

253. The Office of the Keys Is the Only Office in the Church.

They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. *Luk. 16, 29.*

The Church has only the power of the Word. It can command nothing that is not commanded in the Word of God; it must employ no force to make its word effective. It can only exhort, warn, and beseech; it can only point to God's grace or displeasure. A congregation or a church-body can go no farther than declaring whom it will, and whom it will not, acknowledge as a brother. If one will not hear the words which are proclaimed in Christ's name, a congregation may, and should, excommunicate him, consider him a heathen and a publican, debar him from receiving the Lord's Supper, and discontinue Christian fellowship with him. More than this, however, a church-body or a congregation cannot do.

It is true, this method looks rather old-fashioned, but nevertheless it is a fact that Christ has given us but one means whereby to bring sinners to Him, namely, His Word and the Sacraments. He commands: "Go, preach the Gospel," – nothing more and nothing less. For this reason these are the only legitimate means in the Church; they are the only net which Christ has given His ministers to catch men for His kingdom. Nothing is more clearly and plainly contrary and opposed to the very nature of Christianity than a desire to expand Christ's kingdom by physical force. The very first time that Christ sent out His disciples, He said to them: "And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand," and thus gave them the power they should wield in the Church – the power of the Word.

When Christ went up to Jerusalem to die, Salome, the mother of the apostles James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approached Him and begged that in His kingdom He might permit one of her two sons to sit at His right and the other at His left hand, so that they rank next to Him. But the Lord did not grant this petition. His Church is to wield no temporal, but only a spiritual power. The Office of the Keys, which is the power of the Word, is the only office in the Church.

Prayer.

O Lord God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, preserve unto us Thy precious Word, which is our heart's joy and comfort. Enlighten our teachers and ministers and grant Thine increase to their labors. Strengthen our pastors and prosper them that they may be well-pleasing to Thee. Bless them and let the work of their hands prosper. Fill our souls with true fear of Thee and fill our hearts with joy in the Holy Ghost. Enable us, we beseech Thee, by the illumination of Thy Holy Spirit, to use the Office of the Keys according to Thy will and with Christian prudence. Amen.

Grant that, as long as we are living,
We bless and praise Thy name, O Lord,
Receive Thy mercies with thanksgiving,
Forever trusting in Thy Word.
All glory be to Thee alone
On earth and then before Thy throne.

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You may contact Rev. Ley at: pastorley@leychalet.com.

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