



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.1 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Meaning of the Word “Church”

The English word “church” has many different meanings. It may refer to a building, a congregation, an organization, a worship service, or a denomination. But the meaning of the word “church” in the Bible almost always refers to people, a special group of people who in their hearts believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin. In the Greek New Testament, the Greek word that is translated as “church” is the word ἐκκλησία *ekklesia*. It may refer to all these believers in Christ throughout the whole world, or it may refer to believers in Christ in a certain location on earth. But it almost always refers to people who believe in Jesus. As we study the uses of this word, we get a good idea of the Bible’s definition of “church” and what we must teach as the doctrine of the church and its ministry.

As we have learned in previous lessons, the Holy Spirit works through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament to bring unbelievers to faith in Jesus Christ. Out of the darkness of unbelief they learn to know who Jesus is and what He has done for them to rescue them from unbelief and eternal punishment. They now trust in Jesus as their Savior from sin and death. Since the Holy Spirit creates this faith in Jesus in more than one person, He creates a community of believing persons. This group or community of believers in Christ is the Church, the Church of Jesus Christ.

Think of what happened on the fiftieth day after Jesus rose from the dead, that is, the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit moved Peter and the other apostles to talk about **“the wonderful works of God”** (Acts 2:11). Many people, attracted by the special miracles that occurred on that day, listened to Peter, as he told them about Jesus’ death and resurrection and what this meant for them. When they were alarmed by their sins, Peter extended to them the gift of forgiveness of sins because of what Christ had done for them. The Holy Spirit worked through Peter’s speaking, and three thousand individuals **“gladly received his word”** and **“were baptized”** (Acts 2:41). Thus, the Holy Spirit created a community of believers in Christ through the Good News of Christ as spoken by Peter and the other apostles. These three thousand who gladly received the Good News (the Gospel of Christ) became the “Church” of Christ. They are described as **“all who believed”** (Acts 2:44). What did they do as believers in Jesus, that is, as the Church of Christ? **“They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers”** (Acts 2:42). **“And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved”** (Acts 2:47).

The apostle Paul often compared the Church, made up of believers in Christ, to a human body with many members. He wrote to the Corinthians: **“For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. ... For in fact the body is not one member but many”** (1 Corinthians 12:12-14). The Christians in Rome heard the same message from Paul: **“As we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another”** (Romans 12:4-5). To the Ephesians he wrote: **“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all”** (Ephesians 4:4-6).

Notice what all the members of this Church have in common: They all have the same hope of eternal life through Jesus Christ. They were all brought to faith in Christ by the same Holy Spirit. They are all

members of the same body. They all have the same Lord, Jesus Christ. They all have the same faith in Jesus. They were all baptized with the same baptism, the baptism instituted by Christ. They all believe in the same God. They all have this God as their spiritual Father who is over them all and through them all and even in them all.

Questions

1. What are some of the different meanings of the English word “church”?
2. If your primary language is not English, what is the word for “church” in your primary language? Does this word also have different meanings?
3. What is the Greek word that is translated into English as “church”?
4. What does this Greek word almost always mean in the New Testament?
5. Who creates the Church of Christ and how does He create it?
6. How did the Church of Christ come into being on the day of Pentecost?
7. Who are the members of the Church of Christ?
8. What do all these members of the Church have in common?