

LORD'S DAY 31

83. Q. What are the keys of the kingdom of heaven?

A. The preaching of the holy gospel
and church discipline.
By these two the kingdom of heaven
is opened to believers
and closed to unbelievers.¹

1. **Matthew 16:19** And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

John 20:21-23 So Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I

also send you." ²² And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

84. Q. How is the kingdom of heaven opened and closed by the preaching of the gospel?

A. According to the command of Christ, the kingdom of heaven is opened when it is proclaimed and publicly testified to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ's merits, as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel. The kingdom of heaven is closed when it is proclaimed and testified to all unbelievers and hypocrites that the wrath of God and eternal condemnation rest on them as long as they do not repent. According to this testimony of the gospel, God will judge both in this life and in the life to come.¹

1. **Matthew 16:19** And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

John 3:31-36 He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. ³² And what He has seen and heard, that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. ³³ He who has received His testimony has certified that God is true. ³⁴ For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the

Spirit by measure. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand. ³⁶ He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.

John 20:21-23 So Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." ²² And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

85. Q. How is the kingdom of heaven closed and opened by church discipline?

A. According to the command of Christ, people who call themselves Christians but show themselves to be un-christian in doctrine or life are first repeatedly admonished in a brotherly manner. If they do not give up their errors or wickedness, they are reported to the church, that is, to the elders. If they do not heed also their admonitions, they are forbidden the use of the sacraments, and they are excluded by the elders from the Christian congregation, and by God Himself from the kingdom of Christ.¹ They are again received as members of Christ and of the church when they promise and show real amendment.²

1. **Matthew 18:15-20** Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' ¹⁷ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.

1 Corinthians 5:3-5, 11-13 For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. ⁴ In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁵ deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. ¹¹ But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; not even to eat with such a person. ¹² For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? ¹³ But those who are outside God judges. Therefore "put away from yourselves the evil person."

2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. ¹⁵ Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

2. **Luke 15:20-24** And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son." ²² But the father said to his servants, "Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. ²³ And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; ²⁴ for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." And they began to be merry.

2 Corinthians 2:6-11 This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, ⁷ so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. ⁸ Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him. ⁹ For to this end I also wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. ¹⁰ Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, ¹¹ lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.

In this Lord's Day, we speak about the keys of the kingdom of heaven. The first question that we have to answer is, "*What is the kingdom of heaven?*" A kingdom is the realm over which a king or a queen rules. When we speak about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven, we refer to that realm over which God our heavenly King rules.

In the beginning, all of creation was included in the kingdom of God. He ruled over all the forces of nature, as well as over the hearts of all men. But when man rebelled against God in Paradise, God expelled man from His kingdom. With the fall into sin, another kingdom was established on earth, ruled by the prince of darkness. He is called the ruler of this world (cf. John 12:31). He rules the hearts of fallen man.

Christ was sent into this world to transfer us from the kingdom of Satan back to the kingdom of God (cf. Colossians 1:13). Through His obedience unto death, Christ obtained the key to God's kingdom (cf. Revelation 1:18, 3:7). This "*key*" to God's kingdom refers to the power and the authority which Christ received from God to open the kingdom of heaven to those whom the Father had given Christ.

Christ has, in turn, given the church the keys of the kingdom, that is, the power and authority to open and close the kingdom of heaven. There are two keys, namely, the preaching of the gospel and church discipline.

THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL

The kingdom of God is only opened to those who possess righteousness, that is, perfect obedience to the law of God. It is on account of disobedience that man was expelled from the kingdom of God in Paradise, and it is only on the basis of perfect obedience that the gates of the kingdom of heaven are opened to man again. Now fallen man, because of his depravity, cannot render this perfect obedience (righteousness) that God requires. But God has given Christ to be our Representative. He has rendered perfect obedience to God's law for us. He

offers His righteousness to us, which we must accept in faith. Only through faith can we receive this righteousness.

But man cannot believe of himself. Faith is a gift of God that must be given to man. Man's heart must be renewed so that he confesses his sins and seeks his salvation in Jesus Christ. Without this faith, no one receives the righteousness of Christ. Without this faith, no one can enter into the kingdom of God.

In order to work this faith into the hearts of man, Christ gave to the church the key of the preaching of the gospel. This refers both to the *audible word* as it is proclaimed from the pulpit, as well as the *visible word* as it is portrayed in the sacraments. Through the preaching of the gospel, faith is worked and strengthened. And through faith, we receive the righteousness of Christ which alone unlocks the gates of heaven to man (cf. Psalm 118:19,20).

The preaching is very powerful. In the prophecy of Isaiah (55:10f) we read that the Word of God never returns empty, but that it always accomplishes that for which it was sent. This is true for the Word of God that came directly from His mouth, as at the time of creation ("*Let there be...*" and there was). This is also true for the Word of God as it is proclaimed through the mouth of God's servants.

The power of the preaching lies not in man himself, but in the Spirit of God who is pleased to use the preaching as His instrument. Paul says that although he preached the Word in weakness, it was nevertheless with power - not with human power lest any man should boast, but with the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:3-5). As we have seen in Lord's Day 25, the Holy Spirit uses the preaching of the gospel as His instrument or tool to work faith. Thus the power to open and close the kingdom of God does not lie ultimately with the preacher. The power to admit citizens to the kingdom of God belongs to the Holy Spirit. The Church is nothing more than the workshop of the Holy Spirit, and the preaching is nothing more than His tool.

Church discipline

The second key of the kingdom is church discipline. Church discipline is not very different from the preaching of the Word. Actually, church discipline is a form of directed preaching, revealing to specific individuals what the Word of God says about specific heresies or sin, and exhorting them to believe and repent.

Church discipline does not begin with the elders, as is often supposed. It actually begins with the members of the congregation, and they remain involved with discipline as it runs its full course. It follows these steps:

1. **If someone sees his brother sin, he must admonish him.** He is not to go directly to the elders or to the minister. Neither is he to talk about the sin to others. He himself must go and speak to the one who sinned. If the sinner repents, then nothing more should be said or done. The matter has been resolved, and for the sake of the man's reputation, the one who witnessed the wrong must remain silent about it.
 2. If, however, the brother refuses to heed this brotherly admonition, and expresses no sorrow and promises no change of conduct, then the one who witnessed his sin **must take one or two others** with him in order that together they may exhort him, and be witnesses of his response (cf. Matthew 18:15,16).
 3. If the brother still refuses to repent, the **matter is to be brought to the elders.** It is only at this point that the consistory can become involved. It can only become involved on the evidence of two or three witnesses. The consistory then must exhort the sinner, reminding the sinner of the authority with which they have been invested as ambassadors of Christ (cf. Matthew 18:17).
 4. If the admonition of the elders does not meet with immediate repentance, the sinner is **withheld from the sacraments.** The congregation is not informed at this stage. This is called "silent censure." This period of time gives the opportunity to the office-bearers to continue their admonitions.
- To be withheld from the Lord's table is very significant. We have seen in the past that our participation in the Lord's supper is a sure sign that as certainly as we eat the bread and drink from the cup, so certainly do we partake in Christ's sacrifice on the cross. But the reverse is also true. If we are not allowed to sit at the Lord's table, then that is a sure sign that we do not share in the benefits of Christ.
5. If after numerous exhortations there is no repentance, then the **first announcement is made to the congregation.** They are informed that a brother of the congregation (no name is mentioned) is guilty of a certain sin. The congregation is urged to pray that the Lord might bring that brother to repentance.
 6. If after further exhortations the man persists in his sin, the elders are to proceed to the **second announcement** of church discipline. Prior to doing this, however, they are to receive the consent of Classis, which hears both the sin and the efforts undertaken by the consistory to bring this man to repentance. If Classis is satisfied that the man's actions are indeed contrary to God's Word, and that the elders have properly and sufficiently exhorted the sinner, they give their consent to the elders to proceed with the second step. With the second step **the name of the sinner is revealed to the congregation,** and they are encouraged both to pray for, and speak to, the brother.
 7. If these subsequent exhortations fail to bring the fruit of repentance, then the **third step** is taken in which **the date of excommunication is set.** The sinner is informed that if he persists in his sin to the end, then on the day assigned, the form for excommunication will be read. Excommunication means that one is cut off from fellowship with the church, and even more serious, that one is cut

off from fellowship with Christ and has no place in His glorious kingdom.

Church discipline is very serious. It is not simply a matter of words spoken by men. Neither does it concern only the judgment of men. If the church rightly excommunicates someone, then he is also excluded by God from the kingdom of light, and cast back into the kingdom of darkness.

This seems as though the church has been given a great deal of authority. It has! Christ said, *“Whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth is loosed in heaven”* (Matthew 16:19).

The authority which Christ has given to the church can be distinguished between 1. *legislation* and 2. *judgment*.

1. Authority to legislate—In Matthew 16:18 (quoted above) the words *bind* and *loose* mean *forbid* or *permit*. Whatever the elders permit, God permits. And whatever the elders forbid, God forbids. The consistory is given the authority to guide the flock and establish what doctrine and conduct are acceptable and unacceptable. Of course, this is not left up to their own will and whim. They themselves must be governed by Scripture and by the Spirit of God. On the basis of the Word of God, and only on that basis, they may regulate or legislate the doctrine and conduct approved by God.

2. Authority to judge — The elders are also given the authority to judge. In John 20:23 Christ said to the disciples and thus to the church, *“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven, and if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”* Again we stipulate that the elders must judge according to God’s Word, and not by their own fancy. When the elders judge faithfully, God upholds that judgment. The judgment pronounced by Christ’s faithful ambassadors in the present, will be upheld by God on the day of judgment. God stands fully behind His faithful office-bearers.

We must still speak briefly about the **purpose of church discipline**. There

are three reasons why church discipline must be faithfully exercised:

1. In the first place, there is concern for the **honour of God’s name**. If sin was tolerated, that would reflect poorly upon God. It would appear that God tolerates sin. But when sin is disciplined, then the church upholds God’s name by making it evident to all that God hates sin, for He is a righteous and holy God.
2. There is also a **concern for the brother** who has committed sin. If the one who has fallen into sin continues to live in sin and hardens himself in it, then he stands condemned before God. In order that the member might repent, the church disciplines him. It is done out of love, so that the brother might repent and be saved.
3. There is also a concern for the **purity of the church**. Sin is like cancer. It spreads throughout the whole body if it is not removed. If a brother is permitted to live in sin without discipline, then others will think that such sin is permitted by God. Sin will spread, and soon many more will be defiled. Sin must be removed before it infects the whole body.

In some instances church discipline leads to a hardening in heart. Some try to avoid the process of church discipline by withdrawing from the Church. In doing so, they not only rob themselves of the means of grace; they also break the vow they made when they professed their faith—the vow to submit to the discipline of the church. By breaking this vow, they incur still greater guilt before God.

In many instances those who are disciplined are brought to repentance. Sometimes this happens before discipline has run its full course. Sometimes they are brought to repentance many years later. As long as they live there is opportunity for repentance and forgiveness. For our merciful God has established an eternal covenant with us, and His promised grace continues to be offered to His covenant children as long as they live.

When there is repentance after excommunication, the consistory announces to the congregation the name of the brother, giving the congregation opportunity to lodge any lawful objections which it might have regarding the readmission of the brother. If there are no objections, the form for *Readmission* (p. 615 Book of Praise) is read.

These are the two keys of the kingdom which Christ has given to His church. It is good for a moment to pay attention to the important position which the church has been given. Our confession of faith declares, "*Outside of the church, there is no salvation*" (Art. 28 Belgic Confession). This means that the church alone has the keys of the kingdom. Only through the preaching and through the use of the sacraments does the Holy Spirit work faith and repentance into the hearts of men. Only through the preaching and church discipline is the kingdom of heaven opened and closed. There are no other means by

which man can enter the kingdom of God except those means which are given to the church.

Furthermore, we confess in Art. 29 of the Belgic Confession that the true church is the church which faithfully uses the keys of the kingdom. If the keys are not used faithfully, they are ineffective in opening and closing the kingdom. The church that fails to use the keys faithfully ceases to be a true church.

What a responsible and important role the church plays in the application of the salvation which we have in Christ. How important it is to belong to a true and faithful church of our Lord. And how important it is to pray for those who must handle the keys of the kingdom.



The First Key of the Kingdom—The Preaching of the Gospel

AUDIBLE via the pulpit	VISIBLE via the sacraments, especially Holy Supper
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Proclaiming to the congregation in general...

...the promise of God's mercy and salvation to those who believe and repent...	...and...	...the warning of God's wrath and condemnation to those who are unbelieving and unrepentant.
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The members apply the preaching to themselves. This leads to one of three responses:

1. Their hearts are opened to God's grace. They believe and repent. The kingdom of heaven is opened to them.	2. Their hearts are closed to God's grace. They continue in unbelief and sin. The kingdom of God is closed to them.	3. Their hearts are closed to the gospel, but as hypocrites they pretend to believe and repent.
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The members examine themselves before partaking of the Lord's Supper. This leads to a three-fold response:

1. They participate from the table of the Lord. The participation assures them that they have a part in the kingdom of God.	2. They abstain from the table of the Lord. Their absence testifies that they have no part in the kingdom of God.	3. They participate as hypocrites, and eat and drink judgment upon themselves.
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The Second Key of the Kingdom—Church Discipline

AUDIBLE via personal interaction	VISIBLE via the sacraments, especially Holy Supper
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Admonishing and exhorting individual members of the congregation who are known to be unfaithful in doctrine or conduct.

The consistory with divine authority audibly declares to them that God's wrath and condemnation abides on them so long as they do not believe and/or repent... OR ...consistory assures them of God's mercy and salvation if they repent and show real amendment.	...and...	The consistory with divine authority withholds them from the use of the sacraments, thereby declaring that they have no part in the kingdom of God as long as they do not believe and/or repent... OR ...consistory allows them to participate in the Lord's Supper, thereby assuring them of God's mercy and salvation
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If the sinner stubbornly hardens himself in his unbelief and sin, then the church is obliged to proceed with excommunication from the church, which involves two things:

1. No spiritual care and supervision of the office-bearers.	2. No communion or fellowship with members of the church.
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Questions:

1. What is the kingdom of God?
2. What was all included in the kingdom of God at creation? What happened with the fall into sin? Who rules this kingdom?
3. Why was Christ sent into this world? What has Christ obtained? What does this refer to?
4. To whom has Christ given the keys? What are these keys?
5. What must we possess in order to be admitted into the kingdom of heaven? Can we render this ourselves? From whom do we receive this? How do we receive this?
6. Can man believe of himself? Who must work this faith in man? Through what is faith worked?
7. We can distinguish between two types of preaching. Which are they?
8. What does Isaiah 55:11 say? What does this imply?
9. Wherein does the power of the preaching *not* lie? Wherein does it lie? What does 1 Corinthians 2:3-5 say?
10. With whom does the power to open and close the kingdom lie?
11. Is church discipline really different from preaching? What actually is church discipline?
12. With whom does church discipline begin?
13. What must you do if you see your brother sin? If he repents, what must you do? Why?
14. If you have admonished your brother who has sinned, but he does not repent of his sin, what must you do?
15. What must the consistory do if the sinner refuses to repent when they first admonish him? What is this called? What is so significant about this step of discipline?
16. If the sinner refuses to repent after being withheld from the Lord's Supper, what must the consistory do? What must the congregation do?
17. Prior to proceeding to the second announcement of church discipline, what must the consistory do? Why is this needed? In addition to praying, what is the congregation encouraged to do?
18. What is meant by excommunication?
19. Is church discipline only the judgment of *men*? What did Christ say in Matthew 16:19?
20. To what authority did Christ refer when He said, "*Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven*" (Matthew 16:19)? What does this mean? What restriction is placed upon the office-bearers?
21. To what authority did Christ refer when He said, "*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained*" (John 20:23)? What does this mean? What restriction is placed upon the office-bearers?
22. What is the first reason for church discipline? Why is this important?
23. What is the second reason for church discipline? Out of what is this discipline exercised?
24. What is the third reason for church discipline? Why is it important?
25. Does church discipline always lead to repentance?
26. If someone has been excommunicated, is there still opportunity for repentance?
27. What does the Belgic Confession (Art. 28) mean when it says "*Outside of the church there is no salvation*"?
28. How can we tell whether a church is a true church of our Lord Jesus Christ?
29. Since the church plays such an important role in our salvation, what two important things must we do?