

For the

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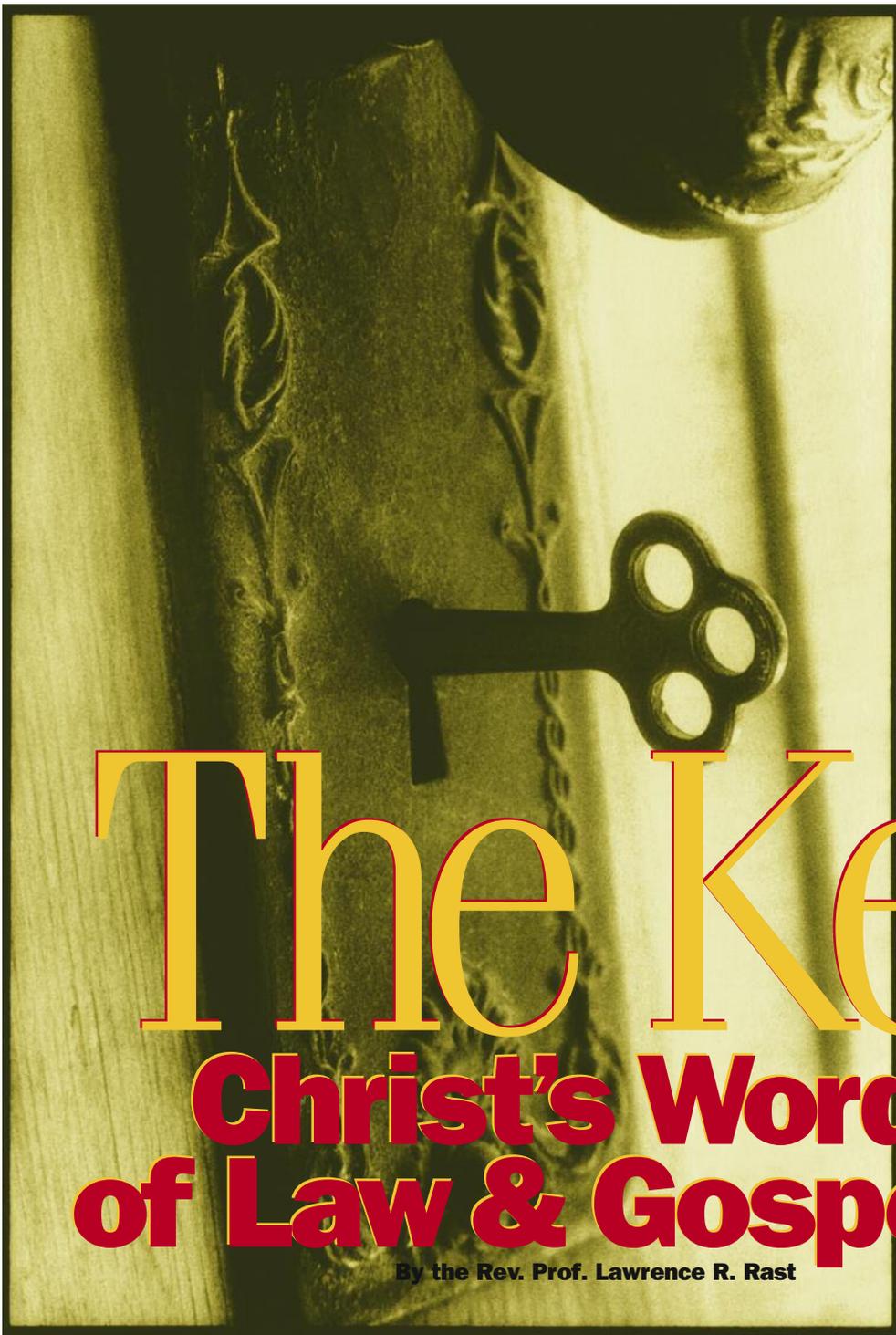
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The Keys:

Christ's Word of Law & Gospel

By the Rev. Prof. Lawrence R. Rast

The horrible abuse and misunderstanding of the precious keys is one of the greatest plagues which God's wrath has spread over the ungrateful world. It has increased so greatly in Christendom that almost nowhere in the world do we find a true use and understanding of the keys" (LW 40:325). Luther's comment from "The Keys" certainly applied to the unfortunate situation in the medieval

Roman Catholic Church. Rome obscured the gracious work of Christ on the cross by making its efficaciousness dependent on human obedience—repentance was turned into a human act that earned God's forgiveness. But by the time Luther wrote "The Keys" in 1530 he was aware of danger on another front. "Remember that the keys or the forgiveness of sins are not based on our own repentance or worthiness ... Such teachings are entirely Pela-

gian, Mohammedan (Türkisch), pagan, Jewish, like those of the Anabaptists, fanatic, and anti-Christian" (LW 40:364). Rome was certainly in error—as were any who compromised the certainty of forgiveness centered in Christ's cross.

What was at stake? For Luther it was the keys of the kingdom—the binding and loosing message of Law and Gospel. Through the keys Christ Himself condemned sin and unbelief, as well as freeing condemned and lost sinners. "The key which binds is the power or office to punish the sinner who refuses to repent by means of a public condemnation to eternal death and separation from the rest of Christendom. And when such judgment is pronounced, it is as a judgment of Christ himself ... The loosing key is the power or office to absolve the sinner who makes confession and is converted from sins, promising again eternal life. And it has the same significance as if Christ Himself passed judgment" (LW 40:372).

The keys carry the Gospel, in the broad sense, forward, condemning self-assured people of their sin and assuring the con-

trite of their forgiveness. The binding key, however, is for Luther only a means to an end. The ultimate aim of the keys is the forgiveness of sins. The loosing key, like baptism, creates new life. The keys are efficacious because of their christological character. "For Christ has not ordained authorities or powers or lordships in His church, but ministries, . . . For in [baptism and penance] there is a like ministry, a similar promise, and the same kind of sacrament" ("The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," *Three Treatises* [Muhlenberg, 1960], 208). Thus, the application of the loosing key is God's act, which delivers the life-giving forgiveness of sins won by Christ. Assurance stems from the application of the loosing key. "A simple trusting heart can

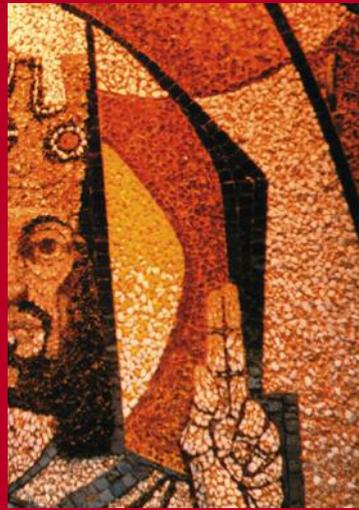
boldly rely on God's action. And in times of deep distress, with our conscience accusing us, we may say: Well then! I have been absolved of my sins, however many and great they may be, by means of the key, on which I may rely. Let no one remind me of my sins any longer. All are gone, forgiven, forgotten" (LW 40:375).

In the 17th century, certain heirs of Luther began to question whether the proclamation of the loosing key had not become too easy and free. "Should we not put a greater emphasis on seeing the necessary fruits of repentance before we proclaim the word of absolution?" they asked. "Is mere confession of sins enough?" For instance, Johann Arndt (1555-1621) outlined his understanding of the relationship between faith and repentance as follows: "Have I not preached to you out of which forgiveness comes? Where is your repentance? Where is the true living faith? Where is the renewal of your mind, the church of life? It is there where forgiveness of sins is" (*True Christianity* [Paulist Press, 1979], 114). Later, Philip Spener would extend Arndt's theology and note: "How many there are who live such a manifestly unchristian life that they themselves cannot deny that the Law is broken at every point, who have no intention of mending their ways in the future, and yet who pretend to be firmly convinced that they will be saved in spite of all this! . . . They are sure of this because it is of course not possible to be saved on account of one's life, but they believe in Christ and put all their trust in Him, that this cannot fail, and they will surely be saved by such faith." Such a faith, says Spener, "leads many people to damnation" (*Pia Desideria*, 64).

Spener believed that people trusted too much in the reception of the sacraments, and did not stress good works enough. Thus, concluded Spener, it was the pastor's responsibility to determine who was and was not a true believer, for it was to true believers alone that forgiveness was to be preached. "This is also true of confession and absolution, which we hold to be an effective means of evangelical comfort and the forgiveness of sins. It is this, however, to none but believers. Why is it, then, that so many, who do not have the slightest bit of that aforementioned true faith, confess and have themselves

absolved even while they remain unrepentant, as if their confession and absolution would be of benefit to them simply because they have performed an act, spoken a confession, and received absolution?" (*Pia Desideria*, 67).

The contrast between Luther and Spener is clear. Where Luther underscores the necessity of both keys, Spener slips toward an emphasis on the binding key. In other words, Spener limits the procla-



The keys carry the Gospel, in the broad sense, forward, condemning self-assured people of their sin and assuring the contrite of their forgiveness. The binding key, however, is for Luther only a means to an end. The ultimate aim of the keys is the forgiveness of sins.

mation of the Gospel to those whom he is convinced show the satisfactory fruits of faith. Works of the Law become the standard by which the presence of faith is judged. Luther will not abide those who persist in manifest, public sin. On the other hand, he rejects the notion that the Law can engender good works. Rather, the fruits of faith will flow from the application of the loosing key. "The

intention of the key which binds is that we heed its threatening and thereby come to fear God. He who believes the key which threatens has satisfied it before and without performing any works. The key does not demand any other work. Afterward such faith will indeed perform works" (LW 40:375).

For Luther it is a matter of assurance for the contrite—one's works only lead to uncertainty and, ultimately, to despair. Christ is displaced with self. While Spener continually examines the character of an individual's repentance from the perspective of the binding key as evidenced by works, Luther stresses the fact of the individual's sinfulness that has been covered by the blood of Christ applied in the loosing key. For the voice of the pastor speaking the absolution is Christ's voice. In 1531 Luther composed a short order of confession and absolution, which was appended to the Small Catechism. At the point of absolution the pastor is to state: "Do you believe that this forgiveness is the forgiveness of God?" After the confessor answers in the affirmative, the pastor continues: "Be it done for you as you have believed. According to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Go in peace" (*Book of Concord* [Fortress, 1959], 351).

In our time people run from one "prophet" to the next, seeking desperately to hear God's voice. What they normally hear is a Spenerian application of the binding key. "Change your life, accept Christ and He will accept you." What a blessing we have in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod! For here, God has graciously maintained the keys. And through the keys, faithfully administered publicly by the Office of the Holy Ministry and privately in the "mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren" (*Book of Concord*, 310), Christ speaks. And where Christ speaks, His keys effect His promise—to "recover for you the innocence you received in baptism. You will be born anew as a real saint, for God's Word and the keys are holy" (LW 40:375).

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