

Lutheran and Patristic Doctrine: the Keys  
as *ecclesiae datae* and *potestas episcoporum*

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Word after word, page following page, and book heaped upon book, all bear witness of the contemporary effort to understand and explicate the mystery of the church.<sup>1</sup> The problem of ecclesiology is manifested in multifarious forms in various places. For some, the argument is over a perceived ecclesiastical trade deficit caused by excessive import of ideas from the worlds of business and psychology. In others, the battle is over the use of popular entertainment forms in public worship. Another wide spread manifestation is the ongoing controversy over women and the public preaching office. These questions seem dissimilar but are related through the even more general struggle to rediscover the role of the laity within the life of the church. This is reflected, for example, in the October, 1993 issue of *The Ecumenical Review* dedicated to the theme of “Reopening the Ecumenical Discussion of the Laity.” And this general malaise continues to motivate the ongoing efforts of the Laos Consultation within the World Council of Churches, where baptism is now referred to as “ordination to the people of God.”<sup>2</sup> All of these are part of the modern struggle for answers to the long-standing questions of “What and where is the church?” and “What is the ministry?”

Among American confessional Lutherans, this general question has fueled new fire in the doctrinal controversy, now more than a century old, over the nature of the public ministry, the nature of the church, and their relationship. Earlier this church versus ministry debate passed

<sup>1</sup> Citation of Latin works follows the method of *Vetus Latina: Kirchenschriftsteller Verzeichnis und Sigel* (, 1981). Greek works are cited according to the conventions adopted in G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford 1961-8), xi-xlv. Abbreviations used for editions cited are:

- ANF     *Ante Nicene Fathers, The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, Grand Rapids, MI.
- CC       *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*, Turnhout
- CS       *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, Wien
- GCS     *Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der Ersten Drei Jahrhunderte*. Leipzig.
- PG       *Patrologiae Series Graeca*, ed. J.P. Migne, Paris
- PL       *Patrologiae Series Latina*, ed. J.P. Migne, Paris

<sup>2</sup> World Council of Churches Laos Consultation, *Proceedings from the Working Group on Lay Participation Towards Inclusive Community*, from the meetings held in Geneva, May 7-10, 1997, from the section “What are the Implications for the Churches Together?”, 5.

through several decades of sterile repristination but has now entered a period of dangerous innovation, which rejects previous answers and is in search of new solutions to these ecclesiastical questions. This can be observed among those who pushed for acceptance of “lay ministers” on the basis of “priesthood”, or who endorse an efficient, businesslike hire-and-fire approach to “professional staff management”, and who adopt a pastor-as-coach model, which is intended to “equip the saints for ministry.” And, while the practical of mind may have launched the first volley, some Lutheran theologians have more recently responded in kind. These now eagerly reject the efforts of Walther and early Missouri as “anthropocentric” in favor of a more “Christocentric” Löhe or even Grabau. Or they have even endorsed a mystical union of Christ and office such that the “pastor is Christ”, and teach that it is on account of the “office” that the words of institution bring about the real presence or that absolution is trustworthy in forgiving sins.<sup>3</sup> Neither of these opposing movements has taken a true churchly approach to the questions at hand, which must, at least in part, seek wisdom in the church’s centuries of experience. As a result they are in danger of degenerating into schism, or worse.

One doctrine, which pertains to many of the arguments referred to above, and, which occupies a documented position in the history of doctrine and therefore presents opportunity to grant some objectivity toward the relationship of church and ministers, is the doctrine of the keys of the kingdom. According to many this would seem like just the wrong place to begin.<sup>4</sup> However, the keys have a foundation in several passages of scripture, have a rich theological tradition beginning already in the second century, are explicitly confessed by the confessions of the Lutheran church, are mentioned by Luther throughout his career, and were discussed at length

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<sup>3</sup> For example, *Logia* 3, no. 1 (1994): 45-47; 5 no. 2 (1996): 25-40. But doesn’t a Chalcedonian based “Pastor as Christ” theory require a “Pastor as God” parallel (as with the *Theotokos*). But who has been so bold as to put that language forward?

<sup>4</sup> For example, Lowell C. Green, “Grabau and Walther: Theocentric versus Anthropocentric Understanding of Church and Ministry,” *Logia* 5, no. 2 (1996): 35. Here it is claimed that “There is much ambiguity in the Lutheran theology about the keys.”

by the early Missouri Synod theologians.<sup>5</sup> Further, the keys have to do with Holy Spirit, the forgiveness of sins, and the church with its public preaching office. This is just the right spot. An examination of the history of the doctrine of the keys will reveal that the Lutheran confessions claim the keys are *ecclesiae datae* (“given to the church”, SA 3, 7; Tr. 24) and are a *potestas episcoporum* (“a power of the bishops”, AC 28, 5), and further, that the confessions are here drawing upon patristic language with a specific tradition and intent. The patristic material will reveal that for the fathers, “church” includes the apostles and the bishops, who follow them in office, and that the language of the keys as “given to the church” can not be used to exclude the public office but rather must include it. Therefore, the *potestas episcoporum* is not opposed to *ecclesiae datae* but is related to it through the “order of the church” based upon “divine law”. This patristic investigation ought allow us a certain objective vantage point outside of our own parochial controversies, from which to understand our own confessional heritage and thus point us back to a better road as we confess the unity of one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.<sup>6</sup>

## 1. The Patristic Tradition

One must always be careful in speaking of a “patristic tradition” as if suggesting a non-existent consensus. The following is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment but focuses on those authors called upon by the confessions themselves and is meant to document a patristic line of thought that was very wide spread especially in the west. It affected the doctrine of the church, and was appropriated and confessed by the Lutherans as they opposed another tradition regarding the keys, namely, the unique claims of the church of Rome.

<sup>5</sup> This is in contrast to the concept of the “priesthood of all believers,” or better, “of all the baptized.” This concept has limited Scriptural description, has limited patristic discussion, and was revived by Luther largely to contradict Roman doctrine but later received limited use, and for these reasons, has proved confusing in attempts to relate it theologically to the public preaching office.

<sup>6</sup> This paper will keep to the confessional terminology of “bishops” in order to refer to the public ministers or “pastors” in order not to introduce complications into this investigation. It must remain for another day to consider the relationship of “bishop” to “presbyter” and “Head Pastor” to “Assistant Pastor.”

The patristic tradition of interest in regard to the keys is essentially a traditional exegesis of Matt. 16:16-19. In this text from the gospel of Matthew, Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus responds,

You are Peter (Πέτρος, *petrus*) and upon this rock (πέτρα/, *petram*) I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind upon earth, will be bound in heaven. And whatever you loose upon earth will be loosed in heaven.

Tertullian, at the turn of the third century, gives us the first patristic texts dealing explicitly with these words of Jesus. While arguing with heretics over the necessity of confessing the faith in the face of persecution, he states, “For though you think heaven still shut, remember that the Lord left here to Peter and through him to the Church, the keys of it, which every one who has been here put to the question, and also made confession, will carry with him.”<sup>7</sup> Tertullian’s reference to the gospel text at this place is entirely incidental and therefore makes it quite likely he is merely repeating a familiar interpretation. His explanation states that the church has received the keys through Peter and that the reception of these keys is based upon the confession which Peter made, such that whoever makes the same confession of Christ will possess the keys. Quite likely, therefore, it was on the basis of Matthew 16:16-19, that the confessors (those suffering persecution on account of their Christian profession), in second century North Africa at any rate, were accustomed to exercise the keys by granting or retaining peace with the church.<sup>8</sup> Apparently this was viewed as a public function of the church in accordance with a fairly mature tradition of the church’s possession of the keys.

Several decades later, Origen largely agrees with this explanation although he adds some original elements so characteristic of this Alexandrian father. In his commentary on the gospel of

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<sup>7</sup> TE. *sco.* 10 (CS 20, 167)

<sup>8</sup> (TE. *mart.* 1 ) Cyprian found this practice disruptive of good order and tended to restrict such public use of the keys to the bishop and other clergy.

Matthew, Origen treats this text at some length, claiming in part that everyone who makes the confession that Peter made, becomes a Peter himself.<sup>9</sup> This is stated on the basis of the biblical and patristic tradition of Jesus as a spiritual rock (petra) from which Peter (petrus) by his confession is named.<sup>10</sup> He further argues explicitly that the promise given to Peter was not restricted to Peter alone, but on the basis of John 20:22, applied to all the apostles, and then to all the church. For “as members of Christ deriving their surname from Him they are called Christians,” so also “from the Rock, (they are) Peters.”<sup>11</sup> To every Peter are given the keys of the kingdom. He does not say how or where the individual Peters make use of these keys.

In addition to the above, Origen states that some apply the gospel text specifically to the bishops,

When those who maintain the function of the episcopate make use of this word as Peter, and, having received the keys of the kingdom of heaven from the Saviour, teach that things bound by them, that is to say, condemned, are also bound in heaven, and that those which have obtained remission by them are also loosed in heaven, we must say that they speak wholesomely if they have the way of life on account of which it is said to that Peter, “Thou art Peter”; and if they are such that upon them the church is built by Christ, and to them with good reason this could be referred; and the gates of Hades ought not to prevail against him when he wishes to bind and loose.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “And if we too have said like Peter, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,” not as if flesh and blood had revealed it unto us, but by light from the Father in heaven having shone in our heart, we become a Peter, and to us there might be said by the Word, “Thou art Peter,” etc. For every imitator of Christ is a rock.” OR. *comm. in Mt. 10-17* XII, 10 (GCS 40, 85-86).

<sup>10</sup> There is a very strong second century tradition which refers to Christ as a rock. See *Just. Tryph.* 34; 36, 70, 75, 114. *Barn.* 6. *Iren. Haer.* 3.21.7; 4.20.11; 4.33.1; 4.36.1; 5.26.1-2. These are based upon Old Testament passages such as Is. 8:14; 38:16; and Ps. 118:22. The “stone cut without human hands” of Daniel 2:34 & 45 was frequently understood as prophesying the virgin birth. This Christ as rock tradition follows upon apostolic teaching: see Acts 4:11, Eph. 2:20.

<sup>11</sup> OR. *comm. in Mt. 10-17* XII, 11. (GCS 40, 88).

<sup>12</sup> OR. *comm. in Mt. 10-17* XII, 14 (GCS 40, 98-99).

This text is important for several reasons. First, it indicates that the text in question was being applied to the binding and loosing done by bishops in addition to the explanation given previously by Origen. Secondly, there is no conflict here between church and bishop. The church and the bishop both have the keys. It seems this is possible for Origen, because, he believed, the bishop's binding and loosing were to be considered a work of the keys on the basis of the bishop's own life, whether he confessed and lived as the original Peter confessed and lived. In other words, he performed binding and loosing on the basis of his own personal status as a "Peter." Thirdly, this text corroborates that the practice of church discipline was viewed as a manifestation of the keys in the third century. This included the bishop's control over excommunication and the penitential system. The early penitential system essentially was a matter of control over who was and who was not admitted to the communion of the church, that is, ultimately to participation in the eucharist. It was this public aspect of the doctrine of the keys that was mainly developed among the fathers.

Tertullian, in another text, corroborates each of these points. When he later left the church and became a Montanist, he felt that the catholics were being too lenient in their practice of church discipline. They were, he felt, forgiving even capital sins and thus leading others to sin by such leniency. The catholics responded that the church had the power to forgive sins. Tertullian acknowledged the claim but wanted to overturn it by stating that it rested on a false exegesis of Matt. 16:16-19. The catholics, he said, subverted and wholly changed the "manifest intention of the Lord" by transferring to the church what had been given to Peter alone. But Tertullian didn't actually want to say that only Peter himself had the keys. Instead, he wanted to claim, like Origen, that only spiritual men, such as Peter, had been given the keys. But even so, Tertullian could not do away with what was already traditional language that the keys had been given to the church. Therefore he reinterpreted the language, claiming that, "the church, it is true, will forgive sins: but (it will be) the church of the Spirit, by means of a spiritual man; not the church



which consists of a number of bishops.”<sup>13</sup> He did not believe the bishops were holy enough to exercise the spiritual function of the keys. And Tertullian became a schismatic. This personal protest only demonstrates further that the church at large was making use of language that declared that the keys were *ecclesiae datae* and yet understood the penitential duties of the bishops as being an exercise of the keys.

These points can be seen more explicitly in the middle of the third century in another North African father, the eminent churchman Cyprian. As the bishop of Carthage, Cyprian had to deal with the practical situation of many Christians who had lapsed under pressure of persecution and made sacrifice to idols. Now, persecution having passed, many desired readmission to the church. This question filled the North African churches with controversy. Some rigorists were determined to never allow readmission; others thought that almost no penitence at all was required and that peace and readmission could be granted by many sources. Cyprian opposed both these positions and pushed for a well ordered process controlled by the bishop’s exercise of the keys. In view of this and other controversies, he enunciated a strong view of the unity of the church based upon the bishop.

Cyprian does not use *ecclesiae datae* language explicitly in regard to the keys. But he maintains the same thought in that he says the church

is one and built upon one who received its keys by voice of the Lord. This (church) is the one who holds and possesses all the power of her bridegroom and Lord. In her we preside; for her honor and unity we fight and we defend equally both her grace and glory with faithful devotion. By divine permission, we water the thirsting people of God, we guard the boundaries of the living fountains.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> TE. *pud.* 21 (CS 20, 271).

<sup>14</sup> CY. *ep.* 73,11,1-2. (CC 3C, 541). “Quo venturus est qui sitit, utrumne ad haereticos . . . , an ad ecclesiam quae una est et super unum qui et claves eius accepit domini voce fundata est? Haec est una quae tenet et possidet omnem sponsi sui et domini potestatem. In hac praesidemus, pro honore eius atque unitate pugnamus, huius et gratiam pariter et gloriam fidei devotione defendimus. Nos divino permissu rigamus sitientem dei populum, nos custodimus terminos vitalium fontium.”

Cyprian maintains that the keys are the church's but equally emphasizes that Peter received her keys from the Lord himself and that the church was built upon him. In *de unitate ecclesiae*, he explains Matt. 16:16-19 and this idea further, noting that Jesus, after his resurrection, also said to Peter,

‘Feed my sheep.’ He builds his church upon him and commands him to shepherd his sheep. And although to all the apostles, He gives an equal power, nevertheless he establishes one chair and by his authority arranges the origin and order of the unity. Certainly the others also were this which Peter was, but the primacy was given to Peter and one church and chair are demonstrated. And all are pastors, but one flock is shown, which is cared for by all the apostles with unanimous consensus.<sup>15</sup>

Peter and the apostles were all given equal authority to shepherd. And the bishops, by divine permission, follow in this office and preside over the church. For “through the changes of times and successions, the ordering of bishops and the plan of the church flow onwards; so that the Church is founded upon the bishops, and every act of the church is controlled by these same prelates.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, for Cyprian, the bishop follows the apostles in a succession of office and presides (*praesidere*) over the church and governs (*gubernare*) her public acts, including church discipline. This is based on divine law (*divina lex*). In his language, at first glance, it would appear that “church” is distinct from “bishop” such that “church” is everything other than the bishop, as seems to prevail in our contemporary language. But for Cyprian, while a distinction can be made, the bishop always remains a part of the church as the foundation is part of a building. The bishop receives the keys from the Lord but they are the keys of the church. The

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<sup>15</sup> CY. *un.* 4 (CC 3, 251-252). “Super illum aedificat ecclesiam et illi pascendas oves mandat et, quamvis apostolis omnibus parem tribuat potestatem, unam tamen cathedram constituit et unitatis originem adque rationem sua auctoritate disposuit. Hoc erant utique et ceteri quod fuit Petrus, sed primatus Petro datur et una ecclesia et cathedra una monstratur; et pastores sunt omnes, sed grex unus ostenditur qui ab apostolis omnibus unianimi consensione pascatur.”

<sup>16</sup> CY. *ep.* 33,1 (CC IIIB, 164 ). “ut ecclesia super episcopos constituatur et omnis actus ecclesiae per eosdem praepositos gubernetur. Cum hoc itaque divina lege fundatum sit, miror ...”

things the bishop does remain acts of the one and only church. This is the order (*ratio*) of the church. The *potestas* (power) of the bishops to shepherd the flock, which came from Christ, does not alter the fact that ecclesiastical acts are based upon the *potestas* and *auctoritas* (authority) of the bride of Christ. Since the bishop is the governing part of the church, he remains within the church and part of the church.

As we turn attention to subsequent western authors, the ideas and language of Origen, Tertullian, and Cyprian are found repeated time and again with various contexts providing cause for emphasis upon possession of the keys by either the church or the bishop. Hilary of Poitiers (d. 368), perhaps reflecting his interaction with the East, discusses Peter's confession of Christ as the Son of God in the context of his defense of the orthodox doctrine of Christ's divinity. On the one hand, he states that after the mystery of his confession, Peter served for the edification of the church and received the keys.<sup>17</sup> But he interprets the passage further saying that "the church is an edifice upon this rock of confession. . . . This faith, is the foundation of the church. On account of this faith, the gates of hell are weak against her. This faith has the keys of the kingdom of heaven."<sup>18</sup> He understands, as a conclusion of this proposition, that the church alone possesses the keys because it alone has the true faith unlike the heretics. Yet, it is the apostolic office through which the keys are exercised.

For there would indeed be another faith, if there are other keys of the kingdom of heaven. There would be another faith, if there were another future church against which the gates of hell will not prevail. There would be another faith, if there were another apostleship (*apostolatus*) binding and loosing in heaven those things bound and loosed through it on earth. There would be another faith, if there were another Christ, the Son of God, than he who is preached.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> HIL. *tri.* 6, 20 (CC 62, 241).

<sup>18</sup> HIL. *tri.* 6, 36-37 (CC 62, 241). "Super hanc igitur confessionis petram ecclesiae aedificatio est. . . . Haec fides ecclesiae fundamentum est. Per hanc fidem infirmes adversus eam sunt portae inferorum. Haec fides regni caelestis habet claves. Haec fides quae in terris solverit aut ligaverit, et ligata in caelis sunt et soluta."

Again the bishop remains within the church in this language. That which the church has on account of the true faith, the bishop uses to bind and loose.

Similarly, Ambrose, the bishop of Milan and spiritual father to Augustine, refers frequently to the keys and to Peter as the apostle who received them in order to open heaven.<sup>20</sup> Ambrose too explains this in terms of the faith which Peter confessed in Christ. For Christ told Peter that “upon this rock (petram) I will build my church (Matt. 16:18), that is, in this confession of the catholic faith I will establish believers unto life.”<sup>21</sup> “Therefore, Peter, who had all faith, received the keys of the kingdom of heaven, in order to open it for others.”<sup>22</sup> Ambrose states that when Christ said to Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” he gave the apostles equality of remitting sin, because that which is said to Peter is said to all the apostles. And that which the apostles received, the church has received. Thus, Ambrose concluded, it is the church of God who heard these words.<sup>23</sup> In another place, interpreting the passage “the king led me into his chamber” (Song of Songs 1:2-4) as allegory of the church, Ambrose returns to the marriage imagery seen in Cyprian and explains with rhetorical finesse that

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<sup>19</sup> HIL. *tri.* 6, 38 (CC 62, 243). “Sit sane fides alia, si aliae claves regni caelorum sunt. Sit fides alia, si Ecclesia alia est futura, adversum quam portae inferni non praevallebunt. Sit fides alia, si erit alius apostolatus, ligata et soluta per se in terra ligans in caelo adque solvens. Sit fides alia, si Christus alius Dei filius praeterquam qui est praedicabitur.”

<sup>20</sup> Peter, “quasi qui claves regni, ut aliis aperiret, acceperat.” (Expos. Evan. Sec. Luc. 10, 145 (CC 14, 387)).

<sup>21</sup> PL 17, 580. “hoc est, in hac catholicae fidei confessione statuam fideles ad vitam.”

<sup>22</sup> AM. *Lc.* 7, 177 (CC 14, 275).

<sup>23</sup> AM. *Ps.* 38, 37 (CS 64, 212f.). “ideo dominus, quod erat ante iudicii sui, dedit apostolis peccata remittendi aequitatem soluenda ne diu ligata manerent. denique audi dicentem: tibi dabo claves regni caelorum ... tibi, inquit, dabo claves regni caelorum, ut et solvas et liges. hoc Nouatianus non audiuit, ecclesia dei audiuit; ideo ille in lapsu, nos in remissione, ille in inpaenitentia, nos in gratia. quod Petro dicitur, apostolis dicitur. Non potestatem usurpamus, sed servimus imperio, ne postea, cum venerit dominus et ligatos invenerit quos oportuit solvi.”

the church is now led into the chamber of Christ not as if only betrothed, but also as being married. She has not only entered the bedroom, but also has obtained the keys of legitimate copulation. And thus as one seated in the bedroom, she says: “A bundle of myrrh [is] my beloved unto me; he will lie between my breasts (Songs 1:13).” ... The chamber of the church is the body of Christ. The king led her into all the inner mysteries, gave her the keys, so that she might open for herself the treasures of knowledge of the sacraments, open the doors previously closed, recognize the grace of rest, the sleep of the dead, the power of the resurrection.<sup>24</sup>

Jerome takes note that some in his day were claiming, on the basis of Matthew 16:16-19, that the church is founded upon Peter. But he counters that the founding of the church “occurs in another place upon all the apostles and all (the apostles) receive the keys of the kingdom of heaven and the strength of the church is equally based upon them (all).”<sup>25</sup> Jerome then emphasizes the public binding and loosing of sin by those who preside over the church. For those who “succeed to the apostolic grade produce the body of Christ with sacred mouth, through whom we too are Christians, those who have the keys of the kingdom of heaven (and) in a way judge before the day of judgement, who with sober chastity preserve the bride of the Lord.”<sup>26</sup>

In St. Augustine, the bishop of Hippo (d. 430), we have the single most influential father of the west. He mentions the keys quite frequently and is rather consistent in his comments in

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<sup>24</sup> AM. *Ps.* 118 (CS 62, 16). “ut osculum quasi sponsa acceperit, in cubiculum autem Christi sit introducta ecclesia non iam quasi tantummodo desponsata, sed etiam quasi nupta, nec solum thalamum sit ingressa, sed etiam legitimae claves copulae consecuta sit. ... cubiculum ecclesiae corpus est Christi; introduxit eam rex in omnia interiora mysteria, dedit ei claues, ut aperiret sibi thesauros scientiae sacramentorum, clausas ante fores panderet, congnosceret quietis gratiam, defuncti somnum, vitum resurrectionis.” In this text Ambrose shows his best rhetorical stuff.

<sup>25</sup> HI. *Jov.* 1, 26 (PL 23, 258). So he claims, Peter is chosen as a head only in order that occasion for schism may be avoided (“inter duodecim unus eligitur, ut capite constituto, schismatis tollatur occasio.”)

<sup>26</sup> HI *ep.* 14, 8 (CS 54, 55). “qui apostolico gradui succedentes Christi corpus sacro ore conficiunt, per quos nos etiam christiani sumus, qui claues regni caelorum habentes quodammodo ante iudicii diem iudicant, qui sponsam domini sobria castitate conseruant.”

regard to Matthew 16:16-19.<sup>27</sup> He could argue from the *status quo* that in this text Peter signifies the church. Because if he did not, and the Lord gave the keys only to Peter, then the church could not bind and loose sin. But since the church does bind and loose sin, clearly Peter signifies the church.<sup>28</sup> But Augustine could also argue directly from the text. For just as all the apostles were asked who they thought Jesus was, and only Peter answered, so also Jesus spoke to one in whom was the unity of all, and so all received the keys with him.<sup>29</sup> If Peter received them, did not Paul? Did not James and John and the other apostles receive them?<sup>30</sup> Peter spoke as one for all, because the unity is in all.<sup>31</sup> So Augustine concludes, Peter was an apostle, even the first apostle, but even such primacy of apostleship being granted, here he signifies the universal church, which is founded upon the rock (petram), from which Peter received his name.

For the rock is not named from Peter, but Peter from the rock (*a petra*), just as a Christian is named from Christ. Thus the Lord says, “Upon this rock I will build my church” because Peter had said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Therefore, upon this rock, he says, which was confessed, I will build my church. For Christ was the rock, upon which foundation Peter himself too was built. Indeed no one is able to lay another foundation than that which is already laid, that is, Christ Jesus. Therefore the church, which is founded in Christ, from him receives the keys of the kingdom of heaven in Peter, that is, the power of binding and loosing sins.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, in his *Retractions*, Augustine mentions that at least once he had expressed the opinion that that the church is founded in Peter himself as if on a rock. This would closely approach the exegesis popular at Rome. Augustine contrasts this type of understanding with his customary exegesis of Peter as representative of all the apostles. And though his own preference seems clear from many examples, yet he concludes his retraction with the words: “Let the reader choose which of these two opinions is more probable.” (*AU. re. 21 (CC 57, 62)*). One has to wonder if Augustine felt the weight of Roman opinion.

<sup>28</sup> *AU. Jo. 50, 12 (CC 36, 438)*.

<sup>29</sup> *AU Jo. 118, 4 (CC 36, 656-657)*.

<sup>30</sup> *PL 38, 802*.

<sup>31</sup> *AU. s. 232, 3 (PL 38, 1109)*.

Time and again Augustine refers to Christ or faith in Christ as the rock upon which the church is built and Peter, who was named from the rock, as representing the church. Peter bears the *personam* of the whole church, the figure of the universality and unity of the church. “Not one man, but the unity of the church received the keys.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, Augustine claims, while quoting Cyprian, that “this is the one, she who holds and possesses all the power of her bridegroom and Lord.”<sup>34</sup> But the order of the church, when the sinner desires the medicine of forgiveness, is: “let him come to the priests, through whom the keys are ministered to him in the church. And as he has now started to be a good son, the order of the maternal (the church’s) members being kept, let him accept her rule of satisfaction of the sacraments from those who preside.”<sup>35</sup>

In a similar fashion, the English Benedictine scholar, the Venerable Bede (d. 735), discusses this gospel text at some length and reproduces our observed exegetical tradition point by point. He states that Peter, on account of the strength and constancy of his confession received

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<sup>32</sup> AU. *Jo.* 124, 5 (CC 36, 684-685). “uniuersam significabat ecclesiam, quae ... fundata est super petram, unde Petrus nomen accepit. Non enim a Petro petra, sed Petrus a petra; sicut non Christus a christiano, sed christianus a Christo vocatur. .... Ecclesia ergo quae fundatur in Christo, claus ab eo regni caelorum accepit in Petro, id est potestatem ligandi soluendique peccata.” Augustine made a rhetorical commonplace out of this Christ / Peter comparison demonstrated earlier in Origen. For example, “so that Peter is built upon the rock, not the rock upon Peter” (PL 38, 480); “Christ himself was the rock, however, Peter himself is from the rock” (PL 38, 1148); “for the rock is not (named) from Peter, but Peter from the rock, because Christ is not (named) from a Christian, but a Christian from Christ.” (PL 38, 1239); “Peter from the rock, not the rock from Peter. Thus is Peter (named) from the rock like a Christian is (named) from Christ.” (PL 38, 1349). “a petra Petrus, non a Petro petra. Sic a petra Petrus, quomodo a Christo Christianus.”).

<sup>33</sup> PL 38, 802; 1349.

<sup>34</sup> AU. *ba.* 4, 1 (CS 51, 223).

<sup>35</sup> AU. *s.* 351 (PL 39, 1545). “veniat ad antistites, per quos illi in ecclesia claus ministrantur: et tanquam bonus iam incipiens esse filius, maternorum membrorum ordine custodito, a praepositis sacramentorum accipiat satisfactionis suae modum.”

his name (Petrus) from the rock, upon which the church is built. Peter, who with greater devotion confessed the kingdom, rightly received the keys, which are the knowledge and power of discerning, by which the worthy are received into the kingdom and the unworthy are excluded. This power of binding and loosing, although it appears to be given only to Peter, without doubt is given to the other apostles after his resurrection and triumph in John 20:22-23. “And indeed this same office is now committed in the bishops and presbyters to every church.” Comparing this to Matt. 18:15-18, he concludes that “in this manner, the authority of binding the guilty or loosing the penitent is given to every church of the elect.”<sup>36</sup>

In conclusion, the foregoing documents a wide spread tradition of language and doctrine in regard to the exegesis of Matthew 16:16-19, primarily in the Latin west. This tradition explained this text by comparison with John 20 and Matthew 18. The “keys” were understood in terms of the binding and loosing of sin and further this was related directly to church discipline. Further, it was concluded, as early as the second century, that in Peter the keys were given to all the apostles, that is, to the church. The possession of the keys was explained in terms of faith in Christ and confession of Christ, which the church has and makes, just as Peter had and made. The use of the keys, in the second century, included the peace given by the confessors or martyrs. But more generally this referred to the giving or holding of reconciliation or peace by the bishop, which gave admission to the fellowship of the church, that is, to the eucharist. There was an ancillary tradition in the early centuries, which connected the bishop’s use of the keys to his own personal faith. But later this idea was rejected. The keys as *potestas episcoporum* was fundamentally based on the Lord’s command of John 20, given to all the apostles, and the conviction that the bishops followed the apostles in office through a succession, not of ordination, but of presiding over the church and serving as the foundation of the church.

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<sup>36</sup> BED. *h.* 20 (CC 122, 144-146). “Necnon etiam nunc in episcopis ac presbyteris omni ecclesiae officium idem committitur ... Omni igitur electorum ecclesiae iuxta modum culparum vel paenitentiae ligandi ac solvendi datur auctoritas.”



It must be stated that in the earlier authors, up to Cyprian, there was a role for the laity even in the public exercise of the keys. This became less and less as time passed. Further, there was no explicit discussion of what it would mean for an individual Christian to possess and use the keys privately, as in a word of absolution. This would be considered confusing and contrary to the order of the church, even if understood in some way to be theologically permissible. For anyone who was granted forgiveness would have to be permitted to the fellowship of the church, yet how could public fellowship be governed by every person in his own home? The idea of the keys as a simple word of forgiveness, which would in no way affect the public fellowship of the eucharist, did not occur to the fathers on the basis of Matthew 16.

Therefore, when the fathers taught that the keys are *ecclesiae datae*, they were not making a distinction between apostles and church, rather, this language was distinguishing between the keys as being given to the individual apostle Peter or all the apostles. Rome, of course, ultimately chose to reject this exegesis and generated its own tradition in regard to Matthew 16:16-19, as if the keys were given to Peter individually and to his see or church, that is, the church at Rome. One only needs to look at the works of a Roman author like Gregory the Great to see what a drastic difference in understanding existed already at the beginning of the middle ages between Rome and most of the rest of the west in regard to the keys. Gregory writes that Peter himself had received the keys and was entrusted with the care of the entire church.<sup>37</sup> Therefore the keys were commissioned to the “church of blessed Peter” with the power of loosing and binding, from which church others would have to receive them. Thus Gregory does not hesitate to “send” the keys to other churches as if they could only have them through the mediation of the church at Rome.<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, the influence and power of Rome in the west was able to make this self-serving exegesis attain its purposes in its claims to power and primacy over all other churches. It

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<sup>37</sup> GR-M. *ep.* 5, 37 (CC 140, 309).

<sup>38</sup> GR-M. *ep.* 4, 41 (CC 140, 262; 374; 192).

was this doctrine which the Lutherans reacted against and rejected by calling upon the earlier patristic tradition regarding the keys accepted earlier by most of the west.

## 2. Luther and the Keys

During the centuries between Augustine and Luther, the concept of the “keys”, or rather the theoretical scope of the keys, underwent an important change. Whereas in the patristic period the keys were applied to provide for exclusion of sinners and reconciliation of the penitents from the church, during the middle ages, apparently through the agency of monasticism, the keys came to be seen as regularly intended for all believers. As the practice of penance grew, the “keys” were applied to all sins rather than merely known external sins, which excluded from the fellowship of the eucharist.<sup>39</sup> Thus developed the practice of private confession and the application of private absolution became part of the ecclesiastical application of the keys. As a result, various medieval theological explanations of how the priest could forgive sins appeared. These do not need to be rehearsed here. But it is within this broadened context that the Lutherans responded to Rome’s claim to immediate possession of the keys.

The doctrine of the keys became an immediate point of theological conflict for Luther because the practice of indulgences was largely based upon the doctrine of Petrine possession of the keys.<sup>40</sup> In his 95 Theses of 1517, Luther claimed that “the keys of the church, given by the merits of Christ” are the treasure of the church (Theses 59, 60) and equated these with “the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.” (Thesis 62). Therefore, he denied that the pope had

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<sup>39</sup> *The Schaff-Herzog Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge*, edited by Samuel Macauley Jackson, vol. 6, (New York, ): 325.

<sup>40</sup> Abbreviations used for editions of Luther’s works are:

LW      *Luther’s Works* (English Translation) (St. Louis. 1955-76).

WA      *Dr Martin Luthers Werke, kritische Gesamtausgabe.* (Weimar, 1883-1897).

the “power of the keys.” (Thesis 26). Luther was striking at the medieval Roman reading of Matthew 16:16-19, which was leading to the abuse of indulgences.

It is not surprising, then, that in 1518 Luther and Eck spent a good deal of energy during the Leipzig debate discussing the proper understanding of this gospel text. Luther had done his historical homework and countered Eck’s quotations of the fathers with yet other quotations. Cyprian, Jerome, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Augustine and others were called as witnesses in the debate. Eck, for example, claimed that Augustine had proclaimed that Peter was the rock upon which the church was built and had never retracted the statement. But Luther countered that he had consulted Augustine’s *Retractions* and found just the opposite. Augustine claimed that Christ, whom is confessed, is the rock. With the word “rock”, Luther said, Christ was indicating the confession Peter had made, “because the church is built upon this article of faith. Therefore, Christ founded his church upon himself.”<sup>41</sup> In light of the various patristic quotations, Luther concluded that the fathers “at times held differing views in differing places, (but) both much more and often for me than for Dr. Eck.”<sup>42</sup> Eck saw his opportunity to make Luther reveal his colors and stated in his final thesis that the Roman church had been recognized as having primacy over all others from the earliest years of the church. Luther offered a counter thesis which claimed that Rome’s primacy could only be proven from the pope’s own decretals from the last 400 years. He claimed that in the early church Roman primacy over all other churches was not recognized and he based this claim on the scriptures, the history of the church from the earliest centuries, and Canon 6 of the council of Nicea (325 AD).<sup>43</sup> The denial of Rome’s claim to primacy by divine

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<sup>41</sup> WA 2, 286.

<sup>42</sup> WA 2, 277.

<sup>43</sup> This canon established the equality of the great metropolitan churches stating: “The ancient customs of Egypt, Libya and Pentapolis shall be maintained, according to which the bishop of Alexandria has authority over all these places since a similar custom exists with reference to the bishop of Rome. Similarly in Antioch and other provinces the prerogatives of the churches are to be preserved.”

right was an enormous step, shocking to many. This placed Luther's doctrine of the keys very much in the middle of the brewing controversy.<sup>44</sup>

After Leipzig, Luther republished a work he had prepared for the Leipzig debate concerning the power of the pope.<sup>45</sup> Already here in 1519, almost all that the Lutheran church would have to say about the keys is already stated and worked out and in large part is based upon arguments repeated from the fathers. First, Luther responded to Eck's thesis that the Roman church had primacy from the earliest years of the church and that "him who has the see and faith of the most blessed Peter, we have always recognized as the successor of Peter and the general vicar of Christ." Here he points out that Eck's thesis was poorly worded because it implies that any evil pope that did not believe was not a successor of Peter or a vicar of Christ. He would return to this idea shortly, but first turned his attention directly to the proof texts given by Eck for the claim of Roman primacy, foremost of which was Matthew 16:16-19.

Luther immediately denied that this gospel text teaches that Peter alone received the keys.<sup>46</sup> He pointed out that some of the Roman jurists themselves no longer based Roman primacy on this text but rather on John 21:16. Therefore, he claimed, he should not be condemned for rejecting the traditional Roman understanding of Matthew 16 when some of their own authors do so. And, he claimed, Jerome was correct in pointing out that Jesus used the future tense when he said, "I will give you the keys." The actual giving of the keys is then found in John 20, when the keys are committed to all the apostles. But Luther also calls upon the patristic tradition that in

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<sup>44</sup> It ought be noted that Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of baptized believers was historically and theologically subsequent to Luther's working with the doctrine of the keys. It played an important role in Luther's reassertion of the relationship of the baptized believer to Christ. But Luther's description of the relationship between private Christian and public minister was already set and was based on these earlier years of work refuting Rome's hierarchical claims to the keys with constant reference to the fathers.

<sup>45</sup> *Resolutio Lutheriana super propositione sua decima tertia de potestate papae*. The pertinent pages are WA 2, 180-195.

<sup>46</sup> WA 2, 188-189.

Matthew 16 Christ gave the promise of the keys to the church and all the apostles in the person of Peter. Peter represented the church or acted in the person of the church. Here Luther claims support from Chrysostom, Jerome, who, he says, is following Origen, and Augustine.<sup>47</sup> The Reformer then approves yet another exegetical point of Jerome's in regard to the way Jesus addresses the apostles and is answered in the text of Matthew 16, which again demonstrates that Peter represented all of the apostles.

Having produced these opinions from the fathers to show that the keys are *ecclesiae datae*, Luther goes on to investigate at length the traditional claim that the "rock", upon which the church is built and upon which the keys depend, is the confession of Christ which Peter made.<sup>48</sup> He notes that although Peter made the confession, neither flesh nor blood had revealed this faith to Peter, but rather the revelation of the Father in heaven.<sup>49</sup> "Just as righteousness is reckoned to Abraham from faith, thus also righteousness is reckoned to everyone who believes. Wherefore also the keys are given to those who have the revelation of the Father and confess Christ just like Peter. Thus it is necessary for the keys to have been given similarly to everyone who confesses and has the revelation of the Father."<sup>50</sup> Or in other words, "it is clear that the keys are no one's except his, who is such as Peter then was."<sup>51</sup>

In Tertullian and Origen this connection between the faith and the keys left them with the opinion that the bishop had to have the personal faith of Peter in order to make use of the keys.

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<sup>47</sup> WA 2, 189.

<sup>48</sup> In so doing, he takes arguments and language from the text of Origen discussed above.

<sup>49</sup> WA 2, 190. "Simon Barjona did not respond like this, no flesh and blood, but rather the hearer of the revelation of the Father. Here no calumniator can twist the word of Christ to Peter the man."

<sup>50</sup> WA 2, 193. "sicut Abrahae ex fide reputata est iusticia, Ita et omnibus qui credunt reputabitur iusticia. Aure et his sicut Petro habenti revelationem patris et Christum confitenti claves dantur, Ita necesse est omni similiter confitenti et revelantem habenti claves donatas esse."

<sup>51</sup> WA 2, 193. "clarum est, claves non esse nisi eius, qui talis est qualis tunc Petrus fuit." Luther is following the catchy rhetorical language of the fathers again. See Origen and Cyprian above.

In Tertullian's case this was part of his schism from the church. Later, this doctrine, which tied the ecclesiastical acts of the bishop to his personal holiness, led to the Donatist controversy. Augustine and the church of the fifth century rejected this notion. Luther recognized that if the bishop is to be given the keys on account of his faith, "the most absurd absurdity follows, that an evil pope or bishop would not be the pope or bishop, because he does not have faith, which constitutes a receiver of the keys. ... We reject the error of the new heretics and ancient Donatists who assert an evil bishop is not a bishop."<sup>52</sup> Luther's solution to the problem begins with the assumption that the keys

are given to no private man, but only to the church, because we are certain of no private man lest he should not have the revelation of the Father. The church, however, is that concerning which it is not permissible to doubt, since it is the body of Christ. ... Peter is this church, that hearer of the revelation and acceptor of the keys. Here the symbol stands firm: "I believe one holy church, the communion of saints."<sup>53</sup>

Only one who hears the Father and believes can have the keys. But to believe and confess Christ is proper "to none except the church, that is the communion of saints. Because no single believer is able to have this confession constantly and certainly and persistently."<sup>54</sup> Similarly, on the basis of Matthew 18, where Christ says "If he does not listen to the church", Luther concludes

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<sup>52</sup> The Lutheran confessions confirmed this rejection. See AC 9, 3 for example.

<sup>53</sup> WA 2,190. "Non Simon Bariona haec respondet, non caro et sanquis, sed revelationis paternae auditor. Potest ne hic calumniator ullus verbum Christi ad Petrum hominem torquere? Quid ergo? is qui auditor est paternae revelationis, huic dantur claves, non Petro, non filio Iohannis, non carni et sanguini. quod si ita est, pronum iam sequitur, quod nulli privato homini datae sunt claves, sed soli ecclesiae, quia de nullo privato homine certi sumus, habeat nec ne revelationem patris. Ecclesia autem ipsa est, de qua dubitari non licet, cum sit corpus Christi, una caro, eodem spiritu vivens quo Christus. Ipsa est Petrus ille auditor revelationis et acceptor clavium: quia hic symbolum stat firmiter 'Credo ecclesiam sanctam, communionem sanctorum.'"

<sup>54</sup> WA 2, 193. "quod nullae nisi ecclesiae, id est communioni sanctorum, convenire potest, cum nullus singularis fidelis constanter et certo ac perseveranter habere possit hanc confessionem, quum nec Petrus ipse in eadem perseverarit."

that Matthew 16:16-19 “pertains neither to Peter nor to his successor, neither to any bishop or any single man, but to the communion of saints, which is the church. This communion then can commit the keys either to one worthy or unworthy, unworthy, I say, before God.”<sup>55</sup> So, he concludes,

it is clear, the keys are (the possession) of no single man but of the church and of the community, so that it is sure the priest uses the keys of the church not by his own right but by the ministry (for he is a minister of the church), and not as if they were his or given to him but as given to the church.<sup>56</sup>

Thus already in 1519, Luther had a theological model for describing the relationship of the church to the ministry on account of his struggle with Roman claims to primacy based on Petrine possession of the keys. The church is the original possessor of the keys and the bishop ministers to the church by means of the church’s keys. The keys are *ecclesiae datae* and yet become a *potestas episcoporum*. Luther’s language is all but identical to that observed in the fathers and is basically repristinated in the confessions.

However, at one point Luther commented where the early church was largely silent. Because of its emphasis upon the keys as manifested in public church discipline, the fathers did not theologially address the issue of individual private Christians and the keys. Luther, on the other hand, addressed the problem by exploring further the confession that “the keys were not given to Peter alone but to the whole community.”<sup>57</sup> In his desire to distinguish between the choices of Peter and the church, he early laid stress upon the church as a community as the fathers had emphasized all the church. But by 1520, Luther was already making use of the biblical idea of the priesthood of baptized believers. Building on the idea of a union between Christ and the

<sup>55</sup> WA 2, 194.

<sup>56</sup> WA 2, 191. “Nonne clarum est ... et claves non esse ullius hominis singularis sed ecclesiae et communitatis, ut firmum sit sacerdotem non suo iure sed ministerio (quia ecclesiae minister est) Ecclesiae clavibus uti, nec tanquam suis aut sibi sed ecclesiae traditis.”

<sup>57</sup> *To the Christian Nobility* (LW 44, 134)

Christian through faith, Luther states that “the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own.” Our sins become Christ’s, Christ’s righteousness becomes ours. Christ was the first-born priest and now “all of us who believe in Christ are priests and kings in Christ.”<sup>58</sup> Therefore, “it is certain that all of us, as many as have been baptized, are equally priests, that is, have the same power in word and whichever sacrament.”<sup>59</sup> This, of course, immediately raised the question of the relationship of a single Christian to the keys and of an individual believer to the public minister.

Luther made efforts to clarify whatever ambiguity had existed in his “communal” language. He therefore stated that Matthew 18 said to all Christians that “whatsoever you loose on earth, will be loosed in heaven.” Thus ultimately the scripture gives the power of the keys (*potestatem clavium*) to all. But, says Luther in 1520, “not all have the use (*usum*) and the ministry, but only those ordained in this power.”<sup>60</sup> So in 1520 he attempts to make a distinction between being given the *potestatem* of the keys, as all Christians have, and having the *usum* of the keys, which only the public ministers have. But further arguments from the papal camp drove Luther’s language even further.

In his 1523 letter to the Bohemians concerning the ministry, Luther stated again that all who are Christians have the office of the keys *commune*, that is, commonly. But here he clearly explicates his meaning. He was intent on dismissing what he considered to be the Roman “mask of masks”, in that they were making a distinction between the right of the keys (*ius clavium*) and the use of the keys (*usum clavium*). Some papal theologians admitted the first to the church but the second they claimed for themselves and thus intended a distinction between the power of the

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<sup>58</sup> *Freedom of a Christian* (LW 31, 354).

<sup>59</sup> WA 7, 611. “nos omnes, quotquot baptisati sumus, aequaliter esse sacerdotes, hoc est, eandem in verbo et sacramento quocunque habere potestatem.”

<sup>60</sup> WA 7, 610-611. “Non autem omnes habent usum et ministerium, Sed solummodo ordinati in hac potestate.”



church and their own power.<sup>61</sup> But Luther returned to Matthew 18 and claimed that there Christ gave even the use of the keys to every Christian (*cuilibet Christiano*):

By saying ‘let him be to you,’ he gives not only the right, but also the use and execution. For what is it to say: ‘Let him be to you as a heathen’? unless thus: “Do not interact with him, deny him fellowship.” And this is truly to excommunicate, and to bind and close heaven. This confirms what follows: “Whatsoever you bind, is bound.” Who are these who are spoken to? Is it not all Christians? Is it not the church? ... Therefore let the foolishness of men cease. The keys belong to the entire church and every member of it, the right as well as the use and every mode.<sup>62</sup>

This early conflict with the Roman theologians here pushed Luther’s language as far as it was to go and at the surface of it seemed to eliminate any distinction between what were called public ministers and every private Christian. But in reality this was not what Luther intended. He wanted to show that every Christian possesses by right of baptism and faith all the promises and blessings given by Christ including the keys. In this regard, the clergy has no advantage over the common believer. The individual Christian has the right to make use of these gifts, he insists. But importantly, Luther introduces a distinction in the types of use of these gifts:

For since all of these things are (as we have proven) common of all Christians, no one may go forth in the midst by his own authority and snatch to himself what belongs to all. ... Truly this communion of right compels (us), so that one, or as many as would be pleasing to the community, should be chosen or accepted, who in place and name of all, who have the same right, should carry out these offices publicly, lest there be disgraceful confusion in the midst of the people of God, and a kind of Babylon come about in the church. But let all things occur according to order, as the Apostle taught.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> WA 12, 183-184. “Nam cum probandum illis sit, suam potestatem esse aliam ab Ecclesiae communi Ecclesiae communi potestate, ipsi hoc pro demonstrato arripiunt, et addunt deinde hanc suam fictam distinctionem, ius clavium esse Ecclesiae, sed usum esse pontificum: frivola sunt haec.”

<sup>62</sup> WA 12,184.

<sup>63</sup>WA 12, 189. “Verum haec omnia de iure communi Christianorum diximus. Nam cum omnium Christianorum haec sint omnia (uti probavimus) communia, nulli licet in medium prodire autoritate propria et sibi arripere soli, quod omnium est. ... Verum haec communio iuris cogit, ut unus, aut quotquot placuerint communitati, eligantur vel acceptentur, qui vice et nomine omnium, qui idem iuris habent,

Thus, whereas Luther in 1520 stated that not all Christians have the “use and the ministry” of the keys, here he claims that all Christians do have the use of the keys, but not all have the public use of the keys. In this way Luther meant to reexpress the fundamental points that the keys are *ecclesiae datae* and yet are also a *potestas episcoporum*.

While the above text may seem to imply that the role of the keys as a power of the bishops is merely a matter of common human insight and agreement for the sake of order, this also was not Luther’s intent. This is indicated in that, later in his career after the conflicts with the radical reformers, his language became more balanced. He taught, for example, that God himself wanted forgiveness preached by the public ministers; it is not our ministry or the pope’s, but God’s alone; Christ instituted the preaching office in his kingdom to save us from sin and bring us to eternal life; it is an external sign established by God, it is part of the divine order.<sup>64</sup> This is all in accordance with patristic precedent. The ministers are members of the church who govern within the church in accordance with the divine order. And Luther often refers to this divine order by a repetitive pattern of speaking about and grouping together baptism, preaching, the Lord’s Supper, and the keys. In this way, without doubt Luther most often uses the term “keys” to indicate the practice of private confession and absolution as a public act of the church.

However, language of the keys in the context of private Christian consolation is occasionally added to this general pattern of speaking about the keys in the context of preaching and the sacraments. Luther went further than those before him in describing how the private Christian makes use of the keys. This was a logical and theological necessity that was required by the medieval broadening of the application of the keys, from being merely the binding and

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exequantur officia ista publice, ne turpis sit confusio in populo dei, et Babylon quaedam fiat in Ecclesia, sed omnia secundum ordinem fiant, ut Apostolus docuit.”

<sup>64</sup> WA 37, 177; WA 41, 456f; WA 45, 252; WA 46, 146 “eius ordnung”; WA 47, 874 “hoc ipsorum officium ordinavit mihi et tibi in salutem.”

loosing of sin in the public discipline of the church, to being equivalent to the application of the law and gospel to the sins of every believer. In the above text, from 1523, Luther mentioned that by considering the impenitent to be like a heathen unto oneself, the Christian is using the binding key. This is simply a returning to the realm of public church discipline and is essentially taken directly from the picture presented by Matthew 16. But, according to Luther, this was not the full extent of how the keys might be used by the private believer. And one of his further statements must be considered briefly here because of its importance.

In 1536, Luther, in characteristic pattern, wrote in the Smalcald Articles that God is rich in the distribution of his grace through many means, preaching, baptism, the sacrament of the altar, the power of the keys, and also “through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren (*per mutuum colloquium et consolationem fratrum*).” It has been suggested recently that this final element should be understood in some way as a public function of the ministry in the interest of keeping the use of the keys within the public ministry. It was suggested that perhaps the phrase referred to only to some specific monastic practice. But this may now be decidedly rejected. Although the language of *consolatio* is not unknown among groups such as the Franciscans, it can be shown that this language was used by Luther in the context of the use of the keys by private Christians and with the same general balance found in the Smalcald Articles.

For example, Luther writes that the external word is necessary for consoling souls, whether that word is offered through a brother or whether the Spirit suggests a word heard once before.<sup>65</sup> For the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts through visible external means, like baptism, the sacrament of the altar, preaching, and also when one Christian comforts, reproves, or instructs another.<sup>66</sup> The Spirit in this way is with the church and governs her. He is not to be found in a

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<sup>65</sup> WA 40<sup>II</sup>, 410. “verbum ... necessarium, sive id per fratrem afferatur, sive spiritus verbum olim auditum suggerat.”

<sup>66</sup> WA 45, 22f. “Denn solchs thet allein der heilig geist, welchen man sihet durch die tauff, Sacrament und predigt, das ein Christ den andern trostet, straffet, unterweiset. Alle dise werck alle mit

monastery, or in Rome with the pope, but in baptism, the preached word, in the keys, and in the mouth of a brother.<sup>67</sup> Thus a laboring conscience should consider the counsel of a “good man”, turn away from what he feels, and keep only to that heard from another Christian. For it is God’s command that one should listen to a brother offering a word of the gospel during such dangers of conscience. “For this reason the keys were given to the church, that through the word one might console another and thus do away with the efforts of the devil.”<sup>68</sup> In these texts, Luther is again working with the idea that the keys are *ecclesiae datae* and yet, as we have seen, he recognizes the divine order by which the public use of the keys becomes a *potestas episcoporum*.

### 3. The Confessional Texts

The doctrine of the Lutheran confessions concerning the keys has been said to be very ambiguous, as noted earlier. But this is not the case when these confessional points are viewed against the background provided by the fathers and Luther. This background allows the statements of the confessions to stand in their theological context and in this place they demonstrate consistency and clarity.

In Part III, Article 7 of the Smalcald Articles, Luther explicitly states that the keys are “an office and power given by Christ to the Church for binding and loosing sin.”<sup>69</sup> This statement is a simple repristination of the patristic exegetical tradition of Matthew 16 with the addition of the

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einander sagen nit anderst, Denn das der mensch wissen sol, das er Gottes Creatur sei und nach dem fall Adae wider sei erloset durch das blut Christi, Darauff geht die predigt, tauff, Sacrament und Schlüssel, das wir wissen, das Christus fur uns gelidten hat, Neben dem nu schreibt ers noch Innerlich Ins hertz.”

<sup>67</sup> WA 47, 645.

<sup>68</sup> WA 40<sup>II</sup>, 570.

<sup>69</sup> SA III, 7, 1. “Die Schlüssel sind ein Amt und Gewalt, der Kirche von Christo gegeben, zu binden und zu lösen die Sünden.” The Latin text reads: “Claves sunt officium et potestas ecclesiae a Christo data, ad ligandum et solvendum peccata.”

characteristic Lutheran language of “office.”<sup>70</sup> It should be noted that the arrangement of these articles reflect precisely Luther’s normal procedure in teaching. He begins in Article 4 by speaking of the gospel, the overall message and promise of God that in more than one way provides “help against sin.” These ways of God are then explicitly listed: the external oral word (*mündliche Wort*), which is the true office of the Gospel, then baptism, the sacrament of the altar, the power of the keys, and then the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren. The next articles follow this order: Article 5: Concerning Baptism, Article 6: Concerning the Sacrament of the Altar, Article 7: Concerning the Keys. In this last article Luther points out that the keys aren’t just for binding and loosing great and well-known sins, as in public church discipline, but also for the subtle and secret sins which only God knows. Article 8 continues with the specific practice of absolution which is called a “power of the keys”, and discusses how it should and should not be managed. Then in parts 3-13 of Article 8, Luther turns back to discussing the external oral word as the divine means of grace. This entire section is very similar to what has been observed previously in Luther. But for Melancthon, this practice of setting the keys into the overall context of the gospel became the basis for yet another change in the language of the keys.

In Tractate 24, Melancthon states that

just as the promise of the Gospel belongs certainly and immediately to the entire church, so the keys belong immediately (*immediate*) to the entire Church, because the keys are nothing else than the office whereby this promise is communicated to every one who desires it.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> But this language adds nothing new as an “office” is simply a function or duty commanded or delegated to someone, in this case, the binding and loosing of sin. It is essentially what Luther had expressed in 1520 and 1523 as the “use” of the keys, the right and obligation to use. For a discussion of this language see Mark Nispel, “Office and Offices: Some Basic Lutheran Philology,” *Logia* 6, no. 3 (1997): 5 – 11.

<sup>71</sup> Tr. 24. “(Christus) tribuit igitur principaliter claves ecclesiae et immediate.” The German text of this article is quite expanded from the Latin and serves for the above translation, “Denn gleichwie die Verheißung des Evangelii gewiß und ohne Mittel der ganzen Kirche zugehört, also gehören die Schlüssel ohne Mittel der ganzen Kirche, diewiel die Schlüssel nichts anderes sind denn das Amt, dadurch solche

This text is similar to the previous in that it states the keys are an “office” of applying the gospel to the sins of individual Christians. Further, it openly reproduces the patristic exegetical tradition of Matthew 16. Melanchthon emphasizes this even further rejecting the claims of Rome by saying that the keys are not given through any one man, Peter or the pope, but *principaliter et immediate* (principally and immediately, *ohne Mittel*) to the church.<sup>72</sup> This is verbatim patristic argument.

In another important confessional text, however, Melanchthon changes the language of the keys. He states that “the power of the keys, or the power of the bishops, ... is a power or commandment of God, to preach the Gospel, to remit and retain sins, and to administer Sacraments.”<sup>73</sup> There are two important aspects of this text. The first is the definition of the keys, which are here defined as a *potestas* and *mandatum Dei* (a power and command of God). This agrees with the previous two texts in that they refer to the keys as a power and “office.” But here a wider definition of the keys is given. This wider definition includes the traditional or strict definition of the keys, the binding and loosing of sin, and adds preaching and administration of the sacraments. Thus Melanchthon includes under “keys” everything that Luther called the external oral gospel.<sup>74</sup> But this is rather minor to the present topic and should not distract us.

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Verheißung jedermann, wer es begehrt, wird mitgeteilt.”

<sup>72</sup> This later text was particularly important to Walther and early Missouri being repeated again and again in the discussions of the doctrines of the church and the ministry. But already here the text is used to play off church against ministers.

<sup>73</sup> AC 28, 5. “sentiant, potestatem clavium seu potestatem episcoporum iuxta evangelium potestatem esse seu mandatum Dei praedicandi evangelii, remittendi et retinendi peccata et administrandi sacramenta.” The German text reads: “Nun lehren di Unsern also, daß die Gewalt der Schlüssel oder der Bischöfe sei laut des Evangeliums eine Gewalt und Befehl Gottes, das Evangelium zu predigen, die Sünde zu vergeben und zu behalten und die Sakramente zu reichen und zu handeln.”

<sup>74</sup> It should be noted that this wider sense of the keys is actually quite rare in the confessions and in Luther.

The second and more important aspect of this text is that the keys are explicitly called a *potestas episcoporum*. This power is exercised by teaching and the administration of the sacraments and grants eternal things such as righteousness, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life. Thus the Lutheran church confesses explicitly with the fathers that the keys are a power of the bishops even though they are given *immediate* and originally to the church. These two basic foci are behind every other text concerning the keys within the confessions.

The foregoing raises immediately for the Lutheran Church, how the keys, which belong immediately to the church, come to be a power of the bishops. And this is a question that has plagued the Lutheran Church in North America for years. But its formulation indicates familiarity with the implicit assumptions of the recent controversy. For it sets up a distinction and separation of church and bishop. It requires some way to get the “power” from here to over there. And it is this chasm between church and ministry and the various theoretical bridges between them that has been the fuel of so much heated argument for decades. But for the fathers, this was not the case. For them it was simply a matter of knowing that there must be such bishops in the church according to the divine order and then the practical question of how to properly choose them.

It seems apparent to this author that part of the recent problem with understanding the ministry has been the language which speaks of the church as an invisible spiritual body of those with faith in their hearts. To be sure, the church in its ultimate reality, as God sees it, as the body of Christ consisting of all believers, must remain an article of faith. But the language of invisibility, which historically has been introduced via the doctrine of predestination, and which the Lutheran confessions do not use, begins to make the “real” church into a heavenly platonic form, from which the localized church gets some sort of derived, imperfect, and separate existence. Thus the minister, bound to the localized “derived” church, is distanced in language from the “real” church. Even with qualification, catechesis has not been able to overcome this

weakness.<sup>75</sup> This is nowhere seen more clearly than in our distinct change of understanding of the traditional language of the keys as *ecclesiae datae*. To the fathers and the confessions this meant that the keys were not given only to Peter or some other apostle and then subsequently distributed to the individual churches. It meant that each church including its bishop had been given the keys. To us, instead, this language immediately suggests a chasm we imagine to exist between the “church” and the “ministry” across which we must somehow transport power. And this understanding is then reflected in exegetical debates over various New Testament texts such as Matthew 28:19 and whether Jesus is speaking “to the apostles” or “to the church.”

For the fathers who did not labor under the burden of retaining an invisible church with a visible minister, it was much easier to conceptualize a model that described the bishop as a basic part of the church. The church is in the bishop and the bishop is in the church, as Cyprian would have it. This model understood that what was given to the church was exercised and used by the bishop, who rules over the church. Didn't the fathers realize that among the visible faithful there were evil bishops and evil people known as Christians who ultimately would not receive salvation? Of course they did. But it did not altar their basic description of the church as a group of people gathered about the life giving gifts of God given to them and administered to them through the bishop who rules and governs the church with his fellow clergy. Their doctrine of the keys reflected this description and explained the keys to be *ecclesiae datae*, not given to any one apostle or man, and yet a *potestas episcoporum*, at one and the same time without conflict.<sup>76</sup> And

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<sup>75</sup> For example, how many times has it been said by Lutheran laymen, in order to express that attending a church service is not a good work by which you earn salvation, has it been said, “Going to church has nothing to do with belonging to the invisible church, you only have to believe.”

<sup>76</sup> Could it be that it is because Luther too works with this basic conception, only with a deeper appreciation and understanding of the meaning and role of faith, that we have such a hard time wrenching answers from him for some of our chasm-crossing questions? When Luther says the church “can commit the keys either to one worthy or unworthy,” it does not require us to read it with preconceived chasm-crossing notions in mind.



it was this language which Luther and the confessions called upon when they spoke concerning the keys.