

Abridged Version

The Lord, The Keys, The Church

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The Synod and Her Officers

- or -

The Department of Redundancy Department

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(Abstract: This paper is written in the context of present considerations of restructuring the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. It starts with the doctrine of the bestowal of the Office of the Keys immediately, or directly to the church, and builds upon that doctrine the reason for the existence of a synod and its proper relationship to the local congregation. Many quotes of C.F.W. Walther are offered from German sources only recently available. A diagnostic of the Synod's problematic condition is offered with its doctrinal cause and remedy.)

I. Introduction

This paper summarizes a document published on October 12, 2007. It is offered at the request of some individuals interested in sharing its contents in a more concise fashion. It is not produced as a substitute for the original work but in the hopes that it will stimulate readers to put in the time and effort to read the original document in its fullness. This paper will summarize the points of the original paper with a minimum of documentation. Fuller documentation should be obtained in the original paper.

The root issue examined is the immediate presence of Christ and the possession of the Office of the Keys immediately by the congregation (that is all true believers in the congregation), that is, the Word of God in Scripture, as the only authority given by Christ to his church on earth and as the basis of the relationships within the congregation, with other congregations, and with Synod and other church bodies. Implications are explored. Diagnostics are offered as to present failures and correctives given with application to every member of every congregation.

The outline of this presentation is exactly that of the original paper to which the reader is referred for fuller information.

II. Congregational Autonomy: Theological Fact, not Political Pass

A. The Mandated, Biblical Ordering of Churchly Authority - Congregations are formed under the authority of Christ (the Great Commission). Christ promises his presence. Congregations are therefore autonomous, independent of other congregations, because of the presence of Christ, and his Word and Sacraments, the Means of Grace. There is nothing else needed for his kingdom. This autonomy is based on and tied to the sufficiency and efficacy of the Word, the Word of Christ, the Word of Scripture. According to that Word and Christ, the Lutheran Church, uniquely, identifies a three-fold authority. The Word and Sacraments are by God's authority. The call of men into the office, mandated by Christ, is of the congregation's authority. The public administration of the Word and Sacraments is given to the authority of the servant of the Church, the Office of the Holy Ministry (OHM). This is not political freedom from authority but freedom found only under Christ in his Word (John 8.31-32).

B. The Congregation's Authoritative Stewardship of Christ and His Grace to Sinners- Since the Office of the Keys is the immediate possession of the entire congregation, pastors and laity are responsible for them, Pastors, publicly on behalf of the Congregation, and individual members according to their callings. All are responsible for use of the Means of Grace for their own salvation and sanctification and for others. Our relationships are God's given avenues for expressing that concern and using the Law and Gospel to rebuke and forgive others as we also have been rebuked by God's Law and

forgiven our sins. In this we must not show favorites because of politics or family relationships. This concern/responsibility to be their brothers' keeper is the nature of their priesthood as a believer. "Love" that buries our use of the keys, that is, love that tolerates and excuses sin instead of dealing with it through the keys of forgiveness is a false love that exults itself above God's Word, command, and doctrine and must be identified as spiritually dangerous.

1. *Baptizing and Teaching: Conversion of Sinners* - Baptizing and teaching are initiating Means of Grace for bringing sinners into fellowship with God through Christ's grace and creating faith. All Christians are responsible for being disciples, learning God's Word so that they can also judge their pastors as to whether they are publicly carrying out the OHM according to the rule of God's Word, that is, Scriptures and the Confessions, which are the true expositions of the Word. They must know the tenets of faith and be able to prove them from Scripture itself so that their faith does not rest upon human authority, but the Word of God. The life of the baptized is, thus, one of repentance, and learning God's Word. And being responsible that it is carried out in his congregation.

2. *Rebuking and Expelling Manifest Sinners* - Church discipline is done by the church as a whole according to God's Word. When people sin obstinately and will not submit to the authority of God's Word and turn from that sin, that is, when they obstinately refuse the counsel of God's Word, they are to be regarded as unbelievers and excommunicated. This is not retribution, but recognition that Christ is the only answer to sin and when he is refused, there is no other answer. It is to tell the truth to the sinner so that eventually they would acknowledge that truth of the law, learn to shun and hate their sin, and flee for refuge to Christ, as do all true believers. In this, they are treating others as Christ has also treated them in his Law and Gospel. Refusal to do this can result in destruction of the church. The church that refuses to be sanctified, would also thereby refuse to be justified, as demonstrated in this treatment.

3. *Communion as the Sanctifying Sacrament for the Converted/Faithful* - The unique attribute of Communion, as a Means of Grace, is that it is used only for sanctification, that is, only for those who have active faith (In remembrance of me). Scripture requires self judgement/self condemnation prior to communion, that is, proper repentance and self-regret over sin and faith that this means will strengthen the inner man, the man of faith, against that sin, that is, to strengthen faith, turn from sin, and do what pleases God. As such, closed communion is practiced as a church's responsibility not to confirm errorists in the false doctrine of their church (public sin against the Second Commandment), but to help them turn from that sin. Open communion is an abuse of the Sacrament, which in the name of "love" affirms people in the false doctrines of their church, rather than applying correction unto repentance to turn them from it. Thus communing anyone who is intentionally sinning instead of disciplining them is an abuse of the Sacrament, administering it according to the principles of

human love rather than the Gospel and God's Word. Instead of sanctifying, it is being used to affirm sin.

4. Mission Work Outside the Congregation

5. Passing the Church On to the Next Generation

III. With Congregational Autonomy, Why a Synod with her Offices?

Synod is the recognition of Christ and his keys among believers in other places and times, where the Word is preached purely and Sacraments administered according to the Gospel.

A. Recognition of the Household of Faith (Fellowship)

1. Universal Gospel in Every Congregation (Roster of Congregations) - Christ at God's right hand is present with grace wherever the Word and Sacrament are preached purely and distributed according to his institution. As an individual believer also joins a church to have brothers to correct him if he would stray, so congregations also want other congregations to watch their doctrine and practice lest they come under Christ's condemnation to whole congregations such as in Rev. 2.5 and 3.1.

2. The Pentecostal Gifting and Mission (Roster of Pastors) - Christ and the Holy Spirit suddenly and immediately prepared servants for the church on Pentecost by the giving of the Holy Spirit. This schooling is now done by Christ and the Holy Spirit through the church through years of teaching and preparation, especially in the Biblical languages and the languages of the peoples.

B. Universality of Congregations at the Right Hand of God

1. The Gracious Redundancy of Christ at God's Right Hand - The presence of Christ in every congregation is not just a recognition of delivery points of God's grace, but is an actual fellowship, a unity between every congregation, each gathered around Christ, as well as a unity with the Saints of all ages, eternally gathered around Christ in heaven. This unity has always been expressed in our fellowship through unity in thought, approach, freedom, and the caution against abusing freedom by using it to indulge what would not please God. Thus this unity is despised by all enemies of God and makes us united under Christ's authority and opposed to all that opposes Christ's authority, even our own fleshly dissatisfaction with the Gospel, that is, our own sinful nature.

2. Redundancy of Worship Fellowship - In worship we gather around the Mandates of God's house, that is, the "all things" Christ Commanded as capsulized in the teachings of Luther's Smaller Catechism. Worship, as the application of God's Law and Gospel to his people is not a place that courts the favor of God's enemies, the devil, the world and our flesh, but where flesh and the world have no place, but only God's children. It is not for entertainment, but soul cure, that is, sanctification.

3. Redundancy of Congregation's Fraternal Care - In our mobile society our members should find the same care for their sins in each congregation. Thus if a person is excommunicated for unrepented, stubborn sin, in one parish he must be regarded the same in others. Since it is valid and certain in heaven, it must be valid and certain throughout the church on earth. Visiting members of sister congregations must also be able to recognize the familiar hospitality that welcomes them as sinners and to see the same keys being administered there under Christ's authority.

C. The Purpose of Synodical Redundancies - By virtue of the presence of Christ and his grace in each congregation, Synod and her offices are, in a sense, unnecessary. All authority is vested in the keys of the congregation that open and close heaven. Thus Synod can have no greater authority than what is already in each congregation. We have already noted, however, the foundation of Synod is recognition of Christ in other congregations and the shared work of training pastors and missions.

We must note that if we think that Synod itself can preserve our congregations in any way, Synod would become an idol that God would not bless. We would be ignoring Christ in our midst and replacing him with Synod.

However, we have already noted that congregations are wary for their sinful flesh in both pastors and laity. The purpose of Synod and her offices is to keep watch over congregations, just as Christians with their keys, keep watch over brothers. As a Christian wants to be corrected, rebuked, restored by their fellows Christians, Congregations want this done by their neighbor congregations.

Synodical officers are, thus, a redundancy. They are to use the Scriptures and Confessions already present and pledged to in each congregation to correct things in congregations as a secondary safe guard, Thus the Synodical officers have no other authority to correct than the Word of God, which they are commissioned to do at the request of the congregations themselves.

1. Positive Purposes of Synod-

a. Multiply Resources for Common Work, Mandated by Scripture

b. Discuss Common Problems and Tasks, Apply Scriptures and Convince

c. Foster Trust in Scriptures alone - Synod from her inception vested in herself no other authority than the Word of God and the opportunity to convince congregations.

2. A Purpose Synod May Never Have: Possession of the Office of the Keys

a. Synod Applies Standards of Doctrine and Life to Rosters - Synod and her officers, as a churchly organization, that is, as a structure for the spiritual welfare of her congregations, is designated to visit the member congregations and their pastors, and, using the same (Catechism/Biblical) standards as would an educated laymen, according to the judgement he has as one of the priesthood of all believers, certify that the Gospel is being purely preached and the Sacraments administered

according to their institution. When pastors and/or congregations stray from this, they are to be marked and avoided, that is, derostered. Such action is not a judgement that they are not church, but that they are heterodox. They are not heeding all the counsel of Scripture and the mandates of Christ and, thus, are to be marked as an infected church whose disrespect for the Lord's Word and doctrine is dangerous and would ultimately be their undoing. As a true believer tolerates no sin in himself, but repents and struggles against and turns from every sin to grace, so a congregation would do the same, so a Synod would do the same. Synodical Presidents are, thus, not pastors of the pastors. The location of the office of the keys is in the congregation for the pastors as well as the people.

b. Roster Management Never Equated with the Call nor the Keys - The Keys are given to the local congregation, not to the Synod and her officers, nor to the pastors. Thus roster status is not equated with orthodoxy, but is at best, a recognition of orthodoxy. A congregation does not become orthodox by being a member of Synod, but by carrying out the mandates of Christ and his Word in their midst. So also, the congregation's call is not the same as a man's being rostered. A pastor's call is not made by Synod or through Synod, but by the Congregation as the LORD's representative. The congregation retains the final word of judgement as to their pastor's carrying out the ministry among them. Derostering is a flag the congregation must respond to and act upon when that is done for Scriptural reasons. So also, congregations are to be served Word and Sacrament only through those regularly called. Those who seek the office and its duties apart from the call do not enter through the gate (Christ's call) and are thieves.

D. The Genius of LCMS Polity

1. How Roster Decisions Must Relate to the Office of the Keys - The genius of LCMS church governance is that it truly respects the investment of the Office of the Keys and all church authority with the Word of God, the Bible, in the congregations. When roster problems are evident, the Synod does not fix them, but acknowledges them, and sends them to the proper seat of authority, the congregation, the holder of the keys. If the holders of the keys, the congregation, will not act according to God's Word, but buries the keys, then Synod releases them. Why is that good? Because if the Word, which they already have, won't be heeded by them, there is no solution that will help. And that's right and it's the way it should be. Their flesh is in control and it must be recognized and avoided by true Christians. And when that is the case, Synod and her congregations will not be in conflict. All will be of one will under God's Word.

2. How Present Implementation is Failing the Scriptural Test - Our problem in Synod is the same as in the modern Christian. Sinful flesh against the Gospel is tolerated and not identified, repented of, forgiven unto sanctification. In the name of “love” God’s commands to confront and restore are being subverted because we don’t want others to do this to us. We, therefore, are insisting that God love us enough to tolerate our sins and let us keep them, which is a rejection of both God’s law and his Gospel, where our sins are either painfully condemned or being condemned in our Savior for our deliverance. Yet, if we will not be damned for our sins with Christ, we also cannot be raised with him.

In our families how many children who are breaking their confirmation vows and have used them as a graduation from grace rather than a continuance in grace, are being confronted for their lying to God in their oaths. How many young people living in sexual sin are regularly communed at our altars? Has every member been properly instructed to examine themselves and judge themselves for their sins so that they come hungry and thirsty for grace? Are we properly using the Lord’s Supper? Are we properly using the keys which are given to us all?

As responsibility is given for the keys to every member do we realize that God will hold us responsible, each of us, for it (Mt. 25.14f)? Are we burying or using the keys?

Synod is not the high court. The congregation is the seat of all authority, at the right hand of God. It is the congregation, not Synod, of which Walther properly says it is “the highest court in her territory and whoever joins her becomes a part of it. A Christian congregation has the administration of the Keys to the heavenly kingdom on earth, and one who joins her become a co-administrator of the same.” Instead of a ‘don’t ask don’t tell’ attitude towards faith, faith must be tested. Those who believe will appreciate being rebuked if they sin unto forgiveness, those who don’t believe won’t stand for it. But then they must not be regarded as believers. They must be excluded for not listening to God’s Word.

3. Why Implementation is Failing: Icebergs and their Tips- Synod cannot be expected to be more than a safeguard. If congregations will not administer the keys, Synod cannot be blamed for not flagging doctrinal problems, but being a part of those problems and even encouraging them. Any visible problems in our church administration must be seen as symptoms of the greater problem and not the problem itself. They are tips of the iceberg, not the iceberg itself.

IV. Conclusion: The Battle for the Bible Lives in Our Midst; Jude 9, 10

A. The Danger of Promoting the Material Principle over the Formal Principle - In the 1970's, our church body battled a heresy called “the historical critical” approach to the Bible, which basically said that not all the Bible is God’s Word but that the Bible contains the Word of God. In dealing with the

heresy, the high court of Synod ruled a seminary faculty majority as heretical, but the real high courts, the congregations were shut down. Synod and derostering had taken the place of excommunication, which never happened.

Although we rejected the historical critical method, the same presupposition, that the Bible is not the Word of God, but contains the Word of God, may still have intruded itself into our church body in a subtler form. What would that be? It would be saying that in the Bible (the formal principle, that is, the thing that INFORMS us), only the Gospel (JESUS - the material principle) is now authoritative, that is God's law is not authoritative, but only the Gospel. This is a subtler form of the same error as the historical critical method and, thus, more dangerous. This is the cause of what is called 'anti-nomianism' or 'Gospel-reductionism.' The Bible thus is then, perhaps, the norm of faith but not life, since God's law is nullified and God is no longer displeased with anything that we do.

The Bible and our Catechism both teach the authority of the Law AND the Gospel. The Gospel is truly our deliverance BECAUSE the law is true. Because God curses sins, and without the Gospel embraced by faith, it WILL curse us forever, the Gospel is the sweet deliverance from our sins that it is. And because the Law is still authoritative, we know, after we come to faith, what pleases God, and what doesn't. Thus, because both the Law and the Gospel are authoritative, we will not place Christ above the Bible, but faith in Christ will find the goodness of God in BOTH the law and the Gospel, God's rebuke for my sin and my justification. The Bible will be the norm or **both faith and life**, of justification **and sanctification**. In theology the formal material must always come before the material, as exemplified in exhaustively the writings of Walther. Without the formal there is no material.

B. Removing Logs and Dealing with Splinters - We cannot exercise the office of the keys given us, without our having received God's grace. We cannot spiritually help others with their sins unless each of us also wants to be rebuked by God for our sins, and saved by God through the grace of Jesus Christ. As such, we as believers will also not accept in ourselves what does not conform to God's Word, but must shun, hate and reject such things in ourselves, and be filled in that emptiness with Christ and his grace. It is this life and death dependence of every true believing sinner on Christ that keeps us steadfast in our church membership around Christ and his grace. As we reject that in ourselves, we must reject it in our body, the church, restoring what can be restored and consigning what will not accept God's Word to the only fate left, God's law and judgment.

Our church is filled with people unwilling to learn or apply God's Word and the keys. The church is sick from its head to its feet. Each member must take responsibility for his own burying the keys, repent of it as sin, and receive Christ's forgiveness. As we truly repent under the burden of this judgement, but we must also believe that, as Christ promised, he will forgive and restore.

For those who will not repent, the ever worsening condition of the church will be a downward spiral to eternal perdition. To those who will repent of their own sin and abuse of God's precious gifts, we will be blessed to see idols continue to fall and God will use this disaster to draw us more closely to the refuge of his grace. And what he forgives he can use as he wishes.

C. Your Priesthood, Use It or Loose It - Is Communion being Used in your Church for Sanctification, or is it being Abused?

This question must be addressed to each individual in our congregations. Does each person communing understand the depth of his sin problem, which still remains in his flesh, and the on-going need for God's appointed means of sanctification, that is, learning God's Word, confessing his sin for the sake of the Absolution, and receiving the Lord's Supper? Does each member DESIRE sanctification, that is, not the maintenance of his sins, but removal and victory over his sin by Christ's grace? Does he understand that if he fails to treasure and retain, but despises or abuses the means appointed by Christ for his sanctification he will lose his salvation?

If that is the case for you, reader, then you MUST desire the same for your brothers and sisters in your church and for your family and neighbors. That concern for others is the nature of your priesthood and service to them.

Then, you must investigate your church to see if your goals (Christ's goals) are the same as your church's goal and practice. With your understanding of the Sacrament as the means of sanctification for sins which are acknowledged and shunned by the sinner, does your church commune people who openly break the Ten Commandments and intend to continue to do so? Does your church recognize false doctrine in other fellowships as sins against the Second Commandment that are publicly embraced by its members and that your church's responsibility is to help them out of their error and sin by first pointing out the sin of their confession and then helping them repent and shun that false doctrine (washing their feet), as marked by their having been instructed in the Catechism and publicly confessed the same, before communing them? Or are tenets of human love, that buries the Keys under an appearance of love, being used as an excuse to maintain sin through communion rather than removing it? In other Words, does your congregation practice open communion? If so she is abusing Christ's property and you are also accountable for that as a share holder in the Office of the Keys!

If this issue is not one that is open for discussion in your church, leave immediately and say why. Those who will not discuss a doctrinal issue are not acting under Scripture's authority. They must shy away from debate because they have no Word of God to stand on. The truth (Christ's Word) begs to be examined, the lie always wants to hide.

If the spiritual leadership will discuss it, use the Catechism to help you explain your concern. Express your concern over open communion to the district office with the charge that the Sacrament is being abused. Charge the pastors and elders and the congregation with misusing the Keys Christ gave to YOU. If they will not repent and return to Christ's authority, that is, his direction to mark and avoid false doctrine (Romans 16), then you must find a true church. Do not stay and fight if they will not listen to the Word. They are rejecting the only means both you and they have for fixing the problem. Use the judgement that you are given as part of the Priesthood, or you will lose it. Flee, lest you partake of her sins and perish! Find a congregation that does not have a name that it is alive but is dead, that is, a church that wants to follow Christ's Word no matter how uncomfortable or what the cost. Or find others in your church with this godly recognition and form a congregation that is in sure and pure fellowship with Christ.

This one issue is enough to expose where there may be true fellowship in our congregations and where God's Word is being rejected. As laymen must judge their own congregations and pastors and the ones they encounter in this way, so pastors must engage this same question in their pastoral associations. Instead of don't ask and don't tell, they need to find out which pastors believe and teach that preaching/teaching as well as Holy Communion are Christ's only means of sanctification, not modern revivalistic movements or any other 'new measures' and that they will not let sentimental reasons or politics be used to commune those who are no longer in the faith, but that communion will be properly given those who truly feel and confess their sins, want to depart from them, and depend on Christ and his grace.

If area congregations are found that abuse Holy Communion and do not use it as a means of sanctification, but to affirm sin, then they also need to be reported to the district office with the expectation that they will be derostered and if not, with a demand to explain by what authority they are being kept on the roster when they violate God's Word publicly. And if they are derostered, they are not to be forgiven by Synod if they repent. They have the Office of the Keys. The pastor must repent to his congregation how he has misled them. They must repent to him for letting him mislead them. And all that based on the Word of Christ, which they hold immediately and must use or lose. The congregation must absolve the pastor if he repents and then decide if he can continue his call among them. And he as their pastor must forgive them. Based upon this sanctification by God's Word, the results can then be evaluated by Synod and their roster status appraised again with joy and integrity.

Though this process is dangerous and horrible, it is the good fight of faith, and it is the means by which we will recognize where the fellowship in our church is present and where it is not. If that means you end up in a much smaller fellowship than you now recognize, that's OK! It will be an honest number whatever it is. There will be peace in the fellowship that comes with sins forgiven and the confidence

that we are not ignoring the voice of the Good Shepherd, but heeding and following/applying the same. But there are no double standards. There is only one who is over and above us all and is also in our midst if we would truly meet in his Name and not our own. The voice of Christ, the LORD, in its sole source, the Bible, is, for us as individuals, for us as congregations, for us as Synod the only authority that saves and will someday judge us. Who is listening? You first must answer for yourself. God grant you grace, faith and faithfulness!

For who bears not the battle's strain, the crown of life shall not obtain.

To God Alone Be Glory

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