



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.12 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

Forms of the Church and Its Ministry

The chief work of believers in Christ is to administer the means of grace: to proclaim God's law as preliminary, and to preach the Gospel of Christ for the salvation of mankind. This includes using baptism and the Lord's Supper according to Jesus' instructions, and teaching the whole counsel of God, as God has revealed it to us in the Bible. This then is the work of Christ's Church on earth.

But our Lord did not give detailed instructions as to how this work is to be done. He has equipped His Church with His Holy Spirit. He has given special gifts of personnel to His Church according to His own plans and purposes. But He has given His Church freedom to do its work in whatever ways it seems best. In His wisdom He has given His Church general guidelines, rather than specific rules. For example: **"Let all that you do be done with love"** (1 Corinthians 16:14). **"Let all things be done decently and in order"** (1 Corinthians 14:40). **"Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him"** (Colossians 3:17). **"Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God"** (1 Corinthians 10:31). And Christ's Church needs to show its love for God and for man by being obedient to God's moral law.

The book of Acts tells us how the early Christians carried out the work of the Church. The congregation in Jerusalem was at first led by the twelve apostles. But we also hear of James, the half-brother of Jesus, who was not one of the twelve, taking a leadership role in the congregation. Whether he was appointed to this position by the apostles, or whether he was chosen as leader by a vote of the congregation, we do not know. When Peter was released from prison by an angel of the Lord, he told a gathering of Christians: **"Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren"** (Acts 12:17).

When there was a complaint in the congregation about how the food for the widows was being distributed, the apostles gathered the whole congregation together and suggested (they did not command) that seven helpers be chosen for the distribution of the food. The apostles themselves had been in charge of this work, but they already had enough to do. They needed assistance. This was their reasoning: **"It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables"** (Acts 6:2). **"We will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word"** (Acts 6:4). The Jerusalem congregation accepted this suggestion and chose seven men for this work. The apostles did not appoint these seven men; the congregation chose them. Exactly how they were chosen we do not know.

Does this then mean that every Christian congregation should choose seven men as helpers, so that the spiritual leaders can concentrate on prayer and the ministry of the Word? The book of Acts gives us descriptions, not prescriptions. That is, we are told what they did in their freedom. We are not told we must do things the same way; we are not told how we must do things in our congregations today.

We read that the congregation of Christians in Antioch of Syria had five **"prophets and teachers"** (Acts 13:1). In some way that we do not know the Holy Spirit told them that they should choose two of the five to become missionaries to the Gentiles. These two were Barnabas and Paul, called by God through the congregation at Antioch for this special work. When they concluded their first mission journey, they returned to Antioch and **"reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles"** (Acts 14:27).

When a dispute arose between some Jerusalem Christians and the two missionaries about their methods of doing mission work, **“they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question”** (Acts 15:2). We do not know how they came to this decision – whether it was by vote or by common consent or in some other way. The meeting took place in Jerusalem, and it was attended by **“all the multitude”** (Acts 15:12), including **“the apostles and elders”** (Acts 15:6). Both sides were given the opportunity to present their case, and the matter was finally decided by God Himself, who had demonstrated in the house of Cornelius that Gentiles could be Christians without having to become Jews first. Peter was the apostle who spoke the Word of God on this occasion. It seems that James, the brother of Jesus, was the chairman of the assembly, and he then proposed a practical way in which Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians could work side by side in the preaching and spreading of the Gospel. They wrote letter and it sent to all the congregations involved in this dispute.

It was natural that those brought to faith in Christ by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace should gather together in groups called congregations. These groups were free to make their own rules regarding their organization and type of worship and methods of using the means of grace. Circumstances differed from place to place and from one period of time to another. There is no one correct way in which these things must be handled. The apostle Paul warned against arrogance and pride: **“I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith”** (Romans 12:3). **“Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another”** (Romans 12:10). **“Do not be wise in your own opinion”** (Romans 12:16).

The congregation in Corinth had all kinds of serious problems. The apostle Paul wrote his first letter to them to help them resolve these difficulties. Their main problem was selfish pride. It was to this congregation that Paul wrote his description of love (1 Corinthians 13), which would solve most of their difficulties. Their greatest concern should be the salvation of souls, not their personal preferences. Paul put himself before them as an example: **“I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some”** (1 Corinthians 9:22).

The gatherings of the Corinthians for hearing the Word of God had become disorderly. Paul wrote to them: **“If ... there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind?”** (1 Corinthians 14:23). He said: **“Let all things be done for edification”** (1 Corinthians 14:26). No one can be edified, or built up in his faith, by chaos. Even their celebrations of the Lord’s Supper had become disorderly and loveless. Despite these problems, Paul did not prescribe a specific order of service that they should adopt. They were free to make their own changes according to the general guidelines he gave them.

Down through the ages Christians have made the mistake of setting up certain types of organizations and saying that their type is the only correct type. The Roman Catholic Church insists that their *hierarchical* organization ruled by the pope with his cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests, and deacons is the way Christ Himself has set up His Church. Other groups follow similar hierarchical, top-down organizational systems, such as the Episcopalians (Church of England). Many Protestant churches believe that a *presbyterial* system is taught by Scripture. In this system authority is shared by pastors and ordinary Christians (elders) by means of synods and other such gatherings. Another popular method of church organization is *congregational*. In this system the highest authority for decision-making lies in the local congregation, and no one has the right to impose any rules governing them.

The fact is, however, that Christ has not given His Church any specific type of organization or order of service (liturgy). Christians are free to develop whatever type of organization or order of service that is best suited to the preaching and spread of the Gospel of Christ in their circumstances in their area for their particular time. Circumstances change, and therefore also the type of organization can change. The congregation at Jerusalem saw the need for helpers, and so they chose them. The

congregation at Antioch in Syria saw the need for missionaries to the Gentiles, and so they sent them. The congregations of Antioch and Jerusalem saw the need for a joint meeting between the two congregations to resolve a serious problem, and so they organized such a meeting. The order of service followed by Jewish Christian congregations was no doubt considerably different from that followed by Gentile Christian congregations.

It is important to remember that each believing Christian is a child of God and a priest in Christ's Church. The apostle Peter wrote: **"You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light"** (1 Peter 2:9). Christians proclaim the praises of their Lord and Savior. Some of the Gospel preachers in Rome did not like the apostle Paul very much. But Paul was not very concerned about this. He said: **"What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice"** (Philippians 1:18).

Since Christ Himself did not prescribe any particular type of church organization and no specific order of service (liturgy), Christians need to resist any attempt by leaders or groups to impose any forms on them, as if these forms were necessary. Christ taught His disciples: **"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you"** (Matthew 20:25-26).

When some Jewish Christians insisted that Paul's Gentile assistant had to be circumcised, Paul reported: **"To whom (that is, to those who insisted) we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the Gospel might continue with you"** (Galatians 2:5). Paul taught the Galatian Christians that they also should not yield to those who insisted on certain rules that God had not given them: **"Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage"** (Galatians 5:1). To the Corinthians Paul wrote: **"You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men"** (1 Corinthians 7:23).

Therefore, if anyone insists that we must have a hierarchical or episcopalian or presbyterian or congregational form of organization in order to please God, we should not yield. If anyone insists that we follow a certain order of service in order to please God, we should not yield. And if we are in a position of leadership, we should not insist on getting our own way if that way is not required by God's Word. The apostle Peter told church leaders: **"Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly, nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock"** (1 Peter 5:2-3).

Among Lutherans all sorts of organizational forms have been used through the years. Lutherans in the United States were troubled for a time by leaders who claimed the right to have the members obey them even in matters not decided by the Word of God. There have been other Lutherans who insisted on a certain form of congregationalism as being the only proper form of church organization.

With respect to forms of church organization, we Lutherans who are members of the Church of the Lutheran Confession have subscribed to the following principles:

"If ... the minister, in his teachings and injunctions, were to go beyond the Word of God, it would be the duty of Christians not to obey, but to disobey him, so as to remain faithful to Christ. Accordingly we reject the false doctrine ascribing to the office of the ministry the right to demand obedience and submission in matters which Christ has not commanded" (Brief Statement of 1932, paragraph 32).

"The outward organizational form of a congregation is of human arrangement and may vary widely as it did even in the apostolic church. Compare Corinth with Jerusalem" (Concerning Church and Ministry, p. 6).

"The office of the public ministry is not limited to any divinely fixed form as such. ... In Christian liberty, as circumstances require and as the Lord supplies diversity of gifts, operations, and ministries, the church may separate the various functions of the public ministry of the Word and apportion them to whatever number of qualified persons it may choose to call" (Concerning Church and Ministry, pp. 32-33).

Questions

1. What is the chief work of Christ's Church on earth?
2. What does it mean that Christ has given His Church general guidelines, rather than specific details, for doing this work?
3. What problem arose in the early congregation at Jerusalem?
4. How was this problem resolved?
5. What does it mean that the book of Acts describes what was done, rather than prescribes what ought to be done by us?
6. Who sent out Barnabas and Paul as missionaries to the Gentiles?
7. Why is selfish pride such a problem for church organization?
8. In what way is the Roman Catholic organization contrary to Scripture?
9. Which form of church organization is commonly used in your locale?
10. What should we do when someone insists on a certain kind of organization or order of service?
11. What are some of the guidelines we should follow in setting up our organization or order of service?