

The Keys Of The Kingdom

Heidelberg Catechism

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Tonight's sermon is on "The Keys Of The Kingdom." This, again, is, I think, a great example of the benefit of catechetical preaching in that the catechism reminds us of the whole counsel of God and we probably wouldn't preach on this under normal circumstances but it brings this up to us.

The keys of the kingdom. You all have keys, even though we are moving more and more to what some call a keyless society. Some of you have cars where you just have some kind of bob and you walk up and your car unlocks for you. But you all know what keys are and keys basically function two things: they either lock doors so people can't come in, or they unlock doors in order that they might be able to come in. And the catechism, as you see tonight, it talks about the keys of the kingdom, Question 83. The preaching of the holy Gospel and the Christian discipline or excommunication of the Christian church by these two, the kingdom of heaven is open to believers and shut against unbelievers.

So the first thing I want to stress for us tonight is a fallacy that we all have in the way we think. It would seem to me, there is kind of an assumption that the kingdom of heaven is open to anyone and everyone and the reality is the kingdom of God is closed to anyone and everyone. No one has a right to claim the kingdom of heaven apart from God's sovereign election and saving you through the preaching of the Gospel. No one has an inherent right to claim heaven apart from God's gracious gift but you listen to the way our society talks and you go to a funeral of sometimes people who never went to church their entire life and they lived nothing like you might think a person of faith might live, but in every one of those sermons at the funeral, "This guy is in heaven. He's in a better place. He's got this. He's got that. I'm so thankful that uncle Billy Bob over here who was just a scoundrel of all scoundrels, he is no longer a scoundrel. He's in God's place." Well, he may be in God's place but it's not the place of blessing but the place of damnation. Apart from God using the key of the preaching of the Gospel to accomplish his eternal decree of saving those he appointed before the foundation of the world, the heaven is closed to you. We saw this morning in the preaching from Acts 2 the keys being used to open the kingdom to people who had crucified Christ at the hands of ungodly men, and when the keys of the kingdom which are the preaching of the Gospel are used, even the most vile of men can be brought into the kingdom of God through the atoning work and sacrificial work of Jesus Christ and the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit.

But just like we have this fundamental assumption that everyone has kind of an equal claim on heaven, that we also have an assumption that says people can't get excluded or to be excluded from the kingdom of God is no significant thing, and that is just as diabolical. The kingdom of heaven is closed to us unless God in his sovereignty chooses to open the door for us through the sending of a Gospel witness to us to preach and sending the Spirit that we might hear and believe, and God is fully capable of closing a door of the kingdom upon people who once made a profession of faith, and when that door is closed, that is a significant thing.

So tonight my focus is primarily and this is why I had Matthew 18 read for us, church discipline, we did an entire Sunday school series many years ago and went through a book on church discipline but it became clear to me that we still have much fuzzy thinking because in so many ways we teach on something, we do a really good job, then we don't have to, you know, deal with that again. We dealt with that. Well, you know, no. These things have to be brought back to on a regular basis.

I think it's the genius of the Heidelberg Catechism that Lord's Day 30 and 31 follow each other, not because of obviously numerical 30 and 31, but because in Lord's Day 30, it's dealing with the Lord's supper and it talks about, it asks the question as we saw last week, "Who is able to come to the table?" Then in Question 31 that we're going to look at tonight, there is the issue of church discipline, and it struck me in a new way that church discipline, true church discipline begins at the table of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, not only do we have a bad assumption that everyone should be included in the kingdom and once you are in, it's really no big deal if someone says you're out, a third faulty assumption that we have is that church discipline only is happening when an elder stands up in front and says, "Well, So-and-so refuses to repent"; that somehow that's when church discipline begins. So tonight if nothing else, I want you to learn two things. Two things: one, that church discipline is a congregational event, not an elder event; and church discipline begins with you disciplining yourself.

By way of reminder, turn to 1 Corinthians 11 that we looked at last week and there we saw that the apostle was warning some of the Corinthians, he says that many among you, verse 30, "For this reason many among you," not a few, many Corinthians are weak and sick, and a number sleep because they were not judging themselves rightly, or more specifically they were not judging the body of Christ rightly as they came to the table and Paul says, "You come for the Lord's supper but it's not the Lord's supper. You come together and it's not for the better, you all are worse." And part of it was because they were not examining or testing themselves, verse 28, "But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup." Whenever you partake of the table, you should be doing church discipline and it begins with you testing the genuineness of your conversion and the genuineness of your walk.

When it says in verse 27, "Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord, a man must

examine himself." In verse 29, "For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly." I won't go back and try to prove it but I believe there the body is not the body of Christ, that he is not rightly understanding the bread, rather he's not rightly understanding the body, the church and the unity that you will see throughout the rest of this chapter, chapter 12 in terms of the gifts, chapter 13 in terms of love, chapter 14 again with the use of the gifts for the building up of the body.

So church discipline begins when the congregation tests itself. "Am I in right relationship with God? And am I in right relationship with the body of Christ? Am I the source of division? Am I the source of hurting and discouraging other people?" You remember and this is a passage, whenever we read this from Matthew 5, I always kind of in myself chuckle and I don't mean chuckle in a funny ha-ha sort of way but chuckle in that, "I don't think this probably has ever been done in the history of the church." I'm sure that's a gross overstatement but maybe not. In Matthew 5 after talking about not killing one another, not committing murder and not saying it to one another fools and all that sort of thing because you'll be guilty of hell, he says in verse 23, "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you," not that you have something against your brother, your brother has something against you, and you remember it, so obviously you must be aware of it, he says, "leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering." I believe that's part of what that 1 Corinthians 11, a man must test himself, then he eats and drinks, and the point is not whether or not you get all the mechanics of when and how you offer and get to take the communion, the point is that we are as Paul says in Ephesians 4, to preserve the unity of the body of Christ and to do that is the beginning of church discipline, and I may need to discipline myself.

Now, it's really hard to do that. I was listening to R. C. Sproul this morning on the book of Acts and he cites George Bernard Shaw as the one who first declined pronouns and this is the way he said it was, "I am bold, you are arrogant, and he is brash." That's the declining of personal pronouns. "I am bold, you are arrogant, and he is brash." In other words, we tend to feel very comfortable with our own sins. The trouble is always out there. How often do we repeat that, what does Adam do in the garden? "Did you eat?" Did you eat, yes or no question. Did you eat and what does he say? "It's the woman that you gave me." If you take that seriously and just begin to listen to people's conversations or listen to the news, you will hear Adam replicated almost nonstop all day long. It's always someone else's fault. It's always somebody else's doing. It's always somebody else that messed up. It's never the speaker and since I'm the one speaking, you know it's never me, it's always you. No, it's us because how many of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God? All of us.

So we are to preserve the body of Christ and the unity the Spirit of God has already given. That is our default. That is our commitment. We are to be resolute at preserving the unity of the body and the primary suspect to screwing it up is you or me. So when we come to the Lord's table, we practice church discipline every week. Who comes to the table? Who is worthy of the table? Lord's Day 30, the ones who have properly evaluated their lives and tested themselves. And if you have something against a brother or a

brother has something against you, make it right now. As Paul will say to the Ephesians, don't let the sun go down on your anger. Be quick about resolving. That doesn't mean you can't literally let the sun go down before you resolve.

I remember when we were first married and the first time my wife as my wife, we had a fight, which I know none of you ever believe that ever happened. But my wife is very very argumentative. I never had a fight until I was married and all of a sudden... No, it probably goes the other way around. You know how it is. But I remember we were married just a few weeks and we had some fight, it's like 10 o'clock at night so I'm thinking Ephesians, "Do not let the sun go down." Oh, gotta fix this. And it didn't make anything better. She needed room but I'm fixing it. She needed room, I'm fixing it. You know how it goes. It went from really bad to much much worse. When we say don't let the sun go down, the point isn't we've got to get this resolved before the sun goes down, the point is be quick about resolution. Be quick about restoration. Be quick about forgiveness. Be quick about preserving the unity.

Now back in Matthew in the eighteenth chapter, you see that really and the reason why I had Mark read the entire chapter, because the whole chapter ultimately kind of deals with this from various ways. You can see the beginning in terms of the rank and how people are always posturing to be the most important person. Everybody wants to be the top dog and, no, we are to become like children. We are not to be stumbling blocks at all. You look at our athletic culture, so I'm the world's greatest running back and the Heisman Trophy was made from a mold of my life when I was an athlete, and so I get this multimillion dollar, you know, \$45 million contract to play football for some team. Five years, no trade, no cut, guaranteed contract, highest ever paid. Then two months later Jason gets a \$50 million contract and we all know that Jason's not nearly the running backs that I am, and so now it's time to show up to practice for the summer. I won't go. I hold out until I get my contract renegotiated to have \$52 million because I can't squeeze by on 45. But what's the whole point? You listen to the athlete and they will say, "It's not about the money," which I say, "Then show up to practice." "It's that I'm better than him."

Now we can laugh at the athlete but happens in the body of Christ. I'm slogging away trying to do the work of the Lord year after year, day after day, whether it's preaching or whether it's cleaning the toilets that need to be done, or whether it's washing the windows, or whatever needs to be done, helping with the fellowship meals, whatever it is. Nobody ever seems to notice and a spirit of bitterness creeps in. That's not to happen. We preserve the body of Christ's unity, so much so that when one of us goes astray, we go after that one, the 99, because what's true of everyone in this room? We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. All of you have sinned even this day. Some of you are, in fact, you're sinning right now. Remember how we talked about the first and great commandment is to love the Lord thy God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength? Anybody doing that right now? Then you're guilty of the greatest of all possible sins. So there ought not to be any haughtiness in us and when we see a brother or sister go astray, we should not be, "Ah!" Because nothing strange is happening when a sinner sins.

Let's see, that may be the fourth wrong understanding that we have, we actually think that once you become a Christian, you don't sin anymore, and you don't like to admit that you sin. That's one reason why it's so hard to confess it to people i.e., go to somebody and say, "I am sorry. I was wrong." It's almost impossible to do, isn't it? But we leave the 99 to go after the one because what do we see in the one? Us. Nothing strange has happened here.

Then he talks in verse 21 about how often are we to forgive? And Peter is thinking, "Well, seven times?" Thinking, "This is great. You know, one time, maybe two. I'm going to give a big number. Jesus," because he's kind of brown nosing, I think, a little bit here, "Jesus, how often should we forgive? Seven times? Look how gracious I am." And Jesus said, "No, 70 times seven."

Then he tells the parable about the great king who has forgiven a man who has had such a vast debt it could never be paid back in a lifetime. Never be paid back and that king forgives him and the guy, the servant who is forgiven goes out and takes a guy who has a debt to be paid off in a matter of a few months and totally blasts him. We are the great debtor. We are the great debtor that the King has forgiven. Who are we not to forgive everyone who hurts us? I'm not saying you haven't been really hurt. I'm not saying there isn't great injustice in the world and you may be greatly violated in this life and violated in ways I don't even know if I could bear hearing, but as great as we have been violated, our violations of the glory of God are greater all the time and we are to forgive, and Paul will say again to the Ephesians, we are to forgive one another even as we have been forgiven in Christ.

So church discipline begins by understanding that, first of all, none of us have a claim on heaven. Not one of us. Apart from God's sovereign grace before the foundations of the world to appoint all things, to send a messenger in the Spirit of God to you at an appointed time in which you might hear and believe, you have no claim on heaven. Secondly, we need to understand that just because you're in doesn't mean you stay in. If you will disrupt the body of Christ and you will become a stumbling block and you refuse to repent of your sin and you become arrogant and boastful and divide the body of Christ over your sin, there comes a time when it's possible for God to say, "No, you're outside the body of Christ and outside the protections of the grace of God." We need to understand that we all are sinners and our sin is great and we can't blame other people for who and what we are or what's happened to us, and we need to forgive as we have been forgiven.

So our Confession even says in the chapter on church discipline, chapter 26, paragraph 13 says, "No church member upon any offense taken, having performed their duty required of them toward the person they are offended at, ought to disrupt any church order or absent themselves from the assemblies of the church, or administration of the ordinances upon the account of such offense of any of their fellow members, but to wait upon Christ in the further proceedings of the church." When you hang out with sinners, you will be sinned against, and when that happens, you do your duty. You go and you seek to find forgiveness, seek to find restitution and reconciliation. But if that can't happen, like Paul

says to the Romans, as far as it is up to you be at peace with all men, but that means there are two people at least involved, you and the other person. As far as it is up to you, you be at peace. I go and I say, "Will you forgive me?" And you say, "It'll be a cold day in you know where, Tampa, Florida, when I forgive you." Well, I've done what I can but what our Confession says: wait. Wait upon Christ for the further proceedings of the church. What is Christ doing? He's building his church and he is conforming all of his sheep to his own image. Wait. Wait for the Lord. Let him do his work.

In the meantime, what do we do? Well, what is the duty our Confession talks about? Well, in Matthew 18 it says if your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private. Not on Facebook. And I'm not saying that flippantly. In the last year or two, I have watched several Reformed Baptist Facebook websites hang out the laundry of people in our movement, men who maybe have done some terrible things, I don't know, but others have brought them to task on Facebook. If I find any of you doing that, I will hunt you down and you don't even want to know what I'll do when I show up. They haven't even discovered words yet to describe what I'll do.

You go to your brother in private, but one of the things that's important to remember here is that the brother is someone who even necessarily just sinned once. It may not be just somebody who has sinned one time, and you go to him in private and you speak to him. This is church discipline and this is where the congregation is involved already. The congregation was involved at the Lord's table where every one of us is testing ourselves and judging the body of Christ rightly. "Am I a source of love and unity and encouragement in this body? Or am I a source of stumbling block and division and sin in this body?" And now you've got something you need to deal with.

Secondly, the congregation is involved so when a brother or sister is in sin and you're aware of it, you go to that person in private and you talk to them. That's church discipline. And I've said this to you on other occasions but, you know, you're sitting around with a group of men and you hear me talking about my wife and I'm telling you all sorts of things about my wife and they're just the kind of snarky embittered things that some men might say about their wives when just men are around, you ought to take me aside and say, "Brother, is everything all right?" Because there is no way I should be talking about my wife that way. And you've seen these things happen. You're aware of maybe gross sin but you're also very much aware of these kind of snarky, cynical, bitter spirits that are in the body of Christ. You go and you address that. Not next year, now before it takes a deep root and the devil is able to exploit it.

Secondly, after you've gone to a brother and I love the way the catechism puts it under Question 85, "How is the kingdom of heaven shut and opened by Christian discipline? Thus when according to the command of Christ those who are under the name of Christians maintain doctrines or practices inconsistent therewith and will not after having been often brotherly admonished, renounce their errors and wicked course of life are complained to the church." Often brotherly admonished. Well, those of you who are raising or have raised kids, every once in a while I will have a parent that says, "You know, I'm trying to discipline my son or my daughter and it doesn't seem to be working."

Do you know how many times you have to tell a kid no? Well, there is no number for that. It's just too high. Think of your own life. How many times has God convicted you of a particular sin and after that very first conviction, that was done with it, right? You just never struggled with that sin ever. It was just one time, it's good. Is that the way it works in your life? It's not the way it works in your life, it's not the way it works in parenting. You may have to tell a child 10,000 times no on the same thing. You may have to discipline them however you understand discipline thousands of times on the same thing, over and over again. That's why I've always said the hardest part of parenting in my life was consistency because if it's wrong on Monday, it sure better be wrong on Tuesday, but for a lot of people it was wrong on Monday morning, right at noon by Monday, wrong again at three and okay again at six, and on Tuesday we don't even deal with it, and then you wonder why the kids disobey.

But the point is its regular, consistent, often, brotherly admonition that's part of church discipline. Just because you go to a brother and say, "Hey, you really need to X or stop X," you may need to constantly do that. You may need to be someone who's involved in their life enough to ask them on a regular basis and to say, "I'll be praying for you on a regular basis," but it's not something that happens once, and this is where the congregation is involved and I keep telling you from the very first sermon I ever preached in this congregation, is that we are in this together. We absolutely need each other. We need one another to come and say, "How's it going? I've been watching. I've been noticing. How do you want me to pray?"

The second thing, well, third if you count your own testing yourself at the table, the second one going in private, the third if you want to think of it that way, is going with two or three witnesses, and it's interesting that what are the witnesses witnesses of? Are they witnesses of the sin? Or are they witnesses of the confrontation, the brotherly admonition? And by brotherly admonition, remember what Paul says in Galatians 6, "You who are spiritual, go and restore your brother." Brotherly admonition is that I know that you haven't done anything that I either haven't done or could do, so I'm not here as a judge looking down, I'm a brother looking straight at you because either I've already been there or I certainly could be there, and I think that two or three witnesses are the fact that they have come to witness that brotherly admonition, coming to say, "You know, that's got to stop," and the person says, "No, I disagree. I'm fine," and continue to reject the authority of Christ.

Then after that, verse 17, if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if he refuses to listen to the church, let him to be to you as a tax gatherer. But first of all, you tell it to the church. In the Canadian Reformed tradition, I'm sure there are others that have this tradition and in the Canadian Reformed tradition, they have a nice little Psalter hymnal, it's got all these great Psalms in the front, but then it's got a lot of like the Athanasian Creed, and it's got the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort, all of that in there, but then it's also got these different forms to deal with situations. There is marriages and baptisms and there is a form of excommunication of people, and it's interesting that they actually bring it to the congregation four times. I become aware or the elders become aware that there is some serious sin and that's

brought to the congregation announcement but there is no name. There is a brother, there is a sister. The way it reads is that the sad duty of informing the congregation that a brother or a sister by baptism, engrafted into the Christian church, is guilty of sin against such and such a commandment and he or she in spite of many earnest admonitions, did not show evidence of true repentance, therefore, with great sorrow, is obligated to deal further with this brother or sister and basically without reading the whole thing, is calling the church to pray. We did that a couple of weeks ago. That's what the church does best, isn't it? The church begins to pray. But how often do we even say, without mentioning names, there is a real issue, would you please be praying for repentance and a change of mind and heart? There is church discipline.

Then they have three other announcements leading up to the fourth being the excommunication and that sort of thing, but how often it is important for us to be praying, and how often our prayers and we've said this on other occasions, we pray and tonight was really quite extraordinary, I think in the way that the prayers that came up. We ought to be praying for health, we ought to be praying for jobs, we ought to be praying for these things, and please never hear me say we shouldn't pray for those things. If you think you hear me saying that, you're listening to me too quickly. We pray for those things. But if we know that we are all sinners and we are all capable of sin, therefore, we know that there is sin in the camp and when that becomes aware and I've gone privately to somebody and said, "Knock it off," and I've gone again, "Knock it off," and I've gone again and, "Knock it off," and several have now come with me, "Knock it off," and the person just refuses, we need to take it to the church and not necessarily by name at that point but why is there a church at all but to proclaim the forgiveness of sins and to teach, and that's how we open and close the door of the kingdom to people. And I wonder if some of the sin that has been in all of our families would have been a whole lot less in our families if the congregation sometimes without making any mention of a specific name was interceding actively on behalf of people because we weren't afraid to say, "You know, there is a situation in the life of the church and there is somebody doing X and they are refusing to listen to those who are admonishing them. Can you really start to hit your knees and to pray for this situation?" In a congregation our size, that kind of prayer request ought to be kind of somewhat frequent and the fact that it isn't tells me that we're not really dealing with the sin at the level that we really need to deal with it.

And if that person still refuses to repent, he says, if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if he refuses to listen to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax gatherer. I want you to look at verse 18 very carefully. I'm going to read it and I'm going to make a comment on it, "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." Sometimes this is another wrong attitude we have, I say, "Well, you know, we do church discipline and we have now gone beyond just asking for prayer. We are saying this person refuses to repent and is going to be treated as a tax gatherer." And someone might complain, "Well, what authority do you have to do that?" Well, it depends on how you want to look at it, I could say either none or a lot. But if you look at verse 18 carefully, when the church announces that, they are not doing anything that Jesus hasn't already done. They are not announcing anything that Jesus hasn't already decided.

Look at the text again, "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth," it's binding them in their sin. That's closing, using the key to close the kingdom of God's door in their face, so to speak, "shall have been bound in heaven." Now that's hard language for us. All I can say to you is the form of that language means that the binding, whatever you bind, happened after "shall have been bound in heaven." That is the antecedent. What was bound in heaven took place first. Jesus has already closed the door on a whole lot of sinful people who are walking around thinking that they are in like Flynn, and that's a sad thing. There is probably only one thing worse than somebody, and sadness, you can say the person over here who is an atheist, they should know better but they have become an atheist and they are very proud of the fact that they've gotten over God. That's a sad sad thing. It's a little sadder to see someone who once professed faith in Christ who now concludes they don't, they are not. "Hey, if you want to be a Christian, that's okay but, you know, I see the foolishness of it and I've moved on to better things." That's sadder. But the saddest thing of all is the person who has no more saving grace in them than that chair right there and they think they're going to heaven, and the church has allowed them to think they're going to heaven and that they're okay. They've got no more saving grace in them than that chair but we talk to them as if, "Well, you know." And I don't know if it's sad because you look at the person and you know what's coming, or it's sad because the church has empowered the person to be so self-deceived in that they don't even know that that chair has a better eternal destiny than they do, metaphorically speaking of course. That chair has no eternal destiny, which I guess would be better. But do you understand what I'm saying?

So the genius of the Heidelberg, why did they go from the communion to the keys of the kingdom? Jesus Christ died to save sinners from their sin. The church exists to deal with sin so that when we get into the age to come, we don't have to deal with sin. Remember Hebrews 9, he will come again but with no reference to sin because it's been dealt with at the cross.

If Jesus had to die for sins, then sin is really really serious, and so we as Christians need to be doing discipline as a church but it starts with the congregation, first of all, testing themselves, 1 Corinthians 11:28, every Lord's Day at the table. That's where it begins. Am I judging the body rightly? Am I an encouragement? Am I a source of unity? Am I a source of help or am I a stumbling block? And dealing with it. Secondly, loving one another, brotherly, sisterly enough to go to people in private, "Are you okay? Is everything okay?" Because we don't and I'm guilty of that. I'm guilty of that as much as anybody, maybe more so. But you've got to go and you've got to be prepared to admonish over and over and over again just as a parent must admonish over and over again, just as God admonishes you over and over and over again, and understand nothing strange is happening by having to say it more than once. It's just the way we are as sinners and the church needs to find its appropriate mechanism to unleash specific prayers to deal with specific sins even if we need to guard a name for a season in order that we really are attacking the throne of grace on behalf of some of us, because sin has gotten the upper hand in someone's life.

Isn't that what you want for yourself? I think I read in this book one time, treat others as you would want them to treat you. I don't remember where I read it. It was a very well selling book, I think. Oh yeah, that was the Bible. Don't we want people to pray for us when we are struggling with things? Don't we want people to love us and to encourage us and to admonish us to grow? Then why won't we do that for others?

We should, but we also must understand that unrepentant sin in the end brings about serious consequences and the way Paul presents it in 1 Corinthians 5 is that we have turned such a one over to the power of the devil for the destruction of their flesh in order that they might be saved in the day of salvation. That's a serious thing. This isn't just a club with a bunch of kind of like-minded people who get together on Sundays because we really have nothing else to do. The church is a divinely ordained group where God has chosen the people of this congregation to be in this congregation at this particular time of life in order that we might together proclaim the Gospel of Christ, opening the door wide into the kingdom of God so our sins might be forgiven. Not that we get secret membership rings. No, we get forgiveness of sins and the promise of the Gospel to be conformed to the image of Christ and his righteousness, and to push us and encourage us through that process to the end, and those who refuse to repent, those who refuse to bow their knee to the Lord Jesus Christ, for them to be sufficiently warned to know to refuse to take the Lordship of Christ and the cross of Christ with its seriousness, has dire consequences in this life and much more in the life to come.

The keys of the kingdom. What are keys for? The keys are for opening doors and closing doors and God in his grace has opened the door for us. May we be found faithful to be proclaiming that Gospel that the doors might be opened for others, but may we also be serious about judging ourselves and encouraging in brotherly admonition one another that we might see the kind of spiritual transformation the Gospel has promised us.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we again confess that we are sinful people. We confess that we in this room are amongst the greatest of all sinners for truly we do not love you with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength, and clearly we have not been as concerned about the needs of others as we have been our own needs. So Lord, we just acknowledge that we have failed to do the things that you have commanded us to do, to love you and our neighbor, and we have done many things you have commanded us not to do. So now, Lord, we pray that you would send your Spirit amongst us to work in our hearts and minds to lead us to a place of genuine biblical repentance. And we pray, Father, for those in our midst who are struggling with sin, some that's private, some that has already been made known. Lord, we pray that your grace that is greater than all of our sins would powerfully come and bring these people to sincere and genuine repentance, that they might find a true covering of all of their sins. We pray, Father, based upon your love and based upon your endless grace, that all of our transgressions would be covered and that you would wash us from the stain of sin and cause us to be whiter than snow, and grant that we might hear joy's cheering voice in our ears as the church cheers and gives glory to you for the repentance and forgiveness and new life that is found even in one

wayward saint that has been won back to Christ. Have mercy on us all, in Christ we pray. Amen.