



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.16 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

Orthodox and Heterodox Church Groups

Throughout Scripture God has warned us through His prophets and apostles about the dangers of false teachers, that is, teachers who do not stick to teaching God's Word as it has been given to us. False teachers teach other teachings as though they were God's Word, sometimes even contradicting what God's Word teaches. The prophet Jeremiah unleashed a lengthy attack against false teachers in chapter 23:9-40. Among his words are these: **"Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. ... They speak a vision of their own heart, not from the mouth of the LORD'"** (Jeremiah 23:16). **"The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; and he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully"** (Jeremiah 23:28). **"Behold, I am against the prophets," says the LORD, 'who use their tongues and say, "He says"'"** (Jeremiah 23:31).

Our Lord Jesus carefully warned His listeners against false teachers. He said: **"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves"** (Matthew 7:15). Notice that false teachers are not always easy to detect because they wear sheep's clothing; that is, they pretend to be very godly Christians and give the impression that they are sincere followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus required that His disciples spread His teachings to the world. He said to them: **"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, ... teaching them to observe all the things that I have commanded you"** (Matthew 28:19-20). Jesus' apostles were not to go around teaching their own thoughts or ideas; they were to restrict themselves to Jesus' teaching. For this purpose Jesus gave them the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised on the night before He died: **"The Holy Spirit ... will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you"** (John 14:26). **"He will guide you into all truth"** (John 16:13).

The apostle Peter wrote: **"If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God"** (1 Peter 4:11). Every teacher in the Church should be able to back up everything he says or teaches in Jesus' name with words from Holy Scripture. The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: **"If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing"** (1 Timothy 6:3-4). According to Paul, a false teacher is a bloated ignoramus. That is, he dares to put his own ideas as equal to God's teaching or even superior to God's Word. At the same time, since his teaching is not based on God's Word, he is an ignorant person; he knows nothing. For there is no religious truth except God's truth, which He has given to us in the holy Scriptures. Paul told Timothy: **"Charge some that they teach no other doctrine"** (1 Timothy 1:3).

God wants His congregations and church leaders to teach His Word, and His Word only. He does not want His congregations and church leaders to teach anything contrary to His Word; He does not want them to add to or subtract from His Word. In other words, God wants His congregations to be orthodox, not heterodox. Orthodox (straight teaching) church groups teach God's Word in truth and purity. Those churches and church leaders that do not teach God's Word in truth and purity are heterodox (other teaching besides God's Word).

Thus, church associations and groups, both congregations and synods, are of two kinds: orthodox and heterodox. The orthodox groups teach the true doctrine; heterodox groups tolerate false teaching and may even promote it. The only way to determine whether a teaching is orthodox or heterodox is to

compare it with what God has told us in Holy Scripture. The apostle John says: **“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world”** (1 John 4:1). The congregation in Berea conducted such a test when the missionaries Paul and Silas came to their city. They **“searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so”** (Acts 17:11).

Since our Lord does not want any of His believers to be led astray by false teachings, He has told us to avoid false teachers. We have this word from the apostle Paul in Romans 16:17-18: **“I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you have learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.”** In other words, we are to take note of and watch out for those groups that do not stick to Scripture in their teaching and practice and policies, but who cause **“divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine”** we have learned from Scripture. These we are to **“avoid”** by breaking all spiritual ties with them.

The Church of the Lutheran Confession subscribes to a document called the *Brief Statement* (of 1932), which says on this topic: *“All Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church bodies, to have church fellowship only with orthodox church bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church bodies, to leave them”* (#28).

There are two kinds of false-teaching or heterodox church groups. Some religious groups do not use God’s appointed means of grace at all. In other words, they do not preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ in any way, shape, or form, nor do they use of baptism or the Lord’s Supper, as our Lord has taught us. Such religious groups are not Christian at all and do not have the right to be called Christian churches. Since the Holy Spirit uses the means of grace to create and strengthen Christians, and these groups are not using the means of grace, we should not expect to find any Christians at all in these groups. Where there is no Gospel at all, there is no Christian Church at all.

But there are also some religious groups that still use the means of grace to some extent but at the same time they allow other teaching to be taught as well. In other words, their teaching is a mixture of true and false, partly true and partly false. In some groups the true teaching may prevail, and the false teaching is minimal. In other groups the true teaching may almost be entirely suppressed, but yet there is enough Gospel still taught there that the Holy Spirit can use that Gospel to create and sustain believers in Christ. In these heterodox assemblies there may very well be members of Christ’s Church, that is, His invisible Church made up of all believers throughout the world.

For example, our risen and ascended Lord Christ wrote seven letters to seven different congregations in Asia Minor. These letters are to be found in Revelation, chapters 2 and 3. As we read these letters, we notice that some are orthodox, allowing no false teaching, and others are heterodox, permitting some false teaching. Yet all of these groups are called churches, and it is clear that there are Christians in all of these churches, even the congregation in Sardis, which Jesus calls a **“dead”** church. He says to this group: **“You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments, and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy”** (Revelation 3:4).

Does this mean that our Lord is not concerned about false teaching? Not at all. He calls on those congregations that tolerate false teaching to repent of their toleration of false teaching and to become orthodox once more. The apostle Paul wrote to the congregations of Galatia: **“A little leaven leavens the whole lump”** (Galatians 5:9). That is, just a little false teaching corrupts the whole group, just like a little leaven or yeast spreads and makes the whole loaf rise. Paul wrote to Timothy concerning two false teachers who were not teaching correctly concerning the resurrection and said: **“Their message will spread like cancer”** (2 Timothy 2:17). If false teaching is not detected and removed, it will spread and grow. For this very reason the apostle Paul tells us to avoid heterodox church groups, lest the Christians in our congregations begin to believe the false teaching instead of the true teaching and lose their faith. False teaching is always dangerous.

True Christians can be found in heterodox church bodies because of the Gospel that is still preached in these bodies. Nevertheless, it is never safe for a Christian to remain in such a heterodox church body when they become aware of the fact that their church body is promoting or even tolerating false teaching. Our Lord tells us to avoid such groups for our own spiritual good. He wants us to drink pure water rather than contaminated water.

Questions

1. What did the prophet Jeremiah say about false teachers?
2. Why are false teachers sometimes hard to detect?
3. What did Jesus give to His apostles so that they would teach only truth?
4. What is the difference between an orthodox and a heterodox church group?
5. How can we determine whether a religious group is orthodox or heterodox?
6. What does the apostle tell Christians to do when false teaching is detected in a group?
7. Why is this so important?
8. What does the Holy Spirit use to create and sustain Christians?
9. Where, then, can Christians be found on earth?
10. Are there Christians in heterodox churches? Explain your answer.
11. List the congregations in Revelation 2-3 that are heterodox.
12. Why is even a little false teaching dangerous?