

# The Use of the Keys when Dealing with Doctrinal Aberration

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The Program Committee for this conference has obviously wanted to address a problem that is very real in our midst. Pastor Festerling's paper was intended to reexamine the broad matter of the proper use of the Keys. One aspect of the proper use of the keys is the matter of church discipline.

Narrowing the topic of church discipline even further, the title of this paper is pointed at a very specific matter: the proper use of the keys in the specific situation of dealing with doctrinal aberration. The need for addressing this topic is evident since some say that admonition should continue to the point that impenitence is shown and then excommunication is the proper procedure. Others say that when in the course of admonition a point has been reached in which it is evident that the person will not yield on the aberration, the person should be excommunicated only if the doctrine is a fundamental one; otherwise the person should be suspended from membership. (We note that terms synonymous to suspended are: excluded, membership terminated.)

So the stage has been set. Pastor Festerling has made an excellent presentation on the proper use of the Keys. The paragraph above was designed to define as briefly and succinctly as possible the issues that are before us. So we are ready to address the topic: In order to keep the discussion as focused as possible, I would like to repeat for emphasis three principles about excommunication:

1. Church discipline, even at the level of excommunication, is an act of agape love.
2. Impenitence is always the issue in excommunication.
3. The issue in impenitence is that if the person has rejected the Word of God which fellow Christians have brought to him, he has with his action placed himself outside of Christ's Church. (Cf "Doctrinal Statements of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod" 1970 p. 41).

In order to make the position of this paper completely clear the following thesis will be defined and defended:

Thesis 1; An individual may be removed from fellowship in a local congregation only for manifest impenitence (the reason) by means of excommunication (the action). It is a tyranny of souls to remove from fellowship in a local congregation anyone of whom it can not be said that he is "a heathen and a tax collector."

This thesis will be defined and defended according to the following outline:

1. There is indeed an issue
  - a. Quotations from Walther and Pieper
  - b. Quotations from "The Shepherd Under Christ" and the Synod's Model Constitution.
  - c. Diagram of alternatives when a member adheres to false doctrine.
2. The exegetical issues
3. The issue is impenitence under the Second Commandment.
4. Other aspects that need discussion.

## **1. There is Indeed an Issue**

A. Quotations from Walther and Pieper pointing to excommunication when there is doctrinal aberration.

## 1. Quotation from C.F.W. Walther's "Pastoraltheologie":

Excommunication can be carried out only against the person:

1. who is still living and is responsible for his actions;
2. who allows himself/herself to be called a brother (sister) or who wants to be called a brother (sister).
3. who is a communicant member of the congregation (1 Co. 5:13);
4. who has become guilty of an open, serious sin against God's commandments (1 Co. 5:11) or has promoted a fundamental error and has been clearly convinced about it (Tit. 3:10-11; 2 Jo. 9:11).
5. who in spite of all admonition or discipline has hardened himself in his sin or in his error and it has thus become clearly evident that he is an incorrigible heathen (Ma. 18:17; Tit. 3:10-11);
6. who has been declared by an unanimous vote of the congregation or of its properly designated representatives to be deserving of excommunication.

The point in this quotation is that, though Point #4 points to fundamental error (Irrtum), Point #5 point generally to error (Irrtum) and indicates excommunication. The following quotation gives Pieper's description of the relationship of Ro. 16:17-18 and Mt.18:15-17 (Christian Dogmatics, I. to, 12 from the bottom):

But the Church may not tolerate the false teachers in the Church. God has commanded the Church to take up arms against them and oppose them with the Word of God. This means that the Church must (1) realize that he who departs from the Word of the Apostles is a false teacher (Rom. 17:17: "Mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned"); but (b) disprove their teaching (Tt. 1:9,11; "Convince (convict) the gainsayers... whose mouths must be stopped"); and finally (c) must isolate them, that is, have no church fellowship with them (Ro. 16:17: "Avoid them"; 2 Jn. 10: "Neither bid him Godspeed"), and eventually, if they do not themselves sever their connection with the Church, formally excommunicate them (1 Ti. 1:20: Hymenaeus and Alexander expelled, from the church; cp 2 Ti. 2:17; 4:14).

## B. Quotations from "The Shepherd Under Christ" and the Synod's Model Constitution (NPH 1981)

1. "The Shepherd Under Christ" by Schuetze/Habeck (p. 173) presents 'suspension' as the method for dealing with doctrinal aberration:

Where admonition has taken place because of doctrinal deviation, only those are to be excommunicated who persistently adhere to an error which subverts the foundation of faith (denial of the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, salvation by grace, vicarious atonement, resurrection). In other cases separation is called for (Tt. 3:10), i.e., the declaration that the persistent errorist is no longer a confessional brother, but not that he to be regarded as a heathen man and a publican.

Another public document that presents the concept of separation short of excommunication is our Synod's model constitution. In Article V. "Church Membership" under Section 5 the following statement is made:

Members who persist in an error that it itself does not make the presence of saving faith impossible shall be excluded from the fellowship of the congregation (Romans 26:17-18) and lose

all rights in the congregation and in its property.

(Another public document that presents the exegetical basis for suspension is Prof. W. Gawrisch's article in the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Vol. 77, Number 4, October 1980, under the title; "Romans 16:1718, And Its Application to Individual Fellowship.")

- C. Diagram of alternatives when a member clings to false doctrine. The specific area this paper addresses is in heavy print.

*\* The situation described before the asterisk separated out only because there is agreement on that situation. Both situations are put in the same box because the essence of the situation is the same.*

## **2. The Exegetical Issues**

- A. Two passages are used to support using suspension.

Romans 16:1718 "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put

obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. (18) For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.”

Thesis A: ἐκκλίνετε ἀπ’ αὐτῶν (“Keep away from them”) in Ro. 16:17 presents an intransitive idea which designates that the verbal idea is entirely realized in the subject itself. Therefore transitive verbs like ‘suspend, exclude, terminate’ are inappropriate.

The primary exegetical issue focuses on the verb ἐκκλίνω in Rom. 16:17.

Both Thayer and Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich designate ἐκκλίνω as intransitive. But before we project our English grammar to the Greek, we note the following. Moulton (“Grammar of N. T. Greek, Vol. III, Syntax p. 51) writes: “Transitive verbs have a nounobject either in the accus, or in an oblique case; in intransitive verbs the verbal idea is entirely realized in the subject itself.” A. T. Robertson (“A Grammar of the Greek New Testament”) repeatedly makes the point that “Per se the question of transitivity belongs to the idea of the verb itself, not to that of voice.” (p. 330); “It is here assumed, therefore, that one understands that voice per se does not deal with the question of transitive or intransitive action. That point concerns the verb itself, not the voice.” (p. 797); “The middle is not, therefore intransitive in itself. That is a matter that belongs to the verbstem.” (p. 806). See also p. 815.

Just to head off a possible objection by a person who looks into Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and sees that τινα is included in the explanation of ἐκκλίνω I would point out four things: 1) Farther reading in the citations from Moulton and Robertson above would indicate that intransitive Greek verbs can have accusative objects without becoming transitive; 2) the meanings given (“shun, avoid, turn aside from”) are intransitive; 3) the accusative may be some loose connection with the ἐκ of ἐκκλίνω (see Robertson p. 562 1.8 from bottom). 4) Ro. 16:17 does not have the accusative.

The next issue that must be addressed is the word ἀπό. The basic meaning of the preposition ἀπό is that it notes the “point of departure.” Used in Ro. 16:17 the APO indicates that we started out “with” ‘them’ but are here urged to move ourselves “away from” ‘them.’ The ‘them’ is the starting point of the action, rather than the recipient of the action. Consequently the ἀπό supports the intransitive emphasis of the verb ἐκκλίνω.

The points made above are well illustrated in 1 Pt. 3:11, where ἐκκλινάτω δὲ ἀπὸ κακοῦ is used. In a quotation from Ps. 34 the point is being made that we are to steer clear of evil. Because of our sinful nature and the sin in the world we do indeed start in evil. But we are to “lean away from” that evil. We are to steer clear of the evil. In no way does this passage suggest that we can push evil away from us. Very clearly the verbal idea is to be carried out on the subject of the sentence.

Now we turn to the content and connotations of ἐκκλίνω. The root κλιν has the meaning “to lean.” When this verb is compounded with ἐκ appropriate translations are: “Keep away from” or “steer clear of.” These translations properly reflect the intransitive character of this verb.

However, a factor is added to this verb when transitive English verbs are used to capture the meaning of ἐκκλίνω. Thus to translate as “separate, remove, exclude” adds a dimension of transitivity that is not included in this intransitive Greek word.

To compound the problem we note that the usage of the English verb ‘terminate’ has changed. The English verb ‘terminate’ has expanded ‘terminating a thing’ to include ‘terminating a person.’ The latter usage is a circumlocution that has been used in the business world to cover up the fact that they are firing someone. It does ‘sound’ better to terminate an unwanted executive than it sounds to say we “fired him.” That change in usage can cause difficulties when ἐκκλίνω, which was in years goneby translated as ‘terminate (fellowship)’ (in which the intransitive nature of the verb is retained, since the subject ends the relationship and moves away from the errorist), now can trap the unwary into translating the verb with ‘terminate’ but switching the thought to “terminate the errorist” (which depicts a transitive action of exclusion from the fellowship.)

In the lifetime of the author three different interpretations of the word ἐκκλίνω have been evident with our own Synod. The following stickmen illustrations are offered to illustrate the interpretations.

<p><b>Interpretation 1:</b>  <i>This illustration of ἐκκλίνετε reflects the interpretation that led to the formation of the CLC.</i></p>	
<p>σκοπεῖν(to watch out)</p>	
<p><b>Interpretation 2:</b>  <i>This is the interpretation our synod followed at the time that it suspended fellowship with the Missouri Synod in 1961.</i></p>	
<p>σκοπεῖν (to watch out)</p>	
<p><b>Interpretation 3:</b>  <i>This illustration represent what I hear the people saying when they want to use Romans 16:17-18 to support suspending people from the congregation when there is doctrinal aberration. In graphic form it illustrates the rather abstruse word “transitive” in the paragraph above.</i></p>	
<p>σκοπεῖν (to watch out)</p>	

Since the issue is focused in ἐκκλίνω, it is hoped that the discussion of Rm. 16:17-18 can focus specifically on that word.

Hopefully to avoid the introduction of other issues the following statements are offered:

- (1) The errorists are defined in the phrases “those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine you have learned.”
- (2) God’s judgment on the errorists is stated in v. 18, when they are described as “such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites.”
- (3) The devastation that the errorists cause is described in v. 18, when it states: “By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.”
- (4) The actions that faithful believers are to follow are σκοπεῖν (watch out for) and ἐκκλίνω (Keep away from).

“Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. (11) You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is selfcondemned (Tt. 3:1011). Tt. 3:10 is quoted in the paragraph about suspension in “The Shepherd Under Christ.” (See above). The problem is that when the context in v. 11 is added the passage proves too much. The term ‘selfcondemned’ (αὐτοκατάκριτος) at the end of v. 11 presents the same thought as “pagan or a tax collector.” When a person is ‘selfcondemned’ it seems inappropriate to use suspension, which chooses not to make the judgment of condemnation.

At this point the author must say that since Tt. 3:1011 speaks of ‘selfcondemned’ and since my study of ἐκκλίνετε ἀπο precludes the transitive actions implied in removal or suspension, I have reached the conclusion that there is no exegetical basis for the concept of suspending a person who has erred in a doctrinal matter.

### 3. The Issue is Impenitence Under the Second Commandment

By definition heterodox churches must have persistent errorists. Very properly we avoid such people. If the faithful believers in such heterodox churches fully carried out their debt of love, they would continue to admonish the persistent errorists. But we live in a very imperfect world and we can not thank God sufficiently that in a double measure of grace there are many errorists that will still be saved because they do not logically follow through on their errors.

But, on the other hand, as we deal with the individual within our congregation who is misled by some doctrinal aberration, we have a duty of love to build his faith by careful, thorough instruction from God's Word hopefully to overcome the error. When, however, this loving purpose fails and the doctrine becomes ad serious issue the person may harden himself in his position. The consequences of such rejection of the Word of God are very serious, as Pieper explains ("Christian Dogmatics," Vo. I. 8990) (I excerpt the following; the heavy print is mine):

3. Everyone who rejects the testimony of Scripture concerning one doctrine, actually though he is not fully aware of it, invalidates the Christian principle of cognition (i.e. knowing doctrine).... If we then, had the right to set aside... the authority of Scripture with respect to one doctrine there is no reason why we should bow to the authority of Scripture when it speaks of the Lamb of God... and of the blood of Christ....

Here, too, Luther makes the reservation: "Except where there are weak Christians who are ready to receive instruction and do not stubbornly contradict." The willingness to be further instructed shows that despite their error, faith in the forgiveness for Christ's sake still dwells in the hearts of the weak ones. But the situation is always fraught with dander, particularly so when controversies arise. Luther reminds us that not only secular wars, but also spiritual wars are dangerous. The spiritual wars, too, have casualties. The greatest danger sets in when in doctrinal controversies the erring Christian, confronted with the clear Word of Scripture, clings to the error in spite of the clear Scripture and the power of the Holy Ghost active in it.. **Then it may easily happen that the "Christian erring,"** i.e., erring from weakness, in which faith still survives, ceases, and the **"unchristian erring,"** the will to err, **takes its place, which renders faith impossible.** That is the case described in Titus 3:1011: "A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject, knowing that he that is such is subverted and sinneth, being condemned of himself."

(Please also confer note 124: Luther's classical dictum on "the Christian error": "You cannot say, I am going to err after the manner of a Christian; A Christian errs unwittingly.")

This quotation focuses on the fact that the person who has erred in weakness may at the time of controversy by clinging to the error, defending the error and propagandizing the error be guilty of "unchristian erring." At that point the church owes him the witness of love that we tell him that by his "unchristian erring" he has reverted to being a 'heathen and a publican.' In effect, the point at which the erring Christian in spite of adequate instruction and admonition still clings to his error, defends that error and seeks to win people to his error is the point at which the question of impenitence is very pertinent. Prior to the evidence of impenitence the church is bound to exercise the full measure of love and patience. Once the evidence of impenitence is manifest the congregation is also bound by love to follow Mt. 18:1517.

The author sees no third alternative.

### 4. Other Aspects that Need Discussion

In our zeal to maintain pure doctrine within our church body there is a very real temptation that we are going to try to maintain a ‘pure church body,’ i.e., a church body in which there is no doctrinal aberration by anybody. To keep our perspective in this matter it is well to review the Theses IX and X that Walther wrote on the doctrine of the church (as they are quoted in “Doctrinal Statement of the WELS. 1970” p. 4647):

THESIS IX: Such members as willfully persist in deviating from the Word of God, no matter what question it may concern, must be excluded.

THESIS X: From the fact that the Church militant cannot attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one it does not follow that any error against the Word of God may be granted equal rights in the Church with the truth, nor that it may be tolerated. (There are other somewhat pertinent Theses on p. 40).

After this reminder the following thesis seems pertinent:

Thesis B: All sins, also those against the second commandment, have the potential for leading a person into impenitence. Therefore when a person persists in an error the congregation must Continue to admonish until such time as manifest impenitence is noted and then the proper procedure is excommunication.

False doctrine is indeed a sin against the Second commandment. Such a sin is no less serious than other sins, indeed it may have more serious consequences since such sins always include the danger that the Gospel itself will be obscured and thus souls will be destroyed. False doctrine like any other sin can lead a person to impenitence—even if the doctrine itself is not a fundamental doctrine. We see clear and unequivocal parallels between the person who clings to false doctrine in spite of all earnest admonition and still promotes that false doctrine and the adulterer who in spite of all earnest admonition still defends and continues to engage in adultery.

It would hardly seem to be necessary to deal with something so elementary, yet the mere fact that exclusion is recommended for doctrinal sins and excommunication for all other sins rather explicitly distinguishes between sin and sin.

For example, in the model constitution Article V, Section 3 refers to “those who err from the faith or who in other ways have given offense.” Article V, Section 5 indicates that there must be another, separate category, i.e., “Members who persist in an error that in itself does not make the presence of saving faith impossible.” Apparently this error is in some way different from other sin, for the procedure is to be different. When there is a doctrinal error they are only to be excluded, rather than admonished until they show manifest impenitence.

Thesis C: The definition of “persistent errorist’ when it describes an individual within our congregation designates a person who has rejected God’s Word regarding his sin against the second commandment and therefore we can note that he is manifestly impenitent.

It is also necessary to ask very pointedly: “Just exactly what is meant by the term ‘persistent errorist’?” In the “Doctrinal Statements of WELS 1970” (p. 42) the persistent errorist is defined as those “who in spite of earnest admonition persistently cling to an error in doctrine, who demand recognition and toleration for their error and make propaganda for it.” The definition of ‘false prophet’ (ibid. p. 43) uses the same criteria: “False prophets are those who in their teaching deviate from God’s Word, demand recognition for their errors, seek to spread them and win adherents for them.... Often enough they are themselves deceived by their own sheep’s clothing.”

When such a definition of persistent errorist is used regarding an individual person, the mere fact that he

demands recognition and toleration for the error removes him from the classification of weak brother. Really “to demand recognition and toleration for an error and make propaganda for it” seems to indicate quite clearly that the person has rejected the Word of God regarding his sin against the Second Commandment and therefore must be classified as impenitent. We note that the “Doctrinal Statements of WELS 1970” uses this statement: “Yet if he rejects also the Word of God which they (fellow Christians) have brought to him he with his action places himself outside of Christ’s church. He is to be told that he has manifested himself as a heathen man and a publican, that he has broken the bond which united him with Christ and His spiritual body of believers. No further expression of fellowship is possible.”

Thesis D: In excommunication the central issue is always impenitence. Until impenitence is manifest the church has the responsibility to try in love to win the person. Just as surely the church acts in love when it excommunicates the manifestly impenitent person. The particular sin is significant only as a determinant for defining the impenitence. Thus impenitence regarding sins against the second commandment involve the public assertion, the defense and the promulgation of false doctrine.

When the position is presented that a person who is a persistent (impenitent) errorist should be excommunicated, someone is sure to say, “But surely you would not excommunicate a person for erring in some minor doctrine, like the doctrine of angels, would you?”

This question has the unfortunate characteristic that it puts the emphasis in the wrong place. Excommunication should never be exercised because of the specific sin that has been committed, else I could probably excommunicate everyone of you for disobeying the 4th Commandment if you break the speed limit on your way home from this conference. Therefore excommunication would not be carried out because the person erred in the doctrine of angels. But if the person after careful instruction and admonition still insisted that he had a right to contradict the Scripture and demonstrated this by publicly asserting that his position is the correct Scripture position, then “if he rejects the Word of God which they (fellow Christians) have brought to him, he has with his action placed himself outside of Christ’s church.” (quoted from “Doctrinal Statement of WELS 1970”). Stated another way, by rejecting the Word of God which has been brought to him the person shows himself to be manifestly impenitent. Therefore excommunication would be carried out on the basis of the manifest impenitence.

Thesis E: That the ‘persistent errorist’ is fully convinced that what he is saying is correct is to be assumed. To identify this conviction as ‘weak conscience’ is, however, incorrect. It is an erroneous conscience—a situation in which he sins no matter what he does. Therefore the church has the obligation to witness as lovingly and urgently as possible so that it can “win the brother.”

Some people have suggested that, since the person is convinced of his correctness in the matter in question, we would be guilty of causing him to sin against his own weak conscience, if he were to ‘knuckle under’ to the teachings of the church.

The problem with this assertion is that it contains a false concept about ‘weak conscience’. Dr. Hoenecke speaks very clearly to this matter (Dogmatic II, 431 by translation):

A sin against an erring conscience (*peccatum contra conscientiam erroneam*) occurs, if a person either does what he ought not do or does not do what he ought to do. If the act is evil in itself and the error is avoidable, the person who follows his conscience sins (since he follows the avoidable error Ac 3:17; 1 Ti 1:13) as well as the person who does not follow his conscience (since ‘formaliter’ he is then a person who does not wish to follow the Law of God). On the other hand, if the act in itself is indifferent (an adiaphoron) a person does not sin when he acts



according to his erring conscience; however, the same person does sin if he acts contrary to his erring conscience, because through the contempt of the judgment of his own conscience he is despising God who has made conscience a guide. According to the expressions of the dogmaticians, the latter person sins ‘formaliter and interpretative,’ because he wants to do something against that which he considers to be God’s command (1 Co. 8:7).

The person who is defending a false teaching is sinning. He is not dealing in an adiaphoron. Therefore he sins both when he acts according to his conscience and when he acts contrary to his conscience. This very serious matter is clearly explained by Pieper:

He sins when he obeys his conscience, and he sins when he does not obey his conscience. In the first case he does what God has forbidden. In the second case he sins because he fails to do something which he feels conscience bound to do as commanded by God. It is therefore of great importance to correct an erring conscience by proper instruction from God’s Word. (Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I. 566)

How can the church allow such a person to be suspended and allowed to find some suitable church? How urgent it is that we continue to witness to him as long as he accepts instruction!! Can we stop short in witnessing to him and suspend him rather than in all urgency seeking to release him from his terrible predicament? In view of such a serious situation, is it really an act of agapelove to suspend such a person from our congregation, while he is still willing to receive instruction. Certainly not. Is it not just as much a part of agapelove that when he wants to stay in our fellowship and still wants to promulgate a false teaching, we tell him that he is showing impenitence for a sin against God’s Word and therefore is no longer a member of the *una sancta*?

In view of the very serious matter of the erroneous’ conscience the procedure suggested by Pieper (quoted on page 2 above) seems to be the one that truly fits all the situations. As we find a person caught in the trap of a false doctrine, we begin to witness to him immediately. Already here we would urge people to avoid him, lest they be drawn in to the vortex. The more public the offense and the admonition, the more emphatic the warning ‘to avoid’ must be. As the issue reaches the entire church the person’s persistence would compel us to isolate him. And should he then continue to undermine the ministry of the Word by promulgating his false teaching, the church would have the sad duty to reach the reluctant conclusion that the person is manifestly impenitent. Then excommunication would be the appropriate action of love.

### **Conclusion**

Early in the paper the point was made that ‘we indeed have a problem.’ I have every confidence that everyone really wants to find a Godpleasing solution. Perhaps the greatest barrier to a Godpleasing solution is the sinful nature that is in each of us. Therefore, I would close with the prayer:

Lord Jesus, in the Great Commission you have instructed us to teach all things whatsoever you have commanded us. As we consider the matter before us we ask you to help each of us to suppress his sinful pride. Fill us with the attitude expressed by the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:45: “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the Knowledge of God and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” Help us to such an attitude, O Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Soli Deo Gloria*