we are free to obtain counsel and comfort, guidance and instruction when and where our need or our inclination moves us. And as long as one is not forced to enumerate all sins but only those which oppress him most grievously, or those which a person will mention in any case."



In 1529, Luther included the portion on Confession in the Catechism because (as was noted earlier) there was a tendency among the people to neglect private confession and the Lord's Supper. This is obvious both from the preface to 'the Small Catechism and the exhortation on confession inserted in the second edition of the Large Catechism.

In the Preface Luther wrote, "Since the tyranny of the Pope has been abolished, people are no longer willing to go to the Sacrament and despise it as something useless and unnecessary." He therefore instructed the pastors to urge the people to partake of the Sacrament. "It is to be feared," he said, that "whoever does not seek or desire the Sacrament at least some four times a year... despises the Sacrament and is no Christian." At the same time, he warned that the pastors should not resort to force to bring the people to the sacrament. "You must not make any law in this matter as the Pope does. Only set forth clearly the benefit and harm, the need and use, the danger and blessing, connected with this Sacrament, and, the people will come of themselves without your compulsion. But if you do not urge this, or make a law or a bane of it, it is your fault if they despise the Sacrament. How could they be otherwise than slothful if you sleep and are silent?. Therefore look to it, ye pastors and preachers." What Luther wrote in the Small Catechism on the Lord's Supper was intended to help the pastors in giving proper instruction on this sacrament and thus reawakening the people's appreciation for it. Since private confession was a custom which preceded the attendance at the Lord's Supper, the decline in attendance at the sacrament also meant a decline in the use of confession. It was this latter subject to which Luther addressed himself in the "Brief Exhortation to Confession" in the Large Catechism (Tappert, The Book of Concord,, p 457ff).

He speaks of the threefold lesson of freedom which the people had learned about confession: no longer being forced to make confession on pain of the gravest mortal sin, no need to make enumeration of all kinds of sin, knowing how useful and comforting confession is instead of it being sheer anguish and hellish torture. "Unfortunately," he adds, "men have learned it only too well...acting as if they will never need or desire to go to confession any more.." Luther's solution to the problem was this, "We must always preach, exhort, encourage, and persuade them not to lose this precious and comforting treasure which the Gospel offers. Therefore we must say something about confession to instruct and admonish the simple folk." Such was Luther's motive for adding this Exhortation to the Large Catechism; such, undoubtedly was Luther's motive a few months later when he added something for the first time to the Small Catechism about private confession.

### **The Augsburg Confession and The Apology**

In 1530 the Augsburg Confession declared (Article 25): "Confession in our churches is not abolished among us, for it is not usual to give the body of the Lord, except to them that have been previously examined and absolved. And the people are most carefully taught concerning faith in the absolution, about which formerly there was profound silence ...But of Confession they teach that an enumeration of sins is not necessary, and that consciences be not burdened with anxiety to enumerate all sins for it is impossible to recount all sins." We note how these words parallel exactly .. what Luther had written on Confession for the ten previous years: Confession should be urged; though it was "usual" that people went to Confession before receiving the Lord's Supper, it was not mandatory; the people were "examined" in confession and "taught concerning faith in the absolution"; the enumeration of sins, which had made confession a terror instead of a comfort, was dropped.

In the Apology, Melancthon expands on the subject of confession at great length. We will concentrate our attention here only on one statement he makes in Article 6, of Confession and Satisfaction. "We also retain confession, especially on account of the absolution, as being the word of ;. God, which by divine authority the power of the keys pronounces upon individuals. Therefore it would be wicked to remove private absolution from the Church. Neither do they understand what the remission of sins or the power of the keys is, if there are any who despise private absolution. But in reference to the enumeration of offenses in confession, we have said above that we hold that it is not necessary by divine right. For the objection, made by some, that a judge ought to investigate a case before he pronounces upon it, pertains in no way to this subject; because the ministry of absolution is favor or grace, it is not a legal process, or law...Ministers in the Church have the command to

remit sin; they have not the command to investigate secret sin ...Absolution, which is the voice of the Gospel remitting sins and consoling consciences, does not require judicial examination.” This quote reminds us of the importance of understanding the Office of the Keys when speaking of absolution in confession; it also underscores what (we noted in part one of this essay) Luther had said about the purpose why God had given men the power to absolve another from his sins, not that he might become a lord or legislator over other men but that he might comfort them.

### **The Import of Confession**

In the Smalcald Articles (Part III, Article VIII, Of Confession) Luther suggests two important benefits of private confession: 1) It is an aid and consolation against sin and a bad conscience. 2) That people (especially the untrained and young people) might be examined and instructed in the Christian doctrine. These two suggestions are worthy of further comment

If a Christian falls into some sin which begins to torment his conscience, he may appreciate more than ever the Gospel message which is proclaimed every Sunday in the sermon. This message assures him that Jesus died for all his sins no matter how small or great, yes, He died for the sins of the whole world. He also may appreciate the confession of sins we make as a congregation; he will join that confession and speak from his heart with his particular sin in mind. He will rejoice to hear the absolution spoken by the pastor. But it may happen that in spite of the Gospel he hears in both absolution and sermon, Satan troubles his heart again and again and prevents him from finding the full comfort of his forgiveness.

Or, a Christian may not have a conscience troubled by a particular sin, but may feel that his faith is in danger of failing because of some affliction he is finding it difficult to bear. Another may wonder about his salvation because of doubts which have been assailing him.

What a blessing it is for such people to have a time for private confession arranged by the congregation, so that the pastor can apply the Word of God to absolve, to comfort, and to strengthen. I know that many congregations still have the custom of “Announcements” for communion. In many instances this has become a mere “Registration” for a number of reasons, most of all, I suspect, because of the time demands on the pastor in the modern ministry and because the constant flow of people in and out of the study or sacristy does not allow for a private conversation on many occasions. Still, if there are some people who do use this opportunity for a heart-to-heart talk with the pastor; shouldn't we continue it instead of just resorting to registration cards? Or; if the time for “Announcements” no longer serves this important purpose, shouldn't some other time be sought to give the opportunity and to invite those with burdened consciences and troubled or doubt-ridden hearts to obtain privately and individually from their spiritual shepherd the consolation of God's Word.. We need to remember Luther's words, “It is useful, even necessary, and I would not have it abolished...for it is a cure without equal for distressed consciences...It is a precious and useful thing for souls.” And - if we doubt that people would make use of the opportunity even if it were provided - these words, “We must always preach, exhort, encourage, and persuade them not to lose this precious and comforting treasure which the Gospel offers...we must say something about confession to instruct and admonish (them).”

The other benefit Luther suggested for such an opportunity is also important. That is, to examine and instruct especially the young people. We might reason that our Bible classes are intended for just such a purpose, but what about that young person such as one who has gone away to college and had his faith severely tested, and who would like nothing more than to consult with his pastor privately but is too timid or too considerate of the pastor's busy schedule to ask for some time for a private talk.

We need to instruct our children carefully on the subject of private confession if we do not want them to lose this treasure, and Luther, as in all the other parts of his catechism has given us a summary which touches on the key points with all simplicity.

“Confession,” Luther writes, “embraces two parts.” Our instruction on this subject needs only to lead the children to an understanding of two simple truths. The first truth is that we are to confess our sins. Though we are particularly concerned with private confession, perhaps the best way to approach the matter is to speak first of the other two ways sins are confessed before touching on confession to our pastor.

In his second question; Luther speaks of one of the two other ways we confess, namely, to God: He says, "Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, as we do in the Lord's Prayer." Luther, of course, was aiming these words in part at the practice of enumeration of sins because of his abhorrence at all the evils it had caused. No one is able to make a list of all his sins since we are not even aware of all the sins we commit, as the psalmist says (19:12) "Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret faults." In the Lord's Prayer Jesus taught us to simply pray, "Forgive us our trespasses." There is the model our Lord Himself gave us how to confess our sins to God - it is all inclusive and it "makes short work of it" (as Luther usually advised when confessing sins to God.) It is a confession of our total unworthiness and a plea for mercy and grace. Many other examples of such a confession are found in Scripture: Ezra (9:7,10) led Israel to confess, "Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass unto this day ...And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? for we have forsaken thy commandments." Psalm 69:5 "O God, thou knowest my foolishness; and my sins are not hid from thee." Isaiah 64:6 "We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags." Jeremiah 14:20 "We acknowledge, O Lord, our wickedness, and the iniquity of our fathers: for we have sinned against thee." Romans 7:19,24 "The good that I would, I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do...O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death." The confession of sins which we make to God in our Sunday services is also such an all inclusive statement of our sinfulness (both original and actual) and a plea for God's mercy. Surely, it would be good while on the subject of how to confess sins to God to lead our children to an appreciation of this confession which they will use so often.

The second type of confession (other than private) is confession to our neighbor. Though Luther does not mention it in the second question in the Small Catechism, a statement from the Large Catechism (A Brief Exhortation to Confession) shows the importance he attached to it: "I have said that in addition to the confession which we are discussing here (i.e., private) there are two other kinds, which have an even greater right to be called the Christian's common confession. I refer to the practice of confessing to God alone or to our neighbor alone, begging for forgiveness. We are to confess our guilt before one another ...before we come into God's presence to beg for forgiveness...(for) besides our universal guilt there is also a particular one,-when a person has provoked another to anger and needs to beg his pardon." (Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, p 458). In another context (quoted earlier) Luther referred to three passages which clearly teach that this type of confession is also God-pleasing: Matthew 5:23-24 "If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother and then come and offer thy gift." Matthew 6:14-15 "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." James 5:16 "Confess your faults one to another."

What form should such a confession to our neighbor take? Scripture presents no better example than that of the prodigal son, "I have sinned against heaven and before thee and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants" (Luke 15). This confession acknowledges to the wronged person that there is a recognition that this was not just a wrong done to him .but that it is a sin before God. That is deepest humility because it confesses that one deserves eternal punishment in hell from God for what was done. This confession also recognizes the wrong done to the other person ("and before thee."). No excuses are offered for the wrong which was done; there is no trying to fix the fault in part on the other person; only a confession of the sin which was committed by which the other person was wronged. This confession includes a recognition that the sin committed has forfeited any claim there may have been to the other person's love ("no more worthy to be called thy son"). It throws itself completely on the mercy of the other person and seeks forgiveness by which some small part of the former relationship might be restored ("make me as one of thy hired servants'."). Would that every confession of sin made to a neighbor would follow this model!

It is helpful first to teach how we confess sins to God and how we confess to our neighbor so that the kind of sins we might wish to confess to our pastor might be made quite clear, namely, "those sins only which we know and feel in our hearts;" Examples of these were cited earlier: sins which trouble the conscience in spite of the knowledge of God's Gospel promises, weakness of faith used by afflictions, doubts about God's Word and one's own personal salvation caused by the world and our flesh, etc. Someone might argue that if only such

sins are to be confessed to the pastor, then there is little need for private confession. Luther would disagree. He says: "One who has a strong, firm faith ...may let this confession go and confess to God alone. But how many have such a strong faith? Therefore I will not let this private confession be taken (away)." (Am. Ed., Vol 51, p 97).

So that people might know and feel their sins in their heart Luther urged a constant and forthright teaching of the Law. This is also the reason the third question (Which are these?) appears under Confession in the catechism. We need to examine our hearts and our life: 1) In regard to our position in life either according to what we have thought or done in a position of authority (father, mother, master, mistress) or over against those in authority over us (son, daughter...man-servant, maid-servant). 2) In regard to the way we have parried out our duties under authority (disobedient, unfaithful, slothful). 3) How we have conducted ourselves toward all our fellow men (grieved any one by words or deeds). 4) How we have conducted ourselves toward all that God gives us and our fellowmen in this world (stolen, neglected, wasted aught, or done other injury).

In the complete text of Confession noted earlier, we saw that Luther included a form of confession both for those under authority and those in authority which might follow upon such an examination of one's sinful life. At the same time he warns that if any one does not find himself burdened with such or greater sins, he should not...search for or invent other sins...but mention one or two...that he knows." If he cannot think at all, which Luther states is almost inconceivable, then he should make just a general confession.

Could not such a confession be made to a fellow Christian just as well as to a pastor since all Christians possess the use of the Keys? In the Large Catechism Luther readily agrees that this might be done since "by "divine ordinance Christ himself has entrusted absolution to his Christian church and commanded us to absolve one another from sins." In some of his other writings Luther cautions, however, that private confession might still most often best be made to a pastor. For two reasons: 1) The pastor is one who is called to this office because he has shown himself to be a workman who rightly knows how to divide the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15). This knowledge is vital in comforting a troubled conscience; if the fellow Christian to whom one goes does not have this knowledge, the outcome of confessing to him and seeking absolution might be further torment instead of comfort. It is the avoiding of such an outcome to which Luther refers in the last paragraph (of the full text) on Confession, "But those who have great burdens upon their consciences, or are distressed and tempted, the father confessor (*Beichtvater*) will know how to comfort and encourage to faith with more passages of Scripture." 2) Luther warns that the danger is present, unless it is carefully guarded against, that confessing sins to a fellow Christian can become a light-hearted thing, a "you-tell-me-your-sins-and-I'll-tell-you-mine" type of exchange where one enjoys telling about his sinful life. Such a thing is far less apt to happen in confessing to our pastor.

If people do not "know and feel" their sins in their heart, the reason most likely is that they have not had the Law taught to them in its severity or that they have so adapted themselves to the ways of a sinful society that they are immune to the Word of God about their sinful practices. We need to ask ourselves therefore, "Do our religious lessons (catechism and Bible history) teach about sin in a matter-of-fact way which fails to stir the emotions to genuine sorrow for all that is evil in our hearts and lives? Does our preaching about sin in our Sunday sermons fail to convict our people of our guilt and the punishment which is justly ours? Are our people also becoming attuned to our society so that they see nothing wrong with fornication, entertainment which centers on sexual sins and/or violence, desires for earthly goods which justifies "little" dishonesties and neglect of the Word, etc.? Are we ourselves as ministers of the Word beginning to close an eye to the entertainment which our people enjoy? On occasion do we watch a TV show which appeals to our flesh, and, as a result, is our teaching about sin becoming muted? At a time when private confession is all but disappearing from the scene in our parishes, we need to ask whether our people still "know and feel" their sins in their hearts.. Often we could sharpen our teaching and preaching from talking only about sin in general to dealing with those specific sins which are so prevalent in our society and thus dulling the consciences of Christians toward sin and God's anger against sin.

But such preaching of the Law should not only have the purpose of leading our people to confess their sins, for that would be putting undue emphasis on the first part of confession. It is the second part of confession

which is its principal part, namely, the absolution.. In the Large Catechism Luther writes, “Note, then, as I have often said, that confession consists of two parts. The first is my work and act, when I lament my sin and desire comfort and restoration for my soul. The second is a work which God does, when He absolves me of my sins through a word placed in the mouth of a man. This is the surpassingly grand and noble thing that makes confession so wonderful and comforting...We should therefore take care to keep the two parts clearly separate. We should set little value on our work but exalt and magnify God’s Word. We should not act as if we wanted to perform a magnificent work to present to him, but simply to accept and receive some thing from him.” (Tappert, p 459).

Luther showed the same concern in the Small Catechism. In the first question, little time is spent on part one (“that we confess our sins”) but a whole paragraph is written on part two (“that we receive absolution, or forgiveness”). He emphasizes that we receive the absolution as if from God Himself. There should be no doubt but only firm belief that when the pastor forgives our sins according to God’s own Gospel promise we are thus forgiven before God in heaven. Remember that in his Small Catechism Luther had no section on the Office of the Keys, but at this point we can see how important a proper understanding of the Keys is for our teaching about confession, for what we teach about absolution is closely bound up with what is taught about the Keys (and their use by the called pastor). It is this close connection of the two which Melanchthon summarized when he wrote in the *Apology (Triglotta, p 261)* “The power of the keys administers and presents the Gospel through absolution which is the true voice of the Gospel.”

It is the absolution which is also stressed in the words which Luther suggests the pastor might say, “God be merciful to thee and strengthen thy faith; Amen. Do thou believe that my forgiveness is God’s forgiveness? (Answer: Yes, dear sir.) As thou believest, so be it done unto thee. And by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ I forgive thee thy sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. Depart in peace.”

This word of absolution “is what,” Luther says (*Large Catechism, Tappert, p 459*) “you should concentrate on, magnifying and cherishing it as a great and wonderful treasure to be accepted with all praise and gratitude...we do not say that one should look to see how full of filthiness you are, making of you a mirror for contemplating yourself. Rather we advise: If you are poor and miserable, then go and make use of the healing medicine. He who feels his misery and need will develop such a desire for confession that he will run toward it with joy.”

Undoubtedly Luther is right in his conclusion that if confession is taught with this proper emphasis on the absolution it would be treasured by all. “If all this were clearly explained, and meanwhile if the needs which ought to move and induce us to confession were clearly indicated, there would be no need of coercion and force. A man’s own conscience would impel him and make him so anxious that we would rejoice and act like a poor, miserable beggar who hears that a rich gift of money or clothes is to be given out at a certain place; he would need no bailiff to drive and beat him but would run there as fast as he could so as not to miss the gift. In short, instruction in private confession dare not stop with the teaching of the Law so that people “know and feel” their sins in their hearts, but in addition and above all it must be a teaching of the Gospel so that it produces in our children (and adults) a proper evangelical understanding of confession.

### **A Sample Lesson for Teaching Confession**

Again, let’s first review the key thoughts which Scripture impels us to teach on the subject of confessions

- 1) Confessing our sins is something God urges us to do.
- 2) We learn to know and feel our sins from God’s Law.
- 3) We confess our sin to God either by confessing a particular sin or in a general way which acknowledges our complete sinfulness in nature and in thought, word, and deed.
- 4) We confess to our neighbor any word or deed by which we may have wronged him.
- 5) We confess to our pastor those sins which especially trouble our conscience.

- 6) When we confess our sins God comforts us with his forgiveness. The absolution spoken by our pastor (or fellow Christian) is God's absolution (cf The Keys).

Although there is enough material here to make two lessons of it, we ought to be able to assume that points #2 and #7 are known by the children on the basis of our teaching of the Ten Commandments and the Ministry of the Keys; although they are vital portions of this lesson we should be able to build on them in this lesson instead of teaching them as part of the new lesson. This, then, reduces the doctrine to be taught to the two parts of confession on which this lesson is to center and which we might well be able to teach in one lesson.

## **The Sample Lesson**

### **Introduction**

Ask the class to discuss this statement: Someone once said that the three hardest words to say in any language, are, "I was wrong." (Agree or disagree? Why?), Use this discussion to lead into the stated aim.

### **Stated Aim**

Why does God teach us to confess our sins?

### **Development**

How does God show us our sin (teach us our sinfulness)?

Joshua 7:19 What does Joshua urge Achan to do about his sin?

2 Samuel 12:13 What did David do when his sin was pointed out?

Ezra 10:11 What does Ezra urge the Israelites to do with their sin?

Leviticus 5:5 What did God want everyone to do when they were guilty of a certain sin?

Psalm 19:12 Why can't we enumerate all our sins?

Ezra 9:10 What did Ezra lead the people to say in confessing their sins?

Isaiah 64:6 How did Isaiah teach us to confess our sinfulness to God?

Psalm 51:3-3 What three things does David confess to God? (transgressions, this sin, sinful nature)

1. God wants us to confess specific sins and our complete sinfulness to Him.

James 5:16a; Matthew 5:23-24 To whom does God also want us to confess a sin? Why?

Mark 1:5 To whom did the people of Judaea confess their sins? When?

1 Corinthians 11:28 When will we especially conduct an examination of ourselves?

Ephesians 4:11-12 If there is a sin which especially troubles us, to whom will we confess it? Why?

1 Thessalonians 2:11 What does Paul say is the pastor to do for those who are troubled by sin or doubts or temptations?

2. We can confess our sins, especially those which trouble our hearts, also to our pastor.

1 John 1:8-9s Proverbs 28:13 Why do we confess our sins?

Psalm 32:3-4 How did David feel while he hid his sin?

Psalm 32:1,5 How did he feel when he confessed? Why?

Isaiah 40:1-2 What is the greatest comfort we can have?

3. When we confess our sins, God comforts us with the assurance of forgiveness.

2 Samuel 12:13 How could Nathan speak for God and absolve David?

John 20:23 How has God arranged that we might have absolution?

Ministry of Keys Why is the absolution of a fellow Christian or of our pastor God's absolution?

4. The absolution which our pastor speaks to us is God's absolution.

Fulfilled Aim: God teaches us to confess our sins so that we enjoy the comfort of His absolution

Application:

- A. Agree or disagree? The Roman Catholic practice of making confession to a priest before Communion is a good practice.
- B. Agree or disagree? A person can be sorry for his sins and believe 'in Christ without confessing his sins to his neighbor or his pastor.
- C. Agree or disagree? If a person is conscious of a sin that he has committed, he should confess it to God, or the pastor.
- D. Agree or disagree? 'The confession which we make in our worship services is made to God, but the pastor is the one who forgives us.
- E. Agree or disagree? When we confess our sins, it is our, confession which leads God to forgive us.
- F. Evaluate this situation. Jim is a friend of John. John has told Jim about a sin which troubles his conscience, but Jim is unable to completely comfort John. Jim suggests that John speak to the pastor about it. John hesitates to do so; he says, "I don't want to use up the pastor's precious time with my trouble. Besides, if you can't comfort me, he probably can't either."
- G. Agree or disagree? The time for "Communion Announcements" on certain Friday afternoons and evenings is a good time for one to make confession to the pastor before attending the Lord's Supper.

### **Comments on the Portion on Confession in the Proposed Enchiridion**

The first major change from our present catechism is the addition under the second question (What sins should we confess?) Of the words "even those we are not aware of" (after "Before God we should plead guilty of all sins.") Really this is not an addition but a restoration of what was originally in Luther's Small Catechism (cf the text printed at the beginning of Part II). For some reason this was dropped in the original Gausewitz catechism and in our present catechism. The restoration seems well advised since these words were written to show the impossibility of an enumeration of sins (as required in the Roman Church); it is no less important in our day that our children clearly understand that confession does not require an enumeration of all sins simply because this is an impossibility.

If one were to recommend a change in wording of any part of confession, it probably would be in the third part ("Which are these?" or as the proposed enchiridion suggests, "How can we recognize, these sins?") Unless we also print the two forms which Luther gave for confessing to the pastor (one for the man-servant or maid-servant, the other for master or mistress) and, encourage our people to use them, the answer which Luther gave to this question does not fit well. Since we apparently feel those two forms are not useful, we should be consistent and also drop this answer which ties so closely to those forms. The suggested change in the question is a move in the right direction; a rewriting of the answer in part (to include the first table of the tat as well as our place or station in life, and to point a little more to the sins which tempt our people is their place in life today) would be an even better move. But I will not belabor the point since the answer as Luther wrote it is serviceable for us even though it is somewhat faulty when removed from all that Luther wrote which followed immediately upon it.

In the fourth question, the thrust of this portion is made more pointed by the change in the question from "What shall the minister say after the confession of sins?" to "How will the pastor assure a penitent sinner of his forgiveness?" The former is more general and could be applied more easily both to the General Absolution as

well as to private absolution; the latter seems to be intended to stress the assurance of forgiveness which is being given by these words. In the answer, the words “Be it unto thee as thou believest,” are dropped in the new proposal. This makes good sense because in Luther’s original these words are intended as the answer to the examination which precedes in which the pastor asks, “Dost thou believe that my forgiveness is God’s forgiveness?” and the person who is confessing answers, “Yes, dear sir.” Without the inclusion of this question and answer these words make little sense and are best dropped.

Finally, the proposed contemporary translation adds a lengthy note on the matter of a Christian confessing his sin(s) to a fellow Christian. I do not understand the need for the note nor would I defend its inclusion. Much of what is said in this note (all but the first two sentences) should be taught under the first question in the Office of the Keys. The corollary of a Christian, therefore, confessing to A fellow Christian can easily be included in the lesson on confession as was done in our sample lesson. The note seems to clutter a text of the catechism; it would seem that if it must be included the first two sentences might better be included under the second question (What sins should we confess?) or in the form of an additional question and answer.

### **Conclusion**

When Luther wrote this section on confession, he was thinking primarily of private confession. The point might be debated whether we, in teaching this section, ought to strive for a restoration of private confession before Communion by most, if not all, of our people. The situation, after all, that we are in is quite different from that of Luther where the people had been accustomed by centuries of use to. such a practice (malformed as it was) in the Roman Catholic Church.

But none of us will argue, I’m sure, with the benefit of private confession and private absolution. That there is a desire today in many people for the opportunity to unload their burdens in private consultation is evident from all the findings of physicians, psychotherapists, and sociologists. The Christian minister. is still the best person to whom individual spiritual burdens should be brought in order that the absolving and com-, forting and strengthening Word of God may be brought to bear on them. Arid every true spiritual shepherd will reflect the Savior’s spirit when He said, “Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest Confession is still good for the soul, and we need as Luther encouraged to preach, exhort, encourage and persuade” our people both to value and to use their opportunities for private confession.

But even if private confession did not even exist we would still be bound to teach our children about confession, for as the apostle John wrote, “If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If, we confess our sins, he is. faithful and just to: forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” The principal part of Confession is the absolution, and the absolution truly is the voice of the Gospel. If we keep this uppermost in mind, we will teach the children correctly about confession and it will be both a joy for us to teach and them to learn.

As all of us learn to appreciate Confession as Scripture expounds it and “As Luther taught this Word of Truth, In simple style to tender youth,” we will also share an appreciation of the hymn writer’s confessional prayer:

With broken heart and contrite sigh,  
A trembling sinner, Lord, I cry.  
Thy pard’ning grace is rich and free.  
O God be merciful to me.

I smite upon my troubled breast,  
With deep and conscious guilt opprest;  
Christ. and His Cross my only plea  
O God be merciful to me.



