



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.14 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

Local Congregations

As the Holy Spirit creates believers in Christ through the Gospel in various places, local congregations of Christians come into being. The first such New Testament congregation was the group of believers at Jerusalem, which numbered 120 before Pentecost (Acts 1:15) and soon thereafter numbered at least five thousand (Acts 4:4). Since this was such a large number that kept increasing, there were probably several different locations in the city where they gathered together to hear the Word of God from the apostles and to join together in receiving the Lord's Supper.

It is likely that in every larger group of Christians there are some people present who are not true believers in Jesus Christ, even though their words and actions seem to indicate that they are true Christians. Ananias and Sapphira, husband and wife (Acts 5:1-11), were exposed by Peter as hypocrites in the group at Jerusalem, and through the years since then there have no doubt been many more. Nevertheless, it is right to call every assembly that uses Christ's means of grace a "church" because of the presence of genuine believers in such a gathering. Since the Holy Spirit uses the means of grace to create Christians, a gathering of Christians is surely present where the means of grace are used.

Jesus Himself promised to be present in such gatherings, even if there were only as few as two or three, for He said: **"Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them"** (Matthew 18:20). Many of the earliest Christian congregations were formed when Christ's Jewish enemies persecuted the Christians in Jerusalem and **"they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria"** (Acts 8:1). Soon groups of confessing Christians were found in many of the neighboring towns and villages. This is the way many Christian congregations came into existence then, and the same is still true today when many Christians are forced to move to new locations because of persecution or perhaps also because of economic or business reasons.

When Paul went on his mission journeys, accompanied by Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Titus, Luke, and others, the people that learned the Gospel from him and his team formed local congregations in the various towns and cities mentioned in the book of Acts. We read that for the sake of order and leadership in these congregations they **"appointed elders in every church"** (Acts 14:23). We are not given the details of how these congregations were organized, however, or exactly how they conducted their Gospel work.

The congregation at Ephesus was the one where Paul spent the most time. He worked there for three years before moving on to another place. In his address to the elders of the Ephesian congregation, recorded in Acts 20:17-38, Paul gives us some indication of how he did his work. Among other things he says: **"I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ"** (Acts 20:20-21). **"I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God"** (Acts 20:27). These elders were spiritual overseers. To them in particular Paul says: **"Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood"** (Acts 20:28). Because of the dangers posed by false teachers, Paul tells them: **"Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears"** (Acts 20:31).

In his letters the apostle Paul called these groups of Christians **“churches”** (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 11:16; 1 Corinthians 16:1). They are called churches because of the believers in these groups, even though some of the people assembling in these gatherings may not have been real Christians. The purpose of these congregations was to proclaim the Gospel of Christ in the world and to edify or build up those who were already believers in Christ. Jesus said: **“Whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven”** (Matthew 10:32). These congregations confessed their faith and allegiance to Christ publicly. They also practiced church discipline, using the binding and loosing keys as Jesus instructed in Matthew 18:15-18. When the circumstances favored it, they sent out missionaries to other places, like the congregation in Antioch of Syria (Acts 13:1-3). They helped the poor and needy among them, and even concerned themselves with the physical needs of outsiders (Galatians 6:10). As they were able, they provided for the earthly needs of those who taught God’s Word to them. Paul said: **“Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel”** (1 Corinthians 9:14).

We could say that a congregation is a church group consisting of more than one Christian. When the group is small, not much organization is necessary. When the group becomes larger under the Lord’s blessing, it is usually helpful to establish some kind of an orderly way of doing things. This may mean adopting a constitution, and devising some kind of system to call church workers as they are needed. The organization may then find it useful to become incorporated or registered according to the laws of the civil government, in order to buy and sell property or to build buildings for worship or education, as they are needed. It is important that these external arrangements all serve the same spiritual purpose: the use of the means of grace, the proclamation of the Gospel.

In the United States at this time, our local congregations usually adopt some kind of constitution, and have definite membership lists of all those baptized persons for whom the congregation is spiritually responsible, as well as lists of those who are eligible to partake of the Lord’s Supper and those who have been given the authority to make decisions for the congregation through voting privileges. The members usually live in the same general geographical area, and when they move to another location, they transfer their membership to the nearest congregation that confesses the same teaching. Decisions are made concerning such matters as the time and place and language of the gatherings, the calling of pastors and teachers and other church workers as needed, the regular hearing of the Word, the regular use of the sacraments, prayer, adult education and children’s education, the edification of the members, the spread of the Gospel to others, the caring for the needy, and the practice of church discipline.

Such details need to be worked out by each congregation according to its circumstances. There will be differences from one place to another, and from one country to another. In some places the congregation may have to go underground, so to speak, because of persecution. They may have to carry out their work in dangerous circumstances, and they may have to adjust their practices accordingly. Our Lord has given us freedom to organize our Christian congregations in various ways, in order to fulfill Christ’s assignment to preach the Gospel.

Questions

1. What does the Bible tell us about the Jerusalem congregation?
2. What led to the formation of many congregations in Judea and Samaria?
3. List some places where congregations were formed by Paul and his team.
4. What may be found in Christian gatherings beside believers in Christ?
5. Why do we call local congregations churches?
6. How did Paul describe his work in Ephesus to the elders of that church?
7. What are some of the main purposes of local congregations?
8. How are congregations generally organized in the United States?
9. How are congregations organized in your locale?
10. Should all congregations be organized in the same way? Explain.