

What is the Use of the Keys?

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It is no secret that part of the fifth chief part of Luther's Small Catechism, *The Ministry of the Keys*, was not written by Luther, nor is it found in the Book of Concord. This paper will seek to answer the question: "What is the Use (Ministry) of the Keys?" by examining it first from an historical point of view, then, from a comparative point of view.

I. The Origin of the Fifth Chief Part: The Ministry of the Keys

For the historical overview of how the fifth chief part of our Catechism came into existence, I am indebted to Prof. David Kuske who kindly consented to allow me to borrow (in nearly its entirety) the following historical material that was originally presented at a Northern Wisconsin Pastoral Conference, October 24-25, 1977.

"In his *Historical Introduction to the Symbolic 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 Nuremburg *Text Booklet* of 1531 and thence were taken over into the Nuremburg 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 Nuremburg 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." 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 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 Nuremburg Sermons of 1533 until it reached its final form in the catechisms of Saxony and Thuringia in 1582.

“In 1531, the Nuremburg *Text Booklet* inserted John 20:22ff between the Lord’s Prayer and Baptism under the title ‘Of the call and office of the word and keys.’ In 1533, Osiander and Sleupner wrote and published *The Nuremburg Sermons for Children*. Each of the sermons in this series expounded a portion of Luther’s catechism. Osiander and Sluepner 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 thought of the sermon in the words of Luther’s Enchiridion.

“Between the sermon on Baptism and the Sermon on the Lord’s Supper the Nuremburg 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 Nuremburg Sermons for Children* were very popular and their use spread widely throughout Germany. This explains why the summary of this sermon was also used in 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 Nuremburg 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 Nuremburg 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 believer 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 Nuremburg 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 ford 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 our catechism (Gausewitz ‘17 and its revision of ‘56) 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 (Gausewitz ‘17 and its revision of ‘56) placement of this as the fifth chief part before the Lord’s Supper 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 fact that this part of the catechism is not Luther’s wording raises the question, ‘What did Luther say and teach on the 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.

Luther was certainly not silent on the topic! In late September or early October of 1530 he penned his famous treatise “Of the Keys” - a document in which he spelled out four misuses of the Ministry of the Keys on the part of the Papacy. This extensive work pre-dated Luther’s 1531 amendments to the Enchiridion of his Small Catechism. Since it was this 1531 version that became (for all practical purposes) the text that was included in the Book of Concord of 1580, there appears to be no reason beyond that of the Reformer’s personal inclinations not to include the treatment of this doctrine in a catechism that was intended for “the young and simple people.”

It is clear, however, that Luther’s contemporaries felt that the topic merited inclusion in their catechisms. It took quite a while, however, before there was a text for the Keys that could be considered fairly uniform over a wide geographical area. This phenomenon of an unsettled text held true not only for the Keys, but to some extent for Luther’s Small Catechism in general. Ren, in his history of Luther’s Small Catechism, makes this observation: “Thus it is evident that the Small Catechism of the 16th century has often been treated, even by staunch Lutherans, with a liberty few of us would dare to exercise today. A 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 16th century? Surely one cannot ascribe it to a lack of respect for Luther or the confessional writings, or to carelessness, or obstinacy, or 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 Small 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 lostHence, choose whatever form you please, and adhere to it forever.’ (Triglotta, pp 533,535).

Over the years our Synod has heeded that advice of the Reformer, and has been conservative in changing of the text of the Enchiridion. Having two catechisms in 65 years (Gausewitz: 1917-1956 and Gausewitz-revised: ‘E956-1982) could hardly be called a frivolous approach to the wording of the Enchiridion. In fact, there appear to be no changes at all from the 1917 catechism to the 1956 catechism! The WELS catechism of 1982 was not without its changes, however. Some of the more notable ones in this edition are in the topic under discussion. And so we as a Synod are a part of that seemingly endless process of updating and upgrading this document called the Small Catechism. Why can’t the wording rest in peace? Why can’t it become etched in stone, never to change again? Perhaps because it is the tool that we use to instruct the youth, we want “Luther’s” Catechism to be relevant to the youngsters that sit at our feet to learn the chief parts of Christian doctrine.

The first change that one notices in connection with the 1982 catechism is that the title of the section is “What is the use of the Keys?” instead of “What is the Ministry of the Keys?” This translation of “Amt” (office, ministry) was intended to direct the children’s thoughts toward the universal priesthood and away from the misconception that ‘ministry’ here meant something to do with pastors only. Yet despite the desire for clarity, the new title is now ambiguous, especially to the minds and language patterns of school children. “What’s the use of studying for the test?” and “What’s the use of the Keys?” fall into the same thought pattern. At first reading, the question usually does not communicate the fact that what we are looking for is a definition of the Ministry of the Keys.

Perhaps the most significant of the 1982 ‘clarifications’ in this chief part is the change of ‘retain the sins of the impenitent’ to ‘refuse forgiveness to the impenitent.’ Of the options possible to replace ‘retain’ (i.e. to keep in a fixed state. Greek: hold fast), there is the opposite of ‘to forgive’— namely—‘not to forgive.’ There is also ‘withhold forgiveness’ and finally ‘refuse forgiveness.’ Of these three possibilities, ‘refuse forgiveness’ was chosen.

Of the three, ‘not to forgive’ is the most neutral. It simply states something that is not done. It is the NIV’s choice to translate the word retain. ‘Withhold forgiveness’ says the same thing but has the implication that the forgiveness is there, is ready, is available! (This would have been a good choice also in view of the doctrine of objective justification which is at the heart of the Ministry of the Keys.)

While ‘refuse forgiveness’ can be understood correctly (if you know that it means ‘retains’), people reading and studying this for the first time will put the usual meaning on the word ‘refuse.’ My Webster says: “Refuse is a direct, sometimes blunt term implying *an emphatic denial of a request or demand.*” In other words, by using the word ‘refuse’ there is the implication that forgiveness has been requested and denied: If we define an impenitent as ‘one not wanting or seeking forgiveness,’ we end up with this in our definition of “What is the use of the Keys?”: “to refuse forgiveness to the one not wanting or seeking forgiveness.” This is an interesting contradiction of terms which can only cause confusion in the minds of young learners.

In the second part of the Ministry of the Keys, the wording has been drastically changed from the ancient wording of the 16th century Nurenburg Sermons. Instead of “What do you believe according to these words?” we have “How does the Christian congregation use the Keys?” The purpose for this change is, again, a desire to shift the emphasis from pastor to congregation, that is, the universal priesthood.

To complete the list of the 20th century changes to the Enchiridion, a question: “Where is this written?” was added to this second part of the Ministry of the Keys. Whether we agree or not with the above changes is not the point of this above discussion. It is pointed out here primarily for the sake of demonstrating that even at this late date in Reformation history—450 years after this chief part was first printed and publicly taught, changes—major changes—are still being made!

Since this chief part is not a part of the Book of Concord, its text will most probably remain ‘in flux,’ constantly being added to or subtracted from in hopes of teaching this important doctrine of Scripture more exactly and more clearly. What well may happen, however, is just the opposite. Instead of being asked to explain archaic words, we, as pastors and teachers, may find ourselves sweeping out cobwebs of confusion! I’m not sure that is progress!

What is the Use of the Keys? According to our historical survey from 1529 to the present, we would have to say that it is that portion of our present catechism that has been and still is subject to the most fluctuations in, its wording, probably because of its non-confessional nature.

Next, we would like to examine the question “What is the Use of the Keys?” from a comparative point of view.

II. The Differences in the Presentation of the ‘Ministry of the Keys’ in the Explanations of the Various Catechisms Used in the WELS in the 1900’s

In this section of the paper we will compare the explanations of “What is the Use of the Keys?” as found in four of the catechisms widely used in our circles.

The catechisms that we will be looking at are:

1. The original Gausewitz catechism ('17)
2. The LC-MS catechism ('43)
3. The Gausewitz revision ('56)
4. The WELS catechism ('82)

As a starting place, let's look at the definition of 'The Ministry of the Keys' in each of the above catechisms:

1. The original Gausewitz: The ministry of the Keys is the authority of church to preach the Gospel and to administer the Sacraments. (Q & A 389)
2. The LC-MS: The ministry of the Keys is the power, or authority, to preach the Word of God, to administer the Sacraments, and especially the power to forgive and to retain sins. (Q & A 267)
3. The Gausewitz revision: The ministry of the Keys is the authority to use the Gospel in Word and Sacraments, the means to open the kingdom of heaven. (Q & A 369, 368)
4. The WELS: (The ministry of)the Keys means the special power and right... either to forgive sins (the loosing Key) or to refuse to forgive sins (the binding Key). (Q & A 304)

It is clear, that disregarding minor variations in 1-3, what we have here are basically only two differing approaches to understanding the Ministry of the Keys. The first three stress the fact that it is an authority to administer the Gospel in its various forms. The original Gausewitz appears to say nothing about forgiving and retaining sins. In fact, following the quote above, Q 390 asks, "What, then, is the Ministry of the Keys? The answer given is the familiar "The Ministry of the Keys is the peculiar authority of the Church...to forgive...to retain, etc."

Of the first three, the LC-MS catechism is the broadest in its definition. Instead of "authority to preach the Gospel/authority to use Gospel" this catechism speaks of the authority to preach the Word of God (i.e. Gospel and Law). This catechism stresses that the Ministry of the Keys is *especially* the power to forgive and retain sins. This is an emphasis that the new WELS catechism focuses on exclusively.

The Gausewitz revision dealt with this aspect of the Ministry of the Keys by stating that it is the Gospel that is the means to open the kingdom of heaven. No mention is made of closing heaven or retaining sins.

Besides the emphasis of the new WELS catechism already mentioned, it must be pointed out here that two terms occur here which are new to WELS catechisms. The terms are not new however. Luther, in his 1530 treatise "Of the Keys" uses the term Löseschlüssel (loosing Key) four times and the term Bindeschlüssel (binding Key) seven times.

This marks the first time that the Keys have been so identified in a catechism of our Synod. Up until this time ('82) the Keys were treated as a unit concept. At the risk of oversimplifying, the Ministry of the Keys was viewed as either *the use* or *the non-use* of the forgiving Gospel. In the new WELS catechism, the Ministry of the Keys is the authority to use either *the loosing Key* or *the binding Key*.

Perhaps the easiest way to show the earlier 'unit concept' that was referred to is to examine how the 'binding' of sins takes place according to the earlier catechisms:

1. The original Gausewitz: Who has no forgiveness? All the impenitent as long as they do not repent. (Q & A 393)

Why have the impenitent no forgiveness? Because they by their impenitence reject the Gospel. Thus their sins are retained. (Q & A 394)

2. The LC-MS: Whose sins are to be retained? The sins of the impenitent sinners, that is, of those who are not sorry for their sins and do not believe in Jesus Christ, are to be retained as long as they do not repent. (Q & A 274)
3. The Gausewitz revision: Who has no forgiveness? The impenitent has no forgiveness because by his very impenitence *he rejects the Gospel*, and thus *his sins are retained* as long as he does not repent. (Q & A 374)

Note that in all three of the above, and in the WELS catechisms particularly, the ‘binding’ or the ‘retaining’ of sins is the *natural result* and *ongoing condition* of impenitence. Being outside the kingdom of heaven is the impenitent’s natural habitat! It is not something we do to him, but rather something we declare!

Several respected writers in our circle have spoken to that very point. Dr. Koehler, in his *Summary of Christian Doctrine* (p. 260), writes: “To retain sins, therefore, simply means *to declare a certain fact, which fact would obtain even though the declaration were not made*, namely, that the impenitent can not and shall not have forgiveness as long as he does not repent.”

Similarly, Schuetze and Habeck write in *Shepherd under Christ* (p. 175): “The essence of excommunication is the *declaration* by the church that the admonished sinner has rejected all exhortation from God’s Word, has proved to be impenitent, and may not be considered a member of Christ’s Church. *Nothing new has been done except formally to establish an existing fact.*”

This approach to understanding the Ministry of the Keys with its strong Gospel emphasis does not deny, however, that the Law is necessary and active in trying to lead a person, to see his sin and the need for a savior. What this view *refuses* to do is *to equate the Ministry of the Keys (or part of it) with the Law*. The Law binds; the Gospel frees! The Ministry of the Keys is the authority to announce that what has been worked by either the Law or the Gospel is a condition that prevails before the very throne of God in heaven!

The binding Key/loosing Key approach of the new WELS catechism appears to be markedly different from the older approach. ‘Suspect’ was the term I used to describe it until I grasped the intention of the various questions. My first impression was that the authors of the new catechism had created a Law Key and a Gospel Key—and that something was fearfully wrong with what I had learned in my younger days!

What I found as I studied more deeply was that both the old approach and the new were, in fact, identical. Each had its own strengths and weaknesses. In looking at the two approaches, it was apparent that the older approach tended to deal with discipline from the point of view “How did it end up?” The declaration of the end result was its focus. The newer approach looked at discipline from a more vital, on top of it, concerned point of view.

My idea, and what is probably the biggest shortcoming of the old approach, was that the announcement of ‘binding’ due to impenitence was ‘the last straw.’ That was done *after* all the steps of Matthew 18 were completed and all avenues to reach the impenitent had been tried. The new approach—and Question 308 in particular impresses upon us something far different. That question asks: “Why does God want us to use the binding Key? God wants us to use the binding Key to try to lead the impenitent sinner to repent by announcing God’s terrible judgment on him.”

What is being advocated here? Concern! Something that wasn’t even hinted at in the earlier WELS catechisms, and only mentioned in passing in the LC-MS version. This approach urges greater concern for the impenitent’s eternal welfare. How?

Keep in mind that the Ministry of the Keys is nothing else than the authority to announce a person’s status that prevails before the very throne of God in heaven! He is at any given moment the possessor of only one of two possible statuses. He is either bound or free!

Let’s assume that a matter for church discipline arises. A man, for example, has been involved in an unscriptural divorce. You go to him as a Christian brother. You show him his fault. He hears you out but promptly denies any guilt. You are saddened by his unwillingness to repent, but you console yourself with the

fact that you are going to follow steps two and three of Matthew 18, and certainly, before it's all over your friend will see the light.

This looking toward the end, toward the next step is, I think, typical of the old (and valid) approach to understanding the Ministry of the Keys. This hoping against hope that you won't have to announce excommunication when it's all over.

The new WELS catechism suggests a different approach to the same problem. It is an approach that is not ruled out by the old understanding, but it is probably in most cases overlooked.

Let's assume the same discipline case as before. You go to your friend as a Christian brother. You show him his fault. He hears you out, but promptly denies any guilt. You are saddened by his unwillingness to repent. Then it occurs to you. If this man dies tonight, he goes straight to hell. God's not going to ask him whether all three steps of Matthew 18 have been carried out! God's not going to give him a free ride just because you only got to step one!

His impenitence has separated him from his God, and it is your right and duty as a concerned Christian friend to exercise the Ministry of the Keys that is the possession of every believer. Tell him that if he dies tonight he spends an eternity in hell! Use the binding key to point out what his status before God is at that moment! As the answer to the catechism question 308 says: "God wants us to use the binding Key to try to lead the impenitent sinner to repent by announcing God's terrible judgment on him."

And similarly, "God wants us to use the loosing Key to comfort the penitent sinner by announcing God's forgiveness to him" (Question 310, WELS) We may be guilty of lack of concern in this area also. God has given us a great blessing in the Ministry of the Keys. Our proper understanding of this blessed gift will make it the blessing that God intended it to be for others!