



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.10 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Church Is Apostolic

The apostle Paul describes Christ's Church as **"built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone"** (Ephesians 2:20). For this reason, Christ's Church is the apostolic Church, as we confess in the *Nicene Creed*. The apostles and prophets were selected by God Himself to receive words from God and reveal them to others on earth. The Old Testament prophets declared their message to be the very Word of God. The apostle Peter wrote: **"Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit"** (2 Peter 1:21).

In the same way Jesus promised His apostles that the Holy Spirit would guide them **"into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you"** (John 16:13-15).

Thus, the foundation of Christ's Church is what God gave the apostles and prophets to put into words. The revelation from God that we have in the Old Testament and the New Testament was given by the Holy Spirit to the prophets and apostles to be a written revelation that remains for all time as the foundation of Christ's Church. It is from the Bible (the Old Testament and the New Testament) that Christ's Church learns what it should believe, teach, and confess about God. God's Word is truth, as Jesus prayed to His Father on the night before He died: **"Sanctify them by Your truth, Your Word is truth"** (John 17:17). In that same prayer Jesus said: **"I do not pray for these (apostles) alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word"** (John 17:20). Notice that Jesus said all future believers in Christ will believe in Him through the word given to His apostles. In this way the apostles are the foundation of Christ's Church.

Our Christian faith is not built on the persons of the apostles or prophets. They were sinners like us, as the Bible makes abundantly clear. Our Christian faith is built on what they wrote as moved by the Holy Spirit. The words God gave them to write are God's words, and that is what makes their words a solid foundation for Christ's Church. The early congregation in Jerusalem has given us a good example of how an apostolic Church should conduct itself: **"They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers"** (Acts 2:42). They continued to listen to what the apostles were teaching. We cannot listen to the voices of the actual apostles, as they did, but we have their writings in the New Testament; and we have the writings of God's prophets in the Old Testament. We can read these writings and listen to Christian teachers explain them to us. Anything that is contrary to the apostolic teaching or that goes beyond this teaching or subtracts from it is not from God.

The Roman Catholic Church and other church bodies have introduced the idea of apostolic succession. By this they mean that the original apostles passed down their authority to their successors, who in turn passed this down to their successors, all the way down to the present time. In their opinion Peter was the chief apostle of Christ and the first pastor and bishop of the congregation in Rome. Peter then passed down his leadership position to the bishops who followed him in office. Eventually these bishops were called popes (fathers of the church) and their teaching was considered to be the ultimate authority in Christ's Church. In their opinion the Church is thus built on the foundation of the pope and the various cardinals and bishops who are the successors of the apostles.

But when we compare what these popes and bishops have taught as so-called successors of the apostles, it is clear that their teaching is not apostolic teaching at all, but man-made teaching. The same is true of other church bodies that claim that their leaders are the rightful successors of the apostles. There are even some Lutheran groups that claim apostolic succession, because their bishops were ordained by bishops who were ordained by other bishops who can trace their ordinations, supposedly, to the apostles themselves. But we do not need anything other than apostolic doctrine to be an apostolic church. All true Christians base their faith on what the prophets and apostles have written in the Bible, for that is the way the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith in Christ.

Along with the apostles and prophets Christ has given many other gifts to His Church on earth. The apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians: **“To each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift. ... He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ”** (Ephesians 4:7-12). **“From whom (Christ) the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love”** (Ephesians 4:16).

Every Christian has been given some gift or gifts they can use for the benefit of other members of Christ’s Church and for the benefit of non-members as well. Peter wrote: **“As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen”** (1 Peter 4:10-11). Notice that pastors and teachers are to teach nothing but God’s Word. They are to speak with one voice as the oracles of God, that is, in accordance with God’s written Word.

In his letter to the Romans Paul refers to various gifts Christ has given to His believers. He says: **“We, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness”** (Romans 12:5-8).

Paul devotes one whole chapter in his letter to the Corinthians on the subject of Christ’s gifts to His Church. Before listing some of these gifts, he says: **“The manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all”** (1 Corinthians 12:7). He compares the Church of Christ with a human body, saying: **“You are the body of Christ, and members individually. And God has appointed these in the church: first, apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues”** (1 Corinthians 12:27-28). The apostles are listed first, because to them Christ gave His Word – His teaching – with this instruction: **“teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you”** (Matthew 28:20). The apostles are the authoritative teachers of Christ’s Church for all time, and no one will ever replace them.

After the apostles and their associates died, there have been no new revelations from the Lord. Christ continues to give many gifts to His Church, but He has not provided new apostles and new prophets with additional apostolic teaching. Until Christ comes again, Christ’s Church remains the Apostolic Church.

Questions

1. What is special about the writings of the prophets and apostles in the Bible?
2. What did Jesus promise to His apostles before He died?
3. In what way are the prophets and apostles the foundation of the Church?
4. How was first congregation apostolic?
5. What is meant by apostolic succession?
6. What is wrong with the concept of apostolic succession?
7. List some of the various gifts Christ has given to His Church.
8. For what purpose have these gifts been given?
9. How does Christ's gift of apostles continue to benefit His Church?