



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.15 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

Associations of Congregations (Synods and Church Bodies)

The various local congregations that emerged during the days of the apostles were aware of each other and cooperated with each other in both doctrinal and charitable endeavors. When there was a doctrinal dispute between Paul and Barnabas, on the one hand, and some of the Jewish Christians from Jerusalem, on the other hand, representatives of the Antioch congregation (in Syria) met with the congregation in Jerusalem to resolve the problem. Perhaps there were representatives from other congregations present as well. They then sent a letter that contained the recommendations of this council to the congregations in Galatia that were also affected by the same problem.

The Antioch Christians also were quick to send aid to the Jerusalem congregation because of a famine that led to dire need among the members in Jerusalem. We read: **“The disciples (in Antioch of Syria), each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul”** (Acts 11:29-30).

During his third mission journey the apostle Paul lead the gathering money from the various congregations he had founded on his mission journeys (chiefly Gentile Christians), which he then personally delivered to the Christians in Jerusalem (chiefly Jewish Christians) to relieve the deep poverty that prevailed there. This is what Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth concerning this project: **“Concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also. On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come. And when I come, whomever you approve by your letters I will send to bear your gift to Jerusalem”** (1 Corinthians 16:1-3).

The Corinthians were slow in doing what they had decided to do earlier, and so Paul encouraged them to continue in his second letter, devoting chapters 8-9 of 2 Corinthians to this topic. Here we read that **“the churches of Macedonia”** (2 Corinthians 8:1) were also involved in the gathering of funds, even though they had very little in the way of earthly goods. But they wanted to participate also in **“the fellowship of the ministering to the saints”** (2 Corinthians 8:4). The various congregations chose delegates called **“messengers of the churches”** (2 Corinthians 8:23) to accompany Paul on his journey to Jerusalem. They are listed in Acts 20:4: **“Sopater of Berea ... – also Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia.”**

In this way the various congregations saw themselves as partners in the work of the Gospel with Paul and the other apostles. Shortly before going to Jerusalem with this offering, Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome: **“Now I am going to Jerusalem to minister to the saints. For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem. It pleased them indeed, and they are their debtors. For if the Gentiles have been partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister to them in material things”** (Romans 15:25-27). Paul then hoped the Roman Christians would help him bring the Gospel of Christ to Spain.

We are not told of any formal or permanent organization of the early Christian congregations as a larger group. They worked together as various needs arose. Eventually the congregations formed associations in various areas that were led generally by the pastors of the chief cities in the area. In other words, a hierarchical system of church government developed under the leadership of pastors

called bishops or patriarchs who lived in the chief cities: Alexandria in Egypt, Antioch in Syria, Jerusalem, Rome, and later on, Constantinople as well. As time went on, the bishop of Rome asserted authority over all the other congregations, and an organization developed known as the Roman Catholic Church. But not all Christian congregations became part of this large organization.

We have previously mentioned that our Lord did not specify any particular form in which congregations had to be organized. Our Lord also did not specify any particular form in which associations of congregations should be organized, or even that they have to be organized in any permanent form at all. But it is necessary that confessing Christians work together in doing the work Christ has assigned to His whole Church when they agree in their teachings.

Among American Lutherans at the present time, it has become customary for local congregations to work together in church associations called synods or church bodies. In these synods local congregations join their forces to carry out certain church functions that are impractical for congregations to accomplish by themselves. According to Paul's words in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9, church leaders need to have certain traits and skills in order to carry out their work. Such a church leader needs to be "**able to teach**" (1 Timothy 3:2), "**holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict**" (Titus 1:9). The apostle Paul instructed Timothy: "**The things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also**" (2 Timothy 2:2).

Synods or associations of congregations may be able to set up training programs to educate young men and women for possible future leadership roles in the congregations. Women are limited to roles that do not involve them in teaching men or having authority over men, for Paul has written: "**I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression**" (1 Timothy 2:12-14). Women can be trained to be teachers of other women and teachers of children and to assist men in their work. Young men can be trained in the languages of the Bible (Hebrew and Greek) so that they can study the Word of God in the language in which the Holy Spirit gave it to us. They can also be trained to become careful preachers of God's law and Gospel and thus prepare themselves to be called by the Holy Spirit through Christians for the needs of the various congregations.

The benefit of synods or congregational associations is that by working together in this way the congregations can establish educational institutions, work on mission projects to the spread the Gospel, cooperate in gathering offerings for special needs that arise, encourage each other to hold fast to the true doctrine, and work together in publishing books and pamphlets and devotional literature of various kinds.

Our Lord has not specified any particular method or form by which these things can be accomplished. But Christians from various places who are united in doctrine can work together to accomplish these tasks, and generally some kind of organization is needed to assist the congregations in doing what our Lord wishes to be done.

The Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) is such an organization of congregations. The churches have agreed on a confession of faith and have adopted a constitution in keeping with the apostle Paul's word: "**Let all things be done decently and in order**" (1 Corinthians 14:40). Conventions are scheduled to enable the congregations to gather together for worship as well as for developing necessary educational and mission endeavors.

Our synod has adopted a statement called *Concerning Church and Ministry* which summarizes our confession on matters that have been in controversy. This document states: "*Any group of professing Christians gathered in Christ's name can rightly be called 'Church' because of the Christians in it. ...*

When it is said that a synod is ‘Church,’ this is said with reference to its inner nature and essence, namely insofar as it constitutes a communion of true believers. When it is said that a synod or conference is a ‘human arrangement,’ this is properly said with reference to its outward organizational form which is determined and defined by the congregations that have constituted this body. ... When a synod faithfully and conscientiously fulfills its assigned functions (whether it be the training of pastors and teachers, in promoting the work of missions, or in the area of doctrinal discipline, the supervision of doctrine and practice), its actions are completely valid and have divine authority.”

The ultimate authority in all church work is God’s Word. Christ Himself remains at all times the Head of His Church. But in brotherly love Christians in congregations and in synods can agree to do things in a certain way for the sake of good order. For example, a congregation or a synod may issue a call to an individual to do a certain task, and a call to another individual to do a different task. Each individual thus called should carry out the work to which he has been called and not interfere with the work to which someone else has been called. This is a matter of love and good order.

There are many different ways in which congregations and synods can organize themselves. Where God’s Word has not spoken, Christians are free to adopt any method or policy that helps them accomplish the great goal in which we work together: the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ.

Questions

1. Give some examples of cooperation between different congregations in the days of the apostles.
2. How were situations of extreme poverty handled by the congregations?
3. What project was the apostle Paul involved in on his third journey?
4. Why is it important to remember that our Lord did not prescribe any particular form of congregational or synodical organization?
5. What are some of the tasks that an association of congregations can take on as its responsibility?
6. What type of church organization is common in your locale?
7. Why should women not be chosen as pastors of Christian congregations?
8. Why can a Christian synod be called “Church”?
9. What are the benefits of having a constitution for a congregation or synod?
10. Why is it not necessary for a congregation or synod to have a constitution?