

THE OFFICE OF THE KEYS

1. Scriptural Foundations

- a. The three passages which deal with the keys are: Matthew 16:18-19; 18:18-20, and John 20:19-23.
- b. In Matthew 16:19 Jesus promises to give 'the keys of the kingdom of heaven' to Peter.
 - (1) Just as God had promised the keys of David's household to Eliakim in Isaiah 22:22, so Jesus promises the keys of his Father's royal household to Peter.
 - (2) They belong to Jesus as God's Son and are exercised together with him in his church.

See M. Luther, *The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests*, LW 38,200: For we must believe and be sure of this, that baptism does not belong to us but to Christ, that the gospel does not belong to us but to Christ, that the office of preaching does not belong to us but to Christ, that the sacrament (of the Lord's Supper) does not belong to us but to Christ, that the keys, or forgiveness and retention of sins, do not belong to us but to Christ. In summary, the offices and sacraments do not belong to us but to Christ, for he has ordained all this and left it behind as a legacy in the church to be exercised and used to the end of the world; and he does not lie or deceive us.
 - (3) As the 'steward' in charge of God's household (Matt 24:45-51; cf. Luke 12:41-48; Tit 1:7), Peter is the doorkeeper who either admits or excludes people from God's presence, his heavenly palace.
 - (4) Jesus connects the keys here with 'binding' and 'loosing' (cf. Matt 20:18).
 - (a) The use of the passive perfect participles indicates that, by using the keys together with Christ, Peter does God's heavenly work on earth.
 - (b) The conditional sentence correlates what Peter does on earth with what God does in heaven so that both are simultaneously one and the same event.
 - (c) While the term 'loosing' was used by the rabbis for teaching what was permitted according to God's law or for exonerating people of offences against it, the term 'binding' was used by them for teaching what was forbidden according to God's law or for condemning people who had broken it (see Matt 23:1-4,13; Luke 12:52).
 - (d) By these terms Jesus authorises Peter and the apostles
 - to free the conscience by preaching the gospel and to bind the conscience by preaching the law (cf. Luke 24:47-49).
 - to admit people to the Father's presence and to exclude people from his presence in the church (cf. Mat 18:10-17; 1 Cor 5:3-5).
 - to absolve and retain sin (see John 20:23; cf. Matt 18:21-35; Rev 1:15).

- to free people from unclean spirits and to bind unclean spirits (see Matt 16:18; Luke 13:16; cf. Matt 10:1; 12:29; Rev 20:2)?
See M. Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*. LW 5, 142:
*We do not have the fathers speaking with us; but we have the Son of God Himself, as the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says (1:2). We hear Him saying: "I absolve you, I give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, the power to baptize, to save, **to tread demons and hell underfoot**. I give you this divine power in order that you may do the same works that I do, and greater works than these" (cf. John 14:12).*

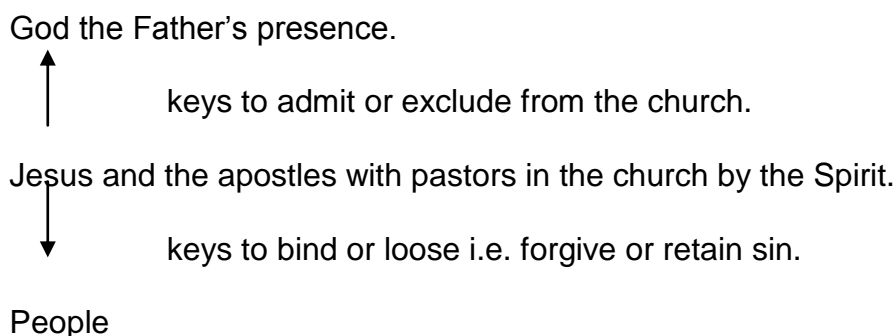
c. In Matthew 18:18-20 Jesus connects the task of 'binding' and 'loosing' with five things.

- The restoration of a strayed member of the church and the excommunication of an impenitent sinner
- The work of all the disciples together with Peter
- The assembly of the congregation
- Corporate prayer
- The presence of the Lord Jesus

d. John 20:19-23 reports that Jesus conferred the keys on the apostles when he commissioned them on Easter Sunday.

- (1) The apostles were **commissioned** to represent Christ as Christ had been **commissioned** to represent his heavenly Father.
- (2) By giving them the Holy Spirit, Christ empowered them to **forgive** and **retain** sins on behalf of God the Father.
- (3) The apostles were therefore given the keys so that they could do the work of the Triune God in the church.

e. The apostles handed on the office of the keys as the apostolic ministry of the word to the men whom they appointed as elders = teachers = bishops in the churches which they established (Acts 14:23; 1 Tim 4:13-16; 2 Tim 1:6-7; 2:1-2; Tit 1:5).



2. The Teaching on the Keys in the Lutheran Confessions

- a. The keys do not belong to any individual but to **Christ** and his church (SA III, VII, 1; Tr 23, 24, 68).

- b. The office of the keys is the office of the public ministry of word and sacrament exercised by bishops and pastors in the church (AC XXVIII, 5-8; Tr 60-62).
- c. According to AC XXVIII, 5-8, 21-22 (cf. Tr. 31,60), the office of the keys authorises the pastor or bishop
 - to preach and teach the gospel
 - to absolve and retain sin
 - to baptise and withhold baptism
 - to administer and distribute Holy Communion
 - to excommunicate ungodly people and readmit the penitent to the Lord's table
 - to judge right doctrine and condemn false doctrine
- d. The exercise of the keys includes the authority to give private absolution on behalf of Christ and so admit penitent sinners to the Lord's table (AC XXV, 1-4).
 - (1) This task is 'derived from the office of the keys' (SA III, VIII, 2).
 - (2) By private absolution penitent people are released from their sins by the pastor as the earthly mouthpiece for 'God's voice from heaven' (AC XXV, 3-4; Apol XI,2; XII, 39-40, 176; SA III, IV).
- e. Our confessions therefore regard the keys as the **office** by which the gospel is proclaimed and enacted in the church (Apol XI, 2; XII, 39).
- f. By means of the keys the faithful receive the final eschatological sentence of absolution from the gracious heavenly Judge here and now in the church (John 5:24; Rom 8:1).

3. Conclusion

- a. The keys are exercised publicly and officially in the church, for they admit people to the presence of God the Father through participation in Holy Communion.
- b. They are therefore normally exercised by the pastor in the public worship of a congregation.
- c. They must not be privatised by separation from baptism, the preaching of the gospel and the celebration of Holy Communion.

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