

Christian Doctrine

#1 - The Ministry of the Keys

When you consider the fact that the Bible calls Christians “the body of Christ,” it is only natural to expect that Christians will gather to jointly function as one in doing those things which are in keeping with the will of Christ, who is the head of the body.

For example, Jesus has told us to preach the gospel to all creation, to make disciples of all nations. This means we are to use the means of grace in Word and sacrament to nurture those who profess Christian faith and to reach out to those who are apart from Christ. The Bible calls that ministry. There is only one ministry – the ministry of the gospel. Christian congregations exist to serve people by proclaiming to both believers and unbelievers the message of sin and grace.

To carry out that ministry, Jesus has given his Church a set of keys. The proper and faithful use of these keys (or as the Catechism calls it – the Ministry of the Keys) is what keeps the body of Christ in good spiritual health.

#2 - Jesus spoke to Peter, as one who represented all the disciples:

“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19).

#3 - He then made very clear what he meant with his picture of the keys:

Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (John 20:21-23).

#4 - According to the picture language Jesus used, there are two keys, the binding key and the loosing key. These keys are pictures of an authority Jesus has given to believers to act in his behalf.

The binding key announces to a person that his sins remain with him, that he is not forgiven. The picture is that the door of heaven has been locked and the person shut out. We use the binding key when a person does not acknowledge his sins and accordingly does not want God’s forgiveness. The goal of using the binding key on one who is impenitent is to have him: 1) see the serious nature of his sin; 2) confess it to God; 3) promise to change his ways as a way of demonstrating his sincerity; and 4) seek and be assured of God’s forgiveness which removes guilt and God’s strength which effects change.

#5 - The loosing key announces to a person that his sins do not remain with him, that he is forgiven. The picture is that the door of heaven is open and the person can be confident of going to heaven. We use the loosing key when a person acknowledges his sin and seeks God’s forgiveness. The goal of using the loosing key is to comfort the repentant sinner with the good news of forgiveness in Christ.

#6 - The keys are used to afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted.

#7 - THE KEYS

First: What is the use of the Keys?

The use of the Keys is that special power and right which Christ gave to his church on earth: to forgive the sins of the penitent sinners, but to refuse forgiveness to the impenitent as long as they do not repent.

Where is this written?

The holy Evangelist John writes in chapter 20, "Jesus breathed on his disciples and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'"

#8 - The Public Use of the Keys

All Christians have been given the right and authority to speak for Christ in announcing either the remission or retention of sins. There is also, however, a number of ways in which the keys are used when the church gathers for public worship. If, when they were gathered for public worship, all Christians exercised their right to use the keys, there would be chaos.

It is especially with this in mind that a group of Christians will call a fellow believer to carry out in its behalf some of the uses of the keys.

So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God (1 Corinthians 4:1).

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

For example, a pastor is called upon to lead the weekly worship service. While all Christians have the Christ-given authority to announce forgiveness to each other, a congregation asks the pastor to do so at the public worship services, for the sake of order. When a pastor speaks the words of the general absolution (the general announcement of forgiveness spoken at the beginning of each worship service after the confession of sins), it is not because he alone has the authority to speak those words but because the congregation has asked him to do so in its behalf.

A congregation also asks its pastor to use the keys in its behalf in the areas of preaching and teaching God's Word, administering the sacraments of Baptism and The Lord's Supper, as well as other aspects of congregational life. Again, this is not because the pastor is the only one who can, for example, perform a baptism. Any Christian can perform a valid baptism. Pastors do so in a congregation because, for the sake of order, they have been asked to do so.

Such people whom a congregation calls to use the keys publicly in its behalf are Christ's gifts to the church. These called servants should never be looked on as "the only people who can use the keys." In their use of the keys, they merely represent the entire congregation.

#9 - The Doctrine of the Call

Whenever Christians do the work of ministry in behalf of other Christians, we refer to it as public or representative ministry. But a Christian cannot serve in an area of representative ministry (preaching, teaching, leading) unless those being represented have asked him to do so. When we ask someone to represent us in ministry, we use the term “call.”

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off (Acts 13:1-3).

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust (Acts 14:23).

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood (Acts 20:28).

No one is to serve in such an office without a call.

No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was (Hebrews 5:4).

God wants Christians to recognize...

1) ...their called pastors and leaders as his servants.

So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God (1 Corinthians 4:1).

2) ...the authority and responsibility which such leaders have been given.

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you (Hebrews 13:17).

3) ...that his own message is being proclaimed through these called leaders.

“He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me” (Luke 10:16).

#10 - Groups of Christians call pastors, teachers and other workers and leaders in the church. While pastors and teachers can be assigned to a congregation after graduating from a training school or can be called to a congregation from the field, while congregational leaders can be elected or appointed into office, it is the Holy Spirit who places people into the called positions where he knows they will best serve God’s kingdom and God’s people. The Holy Spirit works through the members of a congregation to bring public ministers into their respective roles and/or offices.

#11 - Qualifications for the Public Ministry

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap (1 Timothy 3:1-7).

An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God’s work, he must be blameless – not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it (Titus 1:6-9).

Several truths come from an examination of these passages:

- The qualities mentioned here are no different than the qualities which God expects all Christians in general to exhibit. The only difference for public ministers is that they are to be models of these characteristics, in other words, exemplary.
- Since the call to serve in the public ministry includes a great deal of teaching, those thus called to serve must be able to teach.
- Public service in the church does not have celibacy as a prerequisite. Those who serve in the church can be married and raise children. In 1 Timothy 4:1,3, Paul indicates that those who forbid people to marry are following things taught by demons.

Church leaders are to be experienced believers, so that they can encourage people with doctrine which is sound and reliable, refute those who hold to erroneous teachings, and maintain a good rapport with those outside the church (cf. the apostle Paul's time of waiting and training).

#12 - Church Discipline

At times, the sins of an individual become known to other individuals. In Matthew 18:15-17 (printed below), Jesus outlined some clear steps for us to follow when a fellow Christian has become guilty of sin. The pastor and the church as a whole may become involved, but only after steps one and two have been carried out.

If your brother sins against you

1) go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.

But if he will not listen,

2) take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'

If he refuses to listen to them,

3) tell it to the church;

and if he refuses to listen even to the church,

4) treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Steps one and two may well take place more than one time, but note the goal of each step – winning the brother to repentance. This is nothing but an orderly method of using the keys. If the believer who has sinned is penitent, the loosing key is used; if he remains impenitent, the binding key is used.

Step four has come to be known as excommunication. Even this ultimate step, the last resort of declaring a person to be not forgiven and outside the Christian congregation, is intended to be an act of love, to show the person the seriousness of his sin and to lead him to repent. Excommunication is simply the church's formal declaration of what the individual, by his own words and actions, has already declared about himself – he is living as an unbeliever.

Sinful behavior that is known and left unchecked can easily fester and hurt the congregation. A case of a man in Corinth who was living in unrepentant adultery bears this out:

When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Expel the wicked man from among you (1 Corinthians 5:4-6,13).

In this case, church discipline brought about the desired result.

The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him (2 Corinthians 2:6-8).

#13 - THE PUBLIC USE OF THE KEYS

Second: How does a Christian congregation use the Keys?

A Christian congregation with its called servant of Christ uses the keys in accordance with Christ's command by forgiving those who repent of their sin and are willing to amend, and by excluding from the congregation those who are plainly impenitent that they may repent. I believe that when this is done, it is as valid and certain in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us himself.

Where is this written?

Jesus says in Matthew, chapter 18, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

#14 - Confession and Absolution

When troubled by sin on a personal basis, every Christian can take heart in the words of scripture:

If we confess our sins, he [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

God always wants sinners to run to him when they have sinned instead of running away from him. Since Christ has given the keys to the church, God also wants us to confess our sins to each other.

If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other (James 5:15-16).

#15 - CONFESSION

First: What is Confession?

Confession has two parts. The one is that we confess our sins; the other, that we receive absolution or forgiveness from the pastor as from God himself, not doubting but firmly believing that our sins are thus forgiven before God in heaven.

Second: What sins should we confess?

Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the Lord's Prayer.

But before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts.

#16 - CONFESSION

Third: How can we recognize these sins?

Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments. Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, employer or employee? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful or lazy? Have you hurt anyone by word or deed? Have you been dishonest, careless, wasteful or done other wrong?

Fourth: How will the pastor assure a penitent sinner of his forgiveness?

He will say, "By the authority of Christ, I forgive you your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

#17 - Offerings

Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on" (Mark 12:43-44).

#18 - A worship service is a natural place to give an offering to the Lord.

Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts (Psalm 96:8).

Offerings to the Lord are an important part of congregational life. While offerings are to be given primarily out of love for God to thank him for forgiveness and all other blessings, they also provide for the preaching of the gospel, among us and beyond. Offerings which New Testament Christians give to the Lord are to be:

1) cheerfully given out of love for God.

Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7).

2) our best, not what's left over.

Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops (Proverbs 3:9).

"Firstfruits giving" means that we honor God by giving him our best, trusting that he will provide for our other needs. To give God checkbook leftovers after the bills have been paid or whatever happens to be found in the purse or wallet when the plate goes by is really consigning him to last place.

3) given regularly.

On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up (1 Corinthians 16:2).

Our congregations make use of offering envelopes to encourage regular giving.

4) a percentage of our income.

For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have (2 Corinthians 8:12).

The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea (Acts 11:29).

God no longer prescribes a flat rate for the giving of offerings (as he did with the tithe in the Old Testament; cf. 2 Corinthians 9:7). Still today, however, ten percent can serve as a good guideline.

In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:14).

Portions of the offerings given are used by the congregation: 1) to pay its called workers; 2) to cover ongoing expenses (utilities, materials, building costs, etc.); and 3) to support the mission work of our national church body, that with our offerings we might help to train and send pastors, teachers and missionaries to take the gospel to those places where we ourselves cannot personally go.