

# **The Binding Key: The Lutheran Theology of Church Discipline**

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Annual ACELC Free Conference  
Immanuel Lutheran Church,  
Eagle, Nebraska  
July 27–29, 2021  
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“Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven...”  
—Matthew 18:18

Our churches lack discipline. Pastors disagree in doctrine and practice. Congregations do whatever they want in the name of autonomy. Cohabiting couples are communed at one altar and not another. Some have women lectors and others don't. Some practice open communion and others practice closed communion. We see this not only personally in our own Districts and Circuits, but it's on full display every Synod Convention when votes are cast. “Gospel reductionism” appears to be the only standard anyone is held to. It's as if we've forgotten that the Lord gave His Church *two* keys: one to loose and one to bind.

The goal of this paper is to teach on the Office of the Keys, more specifically, the binding key. This is the Lutheran theology of church discipline. To do this, I'll begin with a brief history concerning the Keys, then I'll speak on the binding key in particular, and then finally to our current situation and what we should do.

## **The Office of the Keys**

First, the Office of the Keys: God is the Author of all things, and therefore He has authority over all. According to His good will, He chose to rule the world in a certain way: By establishing and giving authority to worldly rulers. He gives them the power of the sword (Romans 13:1–4). The world is not autonomous. They are ruled by God. He gives authority to officials to enforce laws, to punish the immoral, and to reward the good. So, that's what the government does: It curbs sinful behavior and rewards outward obedience for the sake of worldly, temporal peace.

To the government, the Lord gives the physical and temporal power of the sword over the body, but to the Church He gives a spiritual and eternal power of the Word over the spirit of man. Just as the world is not autonomous, neither is the church. God rules the church in a certain way: The Office of the Keys.

Hebrews 13:17 says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.” In Matthew 16:19, Jesus says, “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.” Again, in Matthew 18:18, Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” And finally, in John 20:23, Jesus says, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” The language of “the keys” comes from Matthew 16, but all three texts speak of the same thing: the special authority Christ gives to His Church to forgive and retain sins. And this is how the Lord grants the spiritual blessings of forgiveness, life, and salvation (1 Peter 1:9; Romans 6:22).

This distinction is widely understood nowadays, but it wasn’t always this way. In the *Unam Sanctam* (1302), Pope Boniface VIII (1294–1303) claimed that he had authority over both realms. He writes,

“Our Lord says in John ‘there is one sheepfold and one shepherd.’ We are informed by the texts of the gospels that in this Church and in its power are two swords; namely, the spiritual and the temporal. . . . Certainly the one who denies that the temporal sword is in the power of Peter has not listened well to the word of the Lord commanding ‘Put up thy sword into thy scabbard’ [Mt 26:52]. Both, therefore, are in the power of the Church, that is to say, the spiritual and the material sword, but the former is to be administered for the Church but the latter by the Church; the former in the hands of the priest; the latter by the hands of kings and soldiers, but at the will and sufferance of the priest.”

In other words, this claims that God gave the pope authority over the church and the state.

The Lutheran Confessions condemn this teaching. In the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* (1540), Philip Melanchthon wrote directly against this, saying,

“Christ gave to his apostles *only* spiritual authority that is, the command to preach the gospel, to proclaim the forgiveness of sins, to administer the sacraments, and to excommunicate the ungodly without the use of physical force. He did not give them the power of the sword or the right to establish, take possession, or dispose of the kingdoms of the world” (Tr 31).

This agrees with what Melanchthon wrote in the *Augsburg Confession* (1530) ten years earlier:

“[I]nasmuch as the power of the church or of the bishops bestows eternal benefits and is used and exercised only through the office of preaching, it does not interfere at all with public order and secular authority. For secular authority deals with matters altogether different from the gospel. Secular power does not protect the soul but, using the sword and physical penalties, it protects the body and goods against external violence. That is why one should not mix or confuse the two authorities, the spiritual and the secular” (AC XXVIII 10–11).

The Lutheran Confessions emphasize this special authority of the church. Melancthon writes, “According to the gospel, the power of the keys or of the bishops is a power and command of God to preach the Gospel, to forgive or retain sin, and to administer and distribute the sacraments” (AC XXVIII, 5–8). Dr. Luther, in the *Smalcald Articles* (1537) writes, “The keys are an office and authority given to the church by Christ to bind and loose sins—not only the crude and notorious sins but also the subtle, secret ones that only God knows” (SA III VII, 1–3). So, the Office of the Keys is the special authority Christ gave to His Church to forgive and withhold forgiveness.

### **Who Holds the Keys?**

Now, the question is this: To whom have the keys been given? Rome, in the *Unam Sanctam*, says, “This authority. . . (though it has been given to man and is exercised by man), is not human but rather divine, granted to Peter by a divine word and reaffirmed to him (Peter) and his successors.” They base this on Matthew 16:19 where Jesus, speaking to Peter, says, “I will give you (singular) the keys.” In other words, for Rome, this text is the foundation of the papacy. Even more, Rome says that only ministers can forgive and withhold forgiveness. In the *Council of Trent*, Rome says,

“the holy Synod declares all these doctrines to be false, and utterly alien from the truth of the Gospel, which perniciously extend the ministry of the keys to any persons whosoever outside of bishops and priests, thinking that these words of the Lord, [Matthew 18:18 and John 20:23], were spoken to all the faithful of Christ indifferently and indiscriminately” (Council of Trent, Session 14, Chapter VI).

Simply put, Rome teaches that Christ gave the keys only to the Peter, the first pope, and that only bishops and priests could forgive or withhold forgiveness.

But Scripture teaches something entirely different. The same Jesus who spoke in Matthew 16:19 is the same one who spoke in John 20:23 and Matthew 18:18. And in these other texts, the “you” is plural. This is how Luther argues in *Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil* (1545):

“Now if the pope could still stand stiffly and proudly, which he cannot, on the passage in Matthew 16, then we on the other hand stand even more proudly and stiffly on Matthew 18. It is not another Christ who speaks in Matthew 16 with St. Peter, and then in Matthew 18 with the other disciples, saying the same words and giving power to bind and loose sin” (AE 41:318).

This is what the *Treatise* concluded also:

“These words [Matthew 16:19; Matthew 18:18; John 20:23] show that the keys were entrusted equally to all the apostles and that all the apostles were commissioned in like

manner. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that the keys do not belong to one particular person but to the church . . . . Thus, he grants the power of the keys principally and without mediation to the church, and for the same reason the church has primary possession of the right to call ministers” (Tr 24).

What Jesus said to Peter (Matthew 16) is what He also said to all the apostles (John 20), and it is also what He said to the entire church (Matthew 18). Simply put, Jesus gave the keys to the entire church.

Christ has the power to forgive sins. And He has given such authority to men (Matthew 9:8; Matthew 28:18), that is, to His Church (Matthew 18:18; Luke 11:4). So, every Christian may forgive the sins of repentant sinners, and every Christian may bind the sins of the impenitent through warning and admonishment. Christians do this privately in their own vocation. (Luther speaks about the forgiveness between Christians in *A Brief Exhortation to Confession* and also in the *Smalcald Articles*.)

Christ gave all Christians the keys to administer them privately, but He has not called all to administer them publicly. For the public exercise of the keys, Christ established pastors (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:12). This is what the *Augsburg Confession* says: “[N]o one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper call” (AC XIV). God calls men to be pastors (Romans 10:15), that is, He commits the public administration of these keys to pastors through the Church (Tr 24). In other words, the congregation calls a pastor, and then submits herself to the pastor she has called (Hebrews 13:17). And the pastor fulfills His calling by publicly and faithfully administering the keys to the members of the congregation. If he fails to do this, he rejects what God has called him to do. However, there are not two degrees or kinds of forgiveness—one from the pastor and one from the Christian. There is only one forgiveness—The forgiveness of sin Christ accomplished on the cross. The difference is not in the person or the kind of forgiveness—The difference is found in the call. Christians are called by God to forgive privately; and pastors, publicly.

### **The Binding Key**

Now, onto the binding key. With a church that preaches the Gospel so purely and proclaims the forgiveness of sins unto salvation clearer than any other, the idea of church discipline may seem foreign to Lutheran churches. But this is wrong. At the time of the Reformation, the emphasis was on correcting the doctrine of Justification, that is, the forgiveness of sins. So, the majority of writings from Luther and those found in the Confessions address the “loosing key.” However, this does not mean that they discarded or ignored the teaching of the binding key. While they corrected the papal abuses concerning penance, indulgences, and absolution, they also defended the use of church discipline.

Luther notes in *The Keys* (1530) that Rome took the word “bind” in Matthew 16 and 18 to mean “to command,” and “to forbid.” They taught that the authority Christ gave is the authority to make laws and commands for all of Christendom, and that all must obey the pope’s decrees in order to be saved. But Luther shows that this teaching violates the text by ripping the word out of context, and by ignoring Matthew 18 and John 20. He corrected the teaching concerning the binding key by turning to the words of Christ Himself. Jesus defines the word “bind” when He speaks of sin. Therefore, Luther concludes that “to bind” means to “withhold forgiveness.” In this same text, Luther writes, “For ‘the key which binds,’ indeed, is nothing else and can be nothing but a divine threat with which God threatens the hardened sinner with hell” (AE 40:329). Even more, he says, “Both [keys] are given by Christ in the same Scripture passage, and both are of equal power.”

This is the teaching set forth in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (1531). Here, it defines the binding key in this way:

“[T]he keys do not have the power to impose penalties or to institute rites of worship but only have the command to remit the sins of those who are converted and to convict and excommunicate those who refuse to be converted. For just as ‘to loose’ means to forgive sins, so also ‘to bind’ means not to forgive sins. For Christ is talking of a spiritual kingdom” (Ap XII, 176).

Again, it says “to bind” means “retaining the sins of those who are not converted” (Ap XII, 139).

The teaching of church discipline was not only written about by Luther and confessed in the Book of Concord, but it was included in the earliest hymnody of the Reformation. Perhaps the clearest confession of the keys was set forth in the hymn “‘As Surely As I Live,’ God Said” by Nicolaus Herman (1500–1561). Herman was a cantor of the church and school in Joachimsthal in the Czech Republic, and he wanted the members to learn the Scriptural teaching of the Office of the Keys. This hymn was published in his 1560 hymnal titled, “The Sunday Gospels throughout the entire year, composed as hymns, for children and Christian fathers.” This hymnal was published in Wittenberg. He taught the members about both keys with these words: (Herman’s original hymn had eleven stanzas.)

1. "As surely as I live," God said,  
"I would not see the sinner dead.  
I want him turned from error's ways,  
Repentant, living endless days."
2. And so our Lord gave this command:  
"Go forth and preach in ev'ry land;  
Bestow on all My pard'ning grace  
Who will repent and mend their ways.
3. "All those whose sins you thus remit  
I truly pardon and acquit,  
And those whose sins you will retain  
Condemned and guilty shall remain.
4. What you will bind, that bound shall be;  
What you will loose, that shall be free;  
To My dear Church the keys are giv'n  
To open, close the gates of heav'n."
5. They who believe, when you proclaim  
The joyful tidings in My name,  
That I for them My blood have shed,  
Are free from guilt and judgment dread.
6. The words which absolution give  
Are His who died that we might live;  
The minister whom Christ has sent  
Is but His humble instrument.
7. However great our sin may be,  
The absolution sets us free,  
appointed by God's own dear Son  
To bring the pardon He has won.
8. When ministers lay on their hands,  
Absolved by Christ the sinner stands;  
He who by grace the Word believes  
The purchase of His blood receives.
9. This is the Power of Holy Keys,  
It binds an does again release;  
The Church retains them at her side,  
Our Mother, and Christ's holy Bride.
10. Let those who stings of conscience bear,  
Whom sins would drive to dark despair,  
To Jesus come with trustful mind  
And peace in absolution find.
11. All praise to You, O Christ, shall be  
For absolution full and free,  
In which You show Your richest grace;  
From false indulgence guard our race.<sup>1</sup>

While teaching the great comfort of forgiveness, Herman still confesses the power of the binding key to close the gates of heaven, and to leave the impenitent guilty and condemned.

Furthermore, church discipline was not only sung about in Lutheran hymnody, but it was also depicted in ecclesiastical artwork. Lucas Cranach the Younger's famous altarpiece in St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg, Germany depicts four ways that Christ's forgiveness comes to us. One part of the polyptych shows God's forgiveness given through Holy Baptism. It shows Philip Melancthon baptizing an infant in the baptismal font. The second part, which may be the most famous part, shows forgiveness given to the entire congregation through the preached Word, and this shows Luther preaching and pointing to Christ and Him crucified. The third part depicts forgiveness given through the Lord's Supper, and it shows Luther as *Junker Jorge* (Knight

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<sup>1</sup> "Lutheran Service Book: Companion to the Hymns" Vol. 1, p. 1783

George) receiving the Lord's Supper. And the fourth and final part shows forgiveness given through confession and absolution. This image depicts Johannes



Bugenhagen, Luther's pastor and father-confessor, holding two keys, one in each hand. On his right, there is a man kneeling before him, Bugenhagen's palm faces toward him, and this symbolizes the absolution given to him, that the man is forgiven his sins. On his left, though, there is another man whose back is turned and whose hands are bound with a cord. Bugenhagen's hand is held up against him, and this symbolizes that the man is impenitent, and that he is bound to his sin.



Cranach's Wittenberg Altarpiece. Photo: Elizabeth Massa-MacLeod. Provided by: Khan Academy. Located at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140215031210/http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/cranachs-wittenberg-altarpiece.html>.

## Degrees of Church Discipline

### *Admonition*

Lutherans not only taught the existence of church discipline, but they also taught how it is to be carried out. It's a mistake to think that church discipline means only excommunication. It includes that, to be sure. But church discipline is applied in different degrees and at various times. The first degree is admonition. When a Christian falls into a sin, he ought to be admonished by those who witness it. God has called His entire Church, both pastors and hearers, to admonish one another. Paul writes in Galatians 6:1, "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you to be tempted." Again, Matthew 18:15 says, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." Luther confesses this in the *Large Catechism* on the Eighth Commandment:

"Let this be your rule, then, that you should not be quick to spread slander and gossip about your neighbors but admonish them privately so that they may improve. Likewise, do the same when others tell you what this or that person has done. Instruct them, if they saw the wrongdoing, to go and reprove the individual personally or otherwise to hold their tongue" (LC I, 276).

In other words, Christians are responsible for each other. They ought to rebuke and admonish each other in love. This isn't optional, but a command from the Lord on how Christians love one another.

When we admonish one another, we should keep it private as much as possible for the sake of our neighbor's reputation. But there are times when this admonishment must be public. In 1 Timothy 5:20–21, Paul writes to pastors saying, “As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.” Keep in mind that this public rebuke is for those who *persist* in sin. Nevertheless, the purpose of this public rebuke is that others may not stumble into the same sin. We see this in practice when Paul recounts rebuking Peter for his hypocrisy saying that he opposed Peter “to his face,” and “before them all” (Galatians 2:11–14). In other words, Scripture teaches that private sins should be privately rebuked, and public sins publicly rebuked, and that this is not simply delegated to the pastor, but it is the responsibility of the entire Church.

### *Suspension*

The next degree of church discipline is suspension from the Lord's Supper. Every Christian has the right to admonish; however, pastors have the right to suspend members from the Sacrament of the Altar for a time. The pastor does this on behalf of the congregation for the sake of the individual and the rest of the Church. Suspension from communion is when the pastor temporarily postpones someone from communing until that person receives instruction, repents, and mends his ways. Suspension is *not* the same as excommunication. I will speak on excommunication later.

Scripture calls pastors, “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God,” and that “it is required of stewards that they be found faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:1, 2). The Lord's Supper does not belong to the pastor or to the Church, but to Christ. Therefore, pastors must administer the Lord's Supper according to the command of the Lord. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul states says, “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11:27). This means that even those who receive it in an unworthy manner, that is, in impenitence or unbelief, still receive the Body and Blood of Christ. Faith doesn't make the sacrament; faith receives the benefit of the forgiveness of sins. It is for this reason that a pastor should do everything in his power to make sure his members receive it in a worthy manner for their benefit, and not their detriment.

The Lutheran Confessions assert this truth. On the Sacrament of the Altar, Luther writes, “For the Word by which it was constituted a sacrament is not rendered false because of an individual's unworthiness or unbelief. Christ does not say, ‘If you believe or if you are worthy, you have my body and blood,’ but rather, ‘Take, eat and drink, this is my body and blood.’” (FC SD, 25–26).



The Augsburg Confession says, "...whoever uses the sacrament unworthily is answerable for the body and blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:27)" (AC XXIV, 12). The Epitome of the Formula of Concord says, "...also the unworthy and unbelievers receive the true body and blood of Christ, though they do not receive life and comfort, but rather judgment and damnation, if they do not turn and repent..." (FC Ep VII, 16–18). Again, in the Solid Declaration, it says,

"[I]ts power does not rest upon the worthiness or unworthiness of the minister who distributes the sacrament, nor upon the worthiness or unworthiness of the one who receives it because, as St. Paul says, even the unworthy receive the sacrament. Thus, they hold that the body and blood of Christ are truly distributed even to the unworthy and that the unworthy truly receive the body and blood when the sacrament is conducted according to Christ's institution and command. But they receive it to judgment, as St. Paul says [1 Cor. 11:27–32], for they misuse the holy sacrament because they receive it without true repentance and without faith" (FC SD VII, 16).

Since the Body and Blood of Christ is received by all regardless of their faith, and since it can be received either to someone's benefit or detriment, it is for this reason a pastor ought to commune some and not others. The Augsburg Confession says, "Chrysostom tells how the priest stands every day and invites some to receive the sacrament, but forbids others to approach" (AC XXIV, 35–37). Simply put, pastors need to discriminate people. But this discrimination isn't on the basis of class, race, sex, or age. It is a discrimination of the public confession of faith.

The Confessions say,

"We believe, teach, and confess that there is only one kind of unworthy guest, those who do not believe. Of them it is written, 'Those who do not believe are condemned already' [John 3:18]. The unworthy use of the holy sacrament increases, magnifies, and aggravates this condemnation (1 Cor. 11[:27, 29])" (FC Ep VII, 18).

We recognize only one kind of unworthy guest: Those who do not believe. But there are different reasons for not believing. Some do not believe what Christ said about the Lord's Supper simply because they have not learned it. Or, put another way, they are ignorant. Luther writes, "For we do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come" (LC V, 2). This includes infants, the mentally retarded, and those who cannot learn or have not yet learned to confess what the sacrament is. We admit that these are Christians who have faith, however, they are unprepared to receive the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner.

While some do not believe because they are ignorant, others do not believe because they are impenitent. Luther makes a distinction between the ignorant and the impenitent, the uneducated and the despisers, between those who don't know and those who don't care. In the Large Catechism, Luther writes,

“[W]e must make a distinction here among people. Those who are impudent and unruly ought to be told to stay away, for they are not ready to receive the forgiveness of sins because they do not desire it and do not want to be righteous” (LC V, 58).

Again, he says, “[I]f you despise it and proudly stay away from confession, then we must conclude that you are not a Christian and that you also ought not receive the sacrament” (LC VI, 29). Also, “[T]he only ones who are unworthy are those who do not feel their burdens nor admit to being sinners” (LC V, 74). Melancthon writes, “[T]he custom has been retained among us of not administering the sacrament to those who have not previously been examined and absolved” (AC XXV, 1–2). Even more, the Solid Declaration says,

“It is essential to explain with great diligence who the unworthy guests at this Supper are, namely, those who go to the sacrament without true contrition or sorrow over their sins and without true faith or the good intention to improve their lives. With their unworthy eating of Christ’s body, they bring judgment upon themselves, that is, temporal and eternal punishments, and they become guilty of Christ’s body and blood” (FC SD VII, 68).

Christians can fall into impenitence against either the first or the second table of the Law. For example, on the one hand, someone who stubbornly rejects infant Baptism breaks the first table of the Law by calling God a liar. On the other hand, someone who refuses to be reconciled with another breaks the second table of the law and sins against his neighbor. When pastors see a member fall into impenitence in either doctrine or life, then he and all other Christians who witness it should admonish the impenitent. However, if this impenitent behavior persists even after admonition, then the pastor has the authority to withhold the Lord’s Supper from him for a time so that he does not receive it to his harm. Those who are suspended from the Lord’s Supper *may* still be considered Christians, but there are doubts from all who witness such impenitent behavior. Those in this state are in grave danger of falling into total unbelief, if they have not already done so.

### *Excommunication*

The third and final degree of church discipline is excommunication. This is reserved for the one who has removed all doubt from the congregation’s mind by publicly proving himself to be an unbeliever. These are the ones who should be excommunicated, that is, publicly excluded from the community of the Church. And this is never the work of an individual, the pastor alone, or a group, committee, or the board of elders. Excommunication is a declaration from the *entire* congregation to the impenitent.

Jesus says, “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:17). We see this in practice in 1 Corinthians 5, where Paul exhorts the congregation to excommunicate the incestuous man:

“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. . . . you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. . . . I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. ‘Purge the evil person from among you’” (1 Corinthians 5:1–2, 5, 11–13).

Here, Paul instructs the congregation to follow the words of Christ and exclude the man from the congregation.

The Lutheran Confessions speak in the same way. In the Preface to the Small Catechism, Luther writes,

“Those who do not want to learn these things [The Catechism]—who must be told how they deny Christ and are not Christians—should also not be admitted to the sacrament, should not be sponsors for children at baptism, and should not exercise any aspect of Christian freedom, but instead should simply be sent back home to the pope and his officials, and, along with them, to the devil himself. Moreover, their parents and employers ought to deny them food and drink...” (SC Preface, 11–12).

Those who reject the Word and refuse to learn it should not only be suspended from the communion, but they are also not to be called Christians. Again, the Apology says,

“Excommunication is pronounced on the openly wicked and on those who despise the sacraments. These things are thus carried out according to both the gospel (Mt. 18:17) and the ancient canons” (Ap XI, 4–5).

Make note that people are not excommunicated from the church because of a particular sin, as if some sins deserve excommunication and others do not. The man in 1 Corinthians 5 is not to be excommunicated because he was sexually immoral with his father’s wife at one point and later repented; rather, Paul says that he “*has*” his father’s wife. In other words, the man constantly and persistently and impenitently lives in this manifest sin. It’s not that God has refused to forgive sexual sins; it’s that He does not pronounce his forgiveness to the impenitent. So, a man isn’t excommunicated on account of his sin, but on account of his impenitence. Put another way, a man isn’t excommunicated because of the magnitude of his sin, but because of the attitude toward his sin.

Though this is the work of the entire congregation, it is declared publicly by the pastor himself. The pastor has “the power of jurisdiction, namely, the authority to excommunicate those who are guilty of public offenses” (Ap XXVIII, 13). This ecclesiastical power, the Treatise says,

“bestows upon those who preside over the churches the commission to proclaim the gospel, forgive sins, and administer the sacraments. In addition, it bestows legal authority, that is, the charge to excommunicate those whose crimes are public knowledge and to absolve those who repent” (Tr 60–61).

We see this all laid out in the rite of “Excommunication from the Holy Christian Church” in *The Lutheran Service Book: Agenda*, the pastor is to stand before the congregation and say this:

“As a called and ordained servant of the Word, I must make known to you that our fellow member, (name), has, by continued impenitence, despised (his/her) Baptism. He/She was under Church discipline and, although repeatedly admonished from the Word of God, has refused to repent. Following the direction of our Lord in the Gospel according to St. Matthew, I and other members of this congregation have pleaded repeatedly with (him/her) to receive Christ’s forgiveness won for (him/her) on the cross, but to no avail. Finally, (name) refuses also to hear the Church. In order to show the seriousness of (his/her) impenitence and, as a last effort to win (him/her) back to our Lord, I announce that (name) is now excommunicated from the holy Christian Church. Until (he/she) repents, (name) may not come to this or any other Christian altar for the Lord’s Supper. (He/she) is also not permitted to serve as a sponsor at Holy Baptism nor engage in any other rights or privileges of the Church, except to hear the preaching of God’s Word. May almighty God mercifully grant (him/her) grace to confess (his/her) sin so that (he/she) might receive the Lord’s forgiveness and be restored to communion with God in His Church.”<sup>2</sup>

Since excommunication is a great declaration, it should never be done in haste or unfairly. The Treatise says, again, “[C]ertainly no one should be condemned without due process” (Tr 74–76).

With all this being said, it would be going too far to say that churches that don’t practice church discipline are not Christian churches, or that excommunication is a mark of the church. The Schwenkfeldians believed excommunication to be a mark of the church. However, this teaching was condemned in the Formula of Concord (FC Ep XII, 26; FC SD XII, 34). The true church is found not by what she withholds, but by what she gives. Therefore, there are only two marks of the church: The pure preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments. Preaching and the Sacraments are constant, and because of this, the church may be found. Excommunication, on the other hand, is infrequent and cannot be found by this mark.

Holy Scripture teaches us that excommunication is not mark of the church. Although the church at Corinth failed to exercise church discipline rightly, and even though Paul rebuked the entire congregation for this (1 Corinthians 5:1–13), he nevertheless called them “the church of God,” “sanctified in Christ Jesus,” and “called to be saints” (1 Corinthians 1:2). Furthermore, even though the church in Pergamum did not excommunicate some who held to the teaching of

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<sup>2</sup> Lutheran Service Book: Agenda, 35

Balaam, and the church in Thyatira did not excommunicate those who tolerated Jezebel, the Lord called these congregations to repentance and gave them a stern warning to deal with these sins in their midst, saying, “I have a few things against you” (Revelation 2:14, 20). Nevertheless, God still referred to them as churches (Revelation 1:4). Although these are serious sins that if left without rebuke would destroy the congregation, the church does not cease to be a church. However, we cannot immediately condemn entire congregations if either the pastor or a few people depart from pure doctrine.

Nevertheless, even though church discipline is not a mark of the church, it does not mean that this is useless and should be abandoned. Prayer is not a mark of the church, yet it’s wrong to conclude that prayer is useless and has no place in the Christian Church. Church discipline is not essential to the congregation, but it does belong to its well-being. Church discipline preserves orthodoxy by refusing to tolerate impenitence and false doctrine. Refusing to discipline the impenitent is an act of disobedience against God’s Word. Both Scriptural examples cited above exhort each congregation *to* practice church discipline.

### **The Lack of Church Discipline**

So far, I’ve presented the Biblical and Lutheran teaching concerning church discipline. There is no question that Scripture and the Confessions speak clearly on the topic. But when we look around at the churches in our Synod, we see little to no church discipline in any degree. We see pastors preach acceptance instead of repentance. Open Communion is the norm. The vast majority of cohabiting couples sit impenitently in the pews without any admonishment or correction whatsoever. Many divorce with no grounds for divorce. And the list goes on.

Why is there such a lack of church discipline among our churches? Simply put, it is because of unbelief. Pastors and congregations lack church discipline because they don’t trust the Word of God in one of two ways. The first is that they don’t believe that God will provide their daily bread. So, they take it into their own hands and depend upon their own works. In order to protect their own salary, many pastors have discarded any church discipline—admonishment, suspension, or excommunication. They secure their own salary and work by ignoring the issues altogether. Since it’s a possibility that members of the church may leave on account of church discipline, then they have done away with it altogether. In other words, they have discarded the Word of God for the numerical growth of the church. They believe they can grow the church better than God can.

The second way is that they do not believe church discipline is loving. As we’ve seen all across the states, there is a wave of antinomianism going across the nation. Any preaching of the Law is seen as legalistic, and so, the binding key is a form of legalism to them and therefore unloving. They trust in and proclaim only half of the words of Christ. To many, church discipline is a thing of the past—an old, hateful, barbaric practice from medieval times that has no place in

our churches. All too often, we've seen church members in one congregation who were admonished and disciplined simply get up and "transfer" to another congregation that doesn't practice any church discipline. (As a side note, the binding key is the judgment of God. This means that even if the doors of other churches are open, the gates of heaven remain closed.) On top of this all, we've seen confession and absolution replaced with "therapy" or "counseling." Sin is regarded as something to be understood rather than rebuked, repented of, and forgiven.

The response I've often times heard is that congregations that practice church discipline may *talk* about forgiveness, but they don't know how to *practice* forgiveness. But the truth is this: Congregations that have discarded the Law and the binding key are not welcoming people into their church by the forgiveness of sin, but by the ignoring and avoiding of sin. When pastors refuse to preach the Law, they also refuse to preach the Gospel. God forgives sin. And if something is not declared a sin, then neither can it be declared forgiven by Christ. Rejecting what God says about sin and repentance leads to rejecting what God says about forgiveness and salvation.

The binding key benefits the entire congregation. It serves as a warning to others, as 1 Timothy 5:20 and 1 Corinthians 5:6 says. However, even when it appears to fail, that is, when the impenitent doesn't repent, the congregation is purified of evil through excommunication. False teachers and the ungodly are removed, as Deuteronomy 13:5 says, "Purge the evil from your midst." This is loving because those who cause little ones to stumble are removed, and the congregation is strengthened by their removal. These are all benefits of the binding key, however, the chief purpose of it is not simply to improve the congregation, but to gain the brother (Matthew 18:15). And it does this by teaching the impenitent the seriousness of his sin. When he learns of the severity of his wickedness, he learns to fear God and to take refuge in Christ. But without this knowledge of sin, he will never see his need for Christ.

It is a grave misunderstanding to claim that church discipline is unloving or legalistic. God disciplines those whom He loves (Hebrews 12:6–11). The same God who spilled His blood to forgive sinners is the same God who gave His Church the binding key. Both keys must be taken together because God has given the binding key for the sake of the loosing key. Ezekiel 33:11 says, "As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?" The rebuking of sin is for the sake of salvation. Luther says this in *The Keys*:

"[T]he purpose of Christ's binding is to redeem the sinner from his sins. With his 'binding' Christ attempts nothing else but to free and rid the sinner's conscience of sins. It is for this reason that he 'binds' and punishes the sinner so that he might let go of his sin, repent of it, and avoid it. One may call such 'binding' a saving of his conscience and an aid in getting rid of his sins" (AE 40:328). Again he writes, "Christ has not given his

keys to harm or ruin his church; neither for her burdening or suppression, but for her profit and salvation.”

It is for this reason that the keys must stay together. Luther says, “Both are given by Christ in the same Scripture passage, and both are of equal power” (AE 40:333). And again he says, “The greatest honor you can bestow on God and His keys is to trust in them” (AE 40:368). We ought to trust in the efficacy of the Word, whether it be the Law or the Gospel because He has chosen to rule His Church through both keys. God’s Word will accomplish what He wills (Isaiah 55:11). These keys do not belong to the pastor or to the congregation—They belong to Jesus, and we use them as He says.

Since the goal of the binding key is the loosing key, excommunication is not permanent. The Augsburg Confession says, “[T]hose who have sinned after baptism obtain forgiveness of sins whenever they come to repentance and that absolution should not be denied them by the church” (AC XII, 1–3). This means that sin is only bound to a man as long as he remains impenitent, but sins are loosed when he repents. However, we must be clear here. 2 Corinthians 5:19 says, “[I]n Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.” And this teaches us that our sins are already forgiven even before we confess them. All sins were forgiven by Christ’s death and resurrection. Unrepentance doesn’t undo what God has already done. Impenitence is the subjective rejection of this objective truth. So, faith does not actuate the forgiveness of sins—It receives it. The message does not benefit those who do not believe (Hebrews 4:2).

The loosing key presents and applies the forgiveness earned by Christ to the individual. The Apology says,

“The power of the keys administers and offers the gospel through absolution, which is the true voice of the gospel. Thus, we also include absolution when we talk about faith, because ‘faith comes from what is heard,’ as Paul says [Rom. 10:17]. For when the gospel is heard, when absolution is heard, the conscience is uplifted and receives consolation. Because God truly makes alive through the Word, the keys truly forgive sins before God according to [Luke 10:16], ‘Whoever listens to you listens to me’” (Ap XII, 39–40). In other words, this is apprehended through faith alone. Faith relies upon the promise of the Gospel. The Apology says, “How do we become sure that our sins are forgiven? . . . This cannot be answered, nor can our consciences find rest, unless they know it is God’s command and the gospel itself that they should be certain that their sins are forgiven freely on account of Christ and not doubt that they are personally forgiven. If anyone doubts, as John says [1 John 5:10], he makes the divine promise a lie. We teach that this certainty of faith is required in the gospel” (Ap XII, 88).

What about works? It’s a profound error to think that penance and satisfactions merit forgiveness. Good works do not come before the absolution—They follow it. The new life is a result of forgiveness and not the cause. The Augsburg Confession says,

“[G]ood works should and must be done, not that a person relies on them to earn grace, but for God’s sake and to God’s praise. Faith alone always takes hold of grace and forgiveness of sins. Because the Holy Spirit is given through faith, the heart is also moved to do good works” (AC XX, 27–31).

The Apology says, “[I]nner repentance means nothing unless it also outwardly results in strict correction of the flesh (Matthew 3:8; Romans 6:19; Romans 12:1; Matthew 4:17)” (Ap XII, 131–132). And again,

“[R]epentance is false if it does not satisfy those whose property is taken. For the person who keeps on stealing does not truly regret that he has stolen or robbed. He is still a thief and a robber as long as he unjustly possesses someone else’s property. This civil restitution is necessary because it is written [Eph. 4:28] ‘Thieves must give up stealing.’ . . . Good works ought to follow repentance, and repentance should not be a fraud but a change of one’s entire life for the better . . . repentance ought to produce good fruits. The Ten Commandments teach what these good fruits are” (Ap XII, 169–170, 174).

These good works are not forced upon the repentant, but a joyful response to the Gospel. The Epitome says, “[P]eople who are not yet reborn do what the law demands unwillingly, because they are coerced. . . . Believers, however, do without coercion, with a willing spirit, insofar as they are born anew, what no threat of the law could ever force from them” (FC Ep VII, 7).

### **What Now?**

This conference is about ecclesiastical supervision and how we’ve lost so much of it in our Synod. And I believe that the reason we’ve lost ecclesiastical supervision over our pastors is the same reason pastors have lost church discipline over the congregations: They trust in themselves more than God. They think the binding key is unloving, and that it will somehow destroy the church rather than strengthen it. In the same way, I think our Synod has given up ecclesiastical supervision because it thinks it will destroy the Synod rather than strengthen it. But this is a trick of the devil. God’s Word is not harmful. We should never despise the discipline of the Lord. Those who do not belong to the Lord will flee His Word, and they will recoil at this teaching and discipline. They will tear the keys apart, or reject what He says. But those who belong to Him will cling to His Word. God’s Word—no matter how difficult or stern it might seem—will never scare away His children. His sheep who hear His voice will follow Him (John 10:27). We cannot compel or force our own churches to exercise church discipline, and we shouldn’t try. It is the Word of God alone that creates a willing spirit. Since God’s Word cannot harm His elect, we have no reason to ever shrink back from speaking the Word boldly and confidently.

Pastors need to preach with authority and trust God to do the work. Congregations need to receive the Word with joy knowing that everything the Lord says is for our benefit, for the



sake of our salvation. We need to do everything we can to “maintain the unity of the spirit of the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). There will always be hypocrites in the church, and there will always be problems, but we need to do something about those who commit public, manifest, ruling sins—They need to be warned for the sake of their salvation. It is hateful to not discipline pastors. And it is hateful to let sheep wander into damaging and faith-destroying sins.

For those who have torn the keys apart and been negligent in your duty, repent. Repent of thinking you can grow God’s church better than He can, or that you can be more loving than He is. For those who have kept the keys together as the Lord has given them, may God continue to strengthen you and keep you faithful. Stand firm and trust that God’s Word will accomplish what He wills no matter what the world says, or how they may revile and slander you for it. Amen.

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