

The Office of the Keys as the Office of Preaching and Teaching

*“What is the Office of the Keys? The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ gives to His church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.”*¹

Introduction

Ask any Lutheran what the Office of the Keys is and he or she will no doubt have little trouble sharing that the Office of the Keys is about the forgiveness of sins. The keys are exercised, as our Confessions teach repeatedly, when sins are forgiven or retained.² The loosing key forgives and the binding key retains. John 20:22-23, is the *sedes doctrinae* for this understanding. Here our Lord Jesus breathes on His disciples and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven: if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”³

If one reads on in the Small Catechism he will find that this forgiving and retaining is legitimately done by the called ministers of Christ who deal with the congregation according to Christ’s command, forgiving repentant sinners but withholding forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent. This withholding of forgiveness is not simply in private absolution, but in the administering of the blessed Sacrament as well.⁴ These unrepentant sinners are, if they should remain unrepentant, eventually removed from the congregation by excommunication.

This is, obviously, the popular understanding of how the Office of the Keys works and what it is for. It is not wrong. Neither is it complete. It itself raises questions such as whether or

¹ Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis. 2008. (29)

² Ap XII, 6, 39; SA III, VII, 1; SA III, VIII, 1, etc.

³ *The Holy Bible : English standard version.* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Jn 20:22-23. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture is quoted from the ESV.

⁴ Time and space preclude an in depth or even cursory look at the implications of asking an unrepentant sinner from participating in the Sacrament and how this is or is not excommunication.

not a layman can forgive sins, and if so, which ones and to what end? Does a sinner have to confess his sins to obtain forgiveness? What is the nature of forgiveness won by Christ on the cross to a sinner who cannot discern his errors? Not too mention the plethora of sins as the *persona Christi* of the pastor and so forth. These are but a few that our congregations, pastors, and our synod struggle with.

Obviously a twenty-five minute paper cannot hope to untie the Gordian Knot that is the Office of the Keys. What I intend to do is hopefully shed light on the Office of the Keys by exploring their promise, institution, and use in the St. Matthew's gospel. While this has certainly been done before, what I hope to contribute is that the proper address of the keys, the proper way to address the keys, does not begin with forgiveness or confession of sin, but rather of right doctrine versus false doctrine: the Office of the Keys as the office of preaching and teaching.

Part I: The keys in Scripture

Despite the fact that the term "Office of the Keys" is well known to every Lutheran, and used with great frequency in our Confessions, the actual use of the term "keys" in sacred Scripture is relegated to only two books of the New Testament and one book in the Old. The Book of the Revelation of St. John makes use of the term in an official capacity, putting the keys of death and Hades in the hands of Jesus (1:18), which is the key of David (3:7). They are mentioned two other times in the Revelation, both of which concern locking and unlocking the pit of hell (9:1; 20:1). The keys are mentioned in the Old Testament in Isaiah 22:22, which speaks of the key of David opening and shutting the door in the manner of the Revelation. Finally, the keys are mentioned in St. Matthew 16(19), when Jesus promises Peter the keys of

the kingdom that will loose in heaven what is loosed on earth and will bind in heaven what is bound (by Peter) on earth.

How is it, then, that John 20:22-23, which does not mention the keys directly, and does not use the wording of binding and loosing but of forgiving and retaining, which are not in Matthew 16, came to be the primary proof text of what the keys are used for? One simple explanation, and not a wrong one, is the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture. It is a systematic conclusion that John 20:22-23, is the Office of the Keys. That does not mean it is wrong (not at all!). It does mean that such an understanding of the keys as binding and loosing sins in particular, as if they have only to do or especially to do with the absolution of sins or the retention of sin, especially if it is considered or treated as the predominant or exclusive use of the keys, is questionable.

Part II: St. Matthew 16: the institution of the keys

The keys are first mentioned in St. Matthew 16, when they are promised by Christ in following Peter's great confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Upon hearing Peter's confession our Lord exclaims:

Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.⁵ (ESV)

The keys are the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and they are not given without context.

The context is Peter's great confession, the confession upon which the church of Christ is built. In this passage we have all the elements of the other places the keys or their function are mentioned: Matthew 18:15-20); Revelation 1:18; 3:7; 9:1; and, 20:1. Here in Matthew 16, is

⁵*The Holy Bible : English Standard Version.* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Mt 16:17-19.

mentioned the binding and loosing (18:15-20) and of the gates of hell (Revelation references). The gates of hell will not overcome the Church, built on Peter's confession, and are, in fact, as Jesus confrontation with Peter will show, used to bind the gates of hell. Being bound by those with the keys, hell is also bound in heaven, even as those freed from hell by the keys are freed also in heaven. Earth is now the seat of authority over heaven and hell, and this authority is vested in Peter and those to whom the keys are given.

When Jesus has heard His disciples' confession of who He is, the Christ, the Son of the living God, He immediately tells them how He is the Christ and what the Christ must do: suffer and die in Jerusalem at the hand of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and that He will rise on the third day (16:21). Peter rebukes Jesus saying to Him, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." (v.22). Peter has forsaken the true teaching of the Christ, the orthodox teaching that Jesus Himself gave, and has embraced false teaching. This false teaching is adversarial to Jesus, so much so that Jesus identifies Peter with the Adversary, Satan.⁶

As a result of Peter's espousing false teaching, Jesus binds him, setting him behind Himself, a place that is not before the Lord but out of the Lord's sight. Peter, who was to see the face of God because he was pure in heart, having confessed the right confession given of the Father, was now to be removed from Jesus' sight. In essence, Peter's denial of the truth made him to deny Jesus who would in turn, deny Peter (Matthew 10:33). Of course, Peter is not sent to hell, but on hearing Jesus' rebuke repents; if not then, then sometime, at least post-resurrection when he begins to preach the right teaching, the orthodox teaching, the teaching set forth by Christ Himself.

The scene we have just walked through (unfortunately at a clipped pace) is the promise of the keys, which are not then given but promised; Jesus still retains the keys. It is a demonstration

⁶ *σατανᾶ* means adversary.

of the keys. If Peter does not repent and listen to Christ, he will be removed from his office and possibly from the band of disciples. In addition, the distinct impression that Jesus' words and actions are meant to preserve the right teaching and His redemptive work, and are not primarily to bring Peter to repentance. Nowhere does Jesus say to Peter, "Repent," though certainly it is almost more than implied. Jesus uses the keys, loosing the kingdom of heaven on earth by the confession, here to the disciples and later to all nations (Matthew 28:16ff), and binding hell in binding Peter's false confession of the Christ, that He will not suffer, die, or rise on the third day, in order to preserve the right (*ortho*) confession which Peter has just made. In short, Jesus did not use the keys *primarily* to show Peter his sin or to bring him to repentance, but to preserve the truth.

Part III: Repentance and the Forgiveness of sins in St. Matthew

Here it is necessary that we take a small, albeit vital, excursion to obtain at least a cursory understanding of the role of the forgiveness of sins in the gospel of St. Matthew.

Our Lord Jesus, upon entering what is dubbed His public ministry, takes up the preaching of St. John the Baptist, preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). Without going into too much detail (something that is difficult to avoid), it must suffice to say that Jesus is telling those that hear Him to turn to Him, for He is the kingdom of heaven or at least He brings it with Him. Either way, until now, no one was turning toward Jesus to encounter the kingdom of heaven, and Jesus' preaching (and John's who pointed to Jesus with the word, "repent") is meant to do just that: turn everyone to Him.

Why? Because Jesus reveals the Father. Jesus came to do the Father's will and to usher in the Father's kingdom (25:34; 26:29). The kingdom of heaven is the Father's kingdom, and Jesus'

teaching is the teaching of His Father. The Sermon on the Mount describes those that live in the kingdom, or are at least waiting for the kingdom to come to full fruition. This is indicated in such places as the Beatitudes where the poor in spirit inherit the kingdom of God, and the meek inherit the earth. Inheritances are waited for. So those who are attached to Jesus are waiting with Jesus for the Father's kingdom to become manifest to all people on the Last Day.⁷ It is the Father's kingdom that is to come and His will that is to be done. And Jesus comes to establish that kingdom and do that will.

In order to do that, Jesus must atone for the sins of the world (the whole world, John would remind us – 1 John 2:2). Therefore, He pours out His blood (26:28), which is the new covenant, not by the Law, but by the forgiveness of sins. Those, then, that gather to Him, who listen to Him, who follow Him, those that believe on Him have what He came to give, eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. They are called sons of God (5:9) and Jesus' Father becomes and is their Father.

The forgiveness of sins, then, is not simply about the one-for-one correlation between sin and absolution, something disallowed by Scripture which asks the rhetorical question, "Who can discern his errors?" (Psalm 19:12). Rather, the forgiveness of sins is the condition into which Jesus plunges (baptism) the world, becoming for the whole world the place where the Father's will is done and sinners are reconciled and His kingdom established. Forgiving sins isn't optional in the kingdom of heaven, but germane to it. So Jesus tells His disciples on more than one occasion that unless they forgive others as they themselves have been forgiven – without cost and without prerequisite – then their Father in heaven will not forgive them their trespasses (6:15; 18:35).

⁷ For a fuller expansion on this idea one should read *Discourses in Matthew*, by the Rev. Dr. David P. Scaer. (CPH, 2004)

Not only so, but even enemies of Jesus and of His disciples are to be forgiven and prayed for and treated as friends. Not after the repent, but before and even if they never do. Paul echoes this when he points out that it was yet while we were sinners and enemies of God that Jesus died for us and reconciled us to the Father (Romans 5:10). Forgiveness is not conditional on anything, but is commanded to be given to all regardless of their condition in or outside the community of Jesus.

Love, that is, forgive

Forgiveness of sins is actually love, as St. Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 13. The apostle Paul teaches that love is patient and kind. Love does not envy or boast. Love bears no record of wrongs. Love is not arrogant or rude, never insisting on its own way. Love is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wickedness, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends (1 Corinthians 13:4-8) So, too, the apostle John teaches that, “Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling.” (1 John 1:10). We know that loving God and loving neighbor is the summation of the whole of the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:37-40).

Love is the fulfillment of the Law. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10). Indeed, the Law is love. That is to say that the Law has in mind God and neighbor. So Christ loved us so that He willingly and joyfully endured the shame of the cross that we would be reconciled to God. He kept the Law and we are the beneficiaries; God loved us by giving us His only-begotten Son for the propitiation and expiation of our sins. In being loved by God we have been forgiven all our sins and trespasses, even our very sinfulness so that not simply actions or inactions that would be called sin are forgiven, but the very core of our rebellion in being the spawn of Adam is forgiven. So that it is written, “If

anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The new man, like the Man of heaven, is the man of love, loving God and neighbor so that as the cross of the Man of heaven was born for our sakes, so our crosses are born for the sake of others. For the one that does not take up his cross and follow the Master cannot be His disciple. So the Lord has said that, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). “Above all,” the apostle Peter would write, “keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.” (1 Peter 4:8)⁸

Part IV: Matthew 18

To this point I have made two main propositions: one, the keys, while having to do with forgiveness of sins, are more to do with right and wrong teaching; and as a subset, two, that the forgiveness of sins is not dependent upon one’s repentance (contrition and desire to do better) but upon the Father’s will that sinners be reconciled to Him by Jesus. Forgiveness of sins is nothing more than love. Here we will turn our attention to Matthew 18, not as the dictum of forgiveness of sins or even of reconciliation of the sinner but of the propriety of right teaching and the severity of false teaching within the community of Jesus.

The Community of Jesus & the Keys

The keys are promised and demonstrated in chapter sixteen. In chapter eighteen, which does not mention the keys by name but does mention everything about the keys, puts the keys in their proper place in the community of Jesus.

⁸ This portion on love as the forgiveness of sins and the natural life of the Christian was meant to be a whole section on its own. However, time restraints prevent me from including it in the presentation as I wanted to, so I have included it as an appendix, though it is germane to my position concerning the proper use and place of the Office of the Keys.

The eighteenth chapter of St. Matthew begins with the disciples asking Jesus who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus calls a child (*παιδιον*) to their midst and tells them that unless they turn and become like this child, they will never enter the kingdom of heaven. While I disagree with him in his conclusions concerning chapter eighteen, I agree with Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs when he observes that, “[While] no consensus has emerged [on the structure of Matthew 18...]. I would suggest [...] that the more important question for understanding the unified character of Jesus’ teaching in 18:1-35, has to do with the imager or metaphor of the child as the greatest.”⁹

To gloss over vast amounts of theology and speculation on why Jesus presented a child to His disciples as the greatest, I simply present in agreement with Dr. Gibbs, that it is because a child must receive all things from his or her father.¹⁰ Unless you turn and receive all things from your heavenly Father, that is, unless you are humble and do not think more highly of yourself than you ought, but recognize that for all things you depend on your Father in heaven, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. In short, the Father gives all things (Sermon on the Mount), and reveals the needed knowledge to the disciples that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (16:17). The Father also bear witness to Jesus, that He is the beloved Son to whom the disciples are to listen (17:5), who is Himself given by the Father (11:27). As a child is wholly dependant on his father, so the disciples and even Jesus Himself are wholly dependent on the heavenly Father. Jesus, being the perfect Son from heaven, is most like the child, and is therefore the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And unless they become like Him, they will not enter it. Thus is fulfilled Jesus words to the Father in chapter 11.

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children;²⁶ yes, Father, for such was

⁹ Gibbs, Jeffery A. *Concordia Commentary, Matthew 11:2-20:34*. Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis. 2010, (889)

¹⁰ Gibbs, Jeffery A. *Concordia Commentary, Matthew 11:2-20:34*. Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis. 2010, (897-901). Here Dr. Gibbs gives details to this conclusion, which one can read in his commentary.

your gracious will.²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.¹¹

Whoever, then, receives one such child, one who depends on the Father who is in heaven, in Jesus' name receives Jesus Himself. Whoever, then, causes one of these little ones to be scandalized (*σκανδαλιζω*), well, it would be better for him to have a millstone fastened about his neck and thrown into the sea (18:6). The ESV translates "*σκανδαλιζω*" in verse six with the word "sin". But the word is not *αμαρτανω*, which is sin and suggests a moral failing or transgression against the commandments. However, *σκανδαλιζω*, suggests that it is not to cause a little one to transgress the commandments, but rather to cause such a little one to be scandalized by Jesus and so stop believing in Him. It is as Jesus said to St. John the Baptist disciples, "Tell John ... *και μακάριός ἐστιν ὁς ἐὰν μὴ σκανδαλισθῆ ἐν ἐμοί.*" (11:6)

At this point Dr. Gibbs suggests that to scandalize a little one is to cause him or her to sin, and I would not disagree except to say that for Dr. Gibbs, as I suspect for the majority, to sin means to transgress a commandment. I would submit that here there is no sin in particular, but that to scandalize the little one is to cause the little one to listen to that which leads him or her astray from the heavenly Father. This seems evident by the following words of Jesus about seeking the straying sheep and the possible verse eleven, which says that the Son of Man came to seek and save that which was lost.¹² By the scandalizing of these little ones, they are in danger of being lost. The loosing here is not simply in danger of sinning, which we are all in danger of regardless of our humility or proximity of others, but a danger of being lost to the Father. So Jesus concludes in verse fourteen: "It is not the will of my Father in heaven that any of these little ones should be lost." The fact that the Father's relation to the little one, or vice versa, is the

¹¹*The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001 (Mt 11:25-27). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

¹² 18:11 is not attested to in the most reliable manuscripts and so is left out of the ESV. Dr. Gibbs also treats it as an inserted verse rather than a proper one.

significant play in this exchange is evident by Jesus' continual reference to the Father, even saying that the angels (messengers) of the little ones look on the face of the Father.

Whoever is scandalized by Jesus rejects Him and denies Him and is eventually cut off from Him as is suggested by His words quoted above to John the Baptist. So also He says, "Whoever denies me before men, I will deny before my Father who is in heaven" (10:33). Whoever causes one of the little ones who trust in their heavenly Father and so believe in Jesus to become so scandalized is cursed. Temptation to be scandalized¹³ must come, but woe to the one through whom it comes (18:7)! At this point Jesus repeats what He said in the Sermon on the Mount; that is it better to enter the kingdom of heaven without a hand or eye than to be thrown into the hell of fire. That which is causing one of these little ones to be scandalized needs to be removed, cut off. Such violent removal of the scandalizing part of the body shows the value of the little ones.

The keys: for the sake of the little ones

Here I part ways with Dr. Gibbs, though his textual notes are more than worth reading through.¹⁴ Despite the fact that Dr. Gibbs sees verses 15-20, as I do, as urgent care for the greatest,¹⁵ he sees the little ones as those who are rebuked by the sinned against brother, I do not. I leave the little ones in verse fourteen. In other words, for Dr. Gibbs, the sinning brother, the one who sins against you, is the little one that has straying and has not sinned against you and is in need of direct rebuke, and the reason you might go and show him his fault is that he would be gained back. I would (humbly) suggest that the sinning brother is not the little one who is straying, but rather that he is the one that caused or is in danger of causing the little ones to stray,

¹³ Again the ESV translates *σκανδαλιζω* as "sin".

¹⁴ Gibbs, Jeffrey A., (914-916)

¹⁵ The title of the section in Dr. Gibbs commentary on Matthew 18:15-20.

and the reason you go and rebuke him is not primarily to save him, but to protect the little ones from his scandalizing them. If he hears you, you have gained a brother.

If he does not listen to you, if he persists in causing one of the little ones to be scandalize and so deny Jesus and stop depending on the Father (as John was in danger of doing while in Herod's prison), then you would gather witnesses that this brother's teaching (which may be verbal as in proclaiming false things about the Christ and God, or physical by living a life contrary to the truth of God in Christ) is wrong. The witness, which suggests this is anything but a private or even semi-private sin, bear witness to the truth. If the brother listens, he is gained back. If however, he does not, the matter is set before the Church.

In setting the matter before the Church the erring brother is confronted with the corpus of believes who would rebuke his false teaching (be it verbal or physical). Not merely to bring him to repentance, but for the sake of the little ones that he is causing to be scandalized (v.14). If he listens to the assembly, he is, presumably, gained back. If he does not listen he is treated as a foreigner or tax collector.

As I made the point above, the Office of the Keys is by and large considered to be only the authority to forgive or retain sins depending upon the repentance or lack thereof of the sinner. It is my contention that this correct, although subservient point of the Keys is read back into the texts of Matthew regarding the keys so that one must draw the conclusion that in chapter 18:15-20, Jesus is here speaking of general Christian interaction between one sinning and another sinned against, who is supposed to then exercise the keys in order to bring the erring brother to repentance and so reinstate him or her back into the community of Jesus.

However, the keys are not presented this way in Matthew's gospel. Rather, they are, as mentioned, presented in chapter sixteen as the authority to bind and loose that which is

dependant upon that great confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. In other words, the keys only have to do with forgiveness of sin or the retention of sin insofar as that sin is the teaching, preaching, and proclamation of falsities, such as Peter's instance that the Christ cannot suffer and die and so cannot be raised on the third day.

Time forbids an in-depth systematic look into this in the New Testament, so one example must suffice. It is the exchange between Peter and Paul when Paul confronted Peter to his face as he was teaching in Ephesus that the believers must be circumcised.

¹¹ But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. ¹³ And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" ¹⁶ (ESV)

Here Paul uses the keys on Peter, not to forgive Peter (though presumably that happened) but to warn him as a brother that if he did not repent, he stood condemned. Peter had sinned against Paul by refuting the orthodox teaching of Paul that circumcision is not necessary, and even harmful to the faith. In the context of Matthew 18:15-20, Peter is the sinning brother and Paul is the one sinned against. Only, Peter has committed no sin against Paul's person but rather against Paul's office of teacher and apostle, the very same sin Peter committed against Jesus in Matthew 16, when he rebuked the Lord for teaching the orthodox teaching that the Christ must suffer and die and on the third day rise from the dead.

In Matthew 18, we have the greatest ones, the little ones who trust in their heavenly Father as Jesus teaches, and so believe on Him, being led astray by scandalizing brothers, such as

¹⁶*The Holy Bible : English Standard Version.* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ga 2:11-14.

Peter had become to those little ones in Ephesus. Paul, caring for the little ones, rebukes Peter. Peter listened and Paul gained his brother.

Had Peter not listened, which seems to be the case that some did not since the council of Jerusalem was needed, Paul would have gathered witnesses. These witnesses are not to witness against Peter for his transgressions against the person of Paul or the commandments, but to bear witness against his teaching that is causing the little ones of Ephesus to become scandalized and stop trusting in their heavenly Father and believing in Jesus and instead turning to circumcision and Moses for their righteousness. Of course, had Peter refused to listen to Paul or the witnesses, then Paul would have informed the whole assembly (the Church) of Peter's false teaching at which point the whole church would have warned Peter. If Peter listened, all well and good; if he did not, he would be to Paul and to the Church as a foreigner and tax collector.¹⁷

Although it is only one example (more could be provided, such as the examples in 1 and 2 Corinthians), it serves the purpose. Those who teach false doctrine, doctrine that contradicts the great confession of Matthew 16, and tempt the little ones to be scandalized and so stop trusting in their heavenly Father and believing in Jesus, are to be rebuked until they either repent of their false teaching or are removed at least from office, if not from the community.

Matthew 18:15-20, is indeed for the sake of the little ones, as Dr. Gibbs points out; but to protect them from false teachers, not to point out their sins and make them repent or threaten them with punishment or banishment. Church discipline is indeed in sight here, but not discipline against sinners as such, but against teachers and preachers who persist in false teaching and would thereby scandalize the little ones.

¹⁷ It seems a reoccurring theme, but time disallows me to develop the foreigner and tax collector motif, but I will here say that this does not seem to demand excommunication, especially that foreigners and tax collectors, though sinners and transplants, are treated well in Matthew's gospel. Rather, it seems that they are to be disregarded as teachers or leaders in the community, their teaching bound. No mention of hell or weeping and gnashing of teeth is present in Matthew 18.

Part V: Implications and the Small Catechism

The Office of the Keys is indeed that special authority which Christ has given to His church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent. It is also – and I would argue primarily – the office whereby teachers are judged according to the right confession and doctrine and are thereby rebuked if found going against it, and reconciled if they repent of their false teaching.

How does this transform to the Small Catechism teaching? In short, anyone who persists in open, unrepentant sin is teaching others to do the same or to disregard that it is a sin. So the couple that is living together outside of marriage, by their public actions, threatens to cause other little ones to be scandalized and go astray. They are to be rebuked, not necessarily that they would repent, but to protect the little ones who might fall prey to their false teaching. If they repent, well and good, a brother (and sister) has been gained. But that's not the point. The point is to protect the little ones from those that would tempt them to go astray.

Gone, then, is the idea that it is loving to point out the sins of others. Rather, it is loving to bear no record of wrongs. If a person is sinning by denying the oracles of God, then Matthew 18:15-20 apply. Dr. Gibbs rightly states that in chapter sixteen authority is granted by Jesus to teach Christocentrically and “in so teaching to use the keys to open (or shut) the way to the reign of God.”¹⁸ However, he does not then go on to see that use of the keys in Matthew 18, but, and seems to me, contrary to the text, suggests that here we are dealing with specific sins against the person of other Christians. This, it also seems to me, goes against the plethora of evidence in the New Testament that we sinners are not to consider ourselves sinned against, but are to consider ourselves reconciled to the world in Christ.

¹⁸ Gibbs, Jeffrey A. (921-922)

Conclusion

The Office of the Keys, then, is not merely (quantitatively so) the authority to forgive repentant sinners and to withhold forgiveness from those who do not repent,¹⁹ but is chiefly a function of the apostolic office to allow or disallow teaching as it relates to the great confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Teaching that coheres to this is the loosing key, loosing the kingdom of heaven – the reign of heaven – upon the world. Teaching that contradicts this great confession and what it entails is bound on earth and in heaven, and the teachers that teach thus are rebuked and eventually, if unrepentant, disallowed to teach and perhaps even excommunicated.

Where two or three of the disciples (apostles) of Jesus agree in what they ask, it is done for them by the Father who is in heaven because they are teaching in the name of Jesus, being gathered in Jesus' name. Then whatever they bind is bound and whatever they loose is loosed. The final fulfillment of this is when Jesus Himself sends out His apostles to loose on the world the kingdom of heaven by the teaching the nations to observe all that He has instructed, binding the lies and false teaching of the Adversary who opposes the Lord, and would thus cause His little ones to be scandalized and fall.

¹⁹ Small Catechism, *What is the Office of the Keys?*

A Compendium on Love, the More Excellent Way

The apostle Paul teaches that love is patient and kind. Love does not envy or boast. Love bears no record of wrongs. Love is not arrogant or rude, never insisting on its own way. Love is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wickedness, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). So, too, the apostle John teaches that, “Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling” (1 John 1:10). We know that loving God and loving neighbor is the summation of the whole of the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:37-40).

Love is the fulfillment of the Law. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10). Indeed, the Law is love. That is to say that the Law has in mind God and neighbor. So Christ loved us so that He willingly and joyfully endured the shame of the cross that we would be reconciled to God. He kept the Law and we are the beneficiaries; God loved us by giving us His only-begotten Son for the propitiation and expiation of our sins. In being loved by God we have been forgiven all our sins and trespasses, even our very sinfulness so that not simply actions or inactions that would be called sin are forgiven, but the very core of our rebellion in being the spawn of Adam is forgiven. So that it is written, “If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The new man, like the Man of heaven, is the man of love, loving God and neighbor so that as the cross of the Man of heaven was born for our sakes, so our crosses are born for the sake of others. For the one that does not take up his cross and follow the Master cannot be His disciple. So the Lord has said that, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). “Above all,” the apostle Peter would write, “keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

We who are loved are to love in the same way as we are loved. As the Man of love bore our sins and carried our sorrows, we bear the sins of others and carry their sorrows. Not to atone for their sins, but to do as the Master has done and count nothing against them. His prayer is ours: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). It is as the apostle of love writes:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:7-12)

It cannot be so hard to understand that the life of the one born of God is one of love – be He Jesus, conceived by the Holy Spirit, the only-begotten of God, or one of the adopted children of God, born from on high by water and the Spirit. Those of God love God and love man. Neither is it so hard to discern from sacred Scripture that loving others means sacrificing ourselves for them, as we heard from St. Paul above. Indeed, love is sacrifice, for sacrifice is not of its essence a hard or burdensome or bloody thing, but is merely the giving over of oneself to another. Without sin such sacrificing, such love, is not burdensome or wearisome. It is not hard or burdensome for the Son to love the Father, to sacrifice Himself, giving Himself and His will to the Father. So the Son says, “Come to me you who are weary and heavy laden. My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” It is easy and light because He has no sin between Him and the Father.

To those who do not love, who do not do as Peter has said and love earnestly, but rather, contrary to another apostle, James, who judge based on appearances and do not treat all the

brothers with the same measure of love, to these Paul reserves one of his harshest rebukes:

“What [...] do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing (1 Corinthians 11:22)? Those who do not love despise. Or to paraphrase John: How can we say we love God whom we have not seen if we do not love our brother whom we have seen (1 John 4:20-21)? The Lord Jesus, dealing with Peter’s question of how often he ought to forgive, that is, how often ought he love the brother that sins against him, says that unless one forgives his brother from the heart neither will His Father in heaven forgive that one. Recalled easily are the words of Jesus after teaching His disciples to pray: “If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:15).

Love is the more excellent way because it is love that reconciled us to the Father; the love of Christ. It was His great love for His Father and for us sinners which motivated Christ to die and make full payment for our sins.²⁰ So we go to the Sacrament to “learn to believe that Christ, our of great love, died for my sin, and also learn from Him to love God and my neighbor.”²¹ Accordingly, we do not merely or only go to the Sacrament to receive the forgiveness of sins, but to learn from Christ to love God and neighbor. We love God by offering our bodies as living sacrifices, which is our spiritual worship. We love our neighbor by not counting their sins and trespasses against them, but by considering their sin our sin and their burdens our burdens and so fulfill the Law of Christ (Galatians 6:2)

²⁰ The Small Catechism, Christian Questions with their Answers, question 17

²¹ The Small Catechism, CPH, 2006, Christian Questions with their Answers, question 19.