



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.17 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Need for Unity in Doctrine and Practice

Since there is only one Holy Spirit who is the true author of both Old Testament and New Testament, and since God wants only His Word to be taught in His Church, all the teachers in Christ's Church should teach the same thing; that is, they should all teach what the Holy Spirit teaches in the Holy Scriptures. The apostle Paul wrote to the congregation in Corinth: "**I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment**" (1 Corinthians 1:10).

It is not God's will that there are many different religious groups calling themselves Christian, each one of them teaching something different from the others. All Christian groups should teach the same thing, and that same thing is what the Holy Spirit teaches in the Scriptures. Our ascended Lord has given His Church on earth apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers "**for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things unto Him who is the head – Christ**" (Ephesians 4:12-15).

Children are easily deceived. They believe what they are told, no matter what the source is. Thus, they are easily swayed or misled by false teachers. As Christians, we are not to be like gullible children, believing whatever we are told in matters of religion. What we hear and what we see needs to be tested based on what the Holy Spirit teaches in His Word. That is the way we can be assured of speaking the truth.

Sometimes testing the teachings of a religious group is easy, because their teachings are far removed from what the Bible says. Our Lord does not want us to participate with or cooperate with such groups. We are to remain separate from them. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "**Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? ... Therefore come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord**" (2 Corinthians 6:14-17). Religious groups that deny that Jesus is God or that deny the resurrection of Jesus from the dead or that worship any kind of god that is not the true Triune God of Scripture are clearly not groups with which we should worship or pray or work together in doing mission work or Christian education.

But God always wants us to avoid religious groups that teach some Christian truth but deviate in some areas of doctrine. For example, the Roman Catholic Church officially accepts the *Nicene Creed* as we do, but nevertheless it adds all kinds of teachings that are not taught in the Bible (for example: the papacy, purgatory, praying to Mary and the saints, justification by faith and good works). Since we are not united in doctrine and practice with them on the basis of the Bible's teaching, we cannot participate with them in any Christian work or worship. We must say the same thing about the Reformed or Protestant churches who do not teach what the Bible teaches with respect to baptism and the Lord's Supper and other clear Bible teachings.

What about Lutherans? Are we united in doctrine and practice with all those who call themselves Lutheran? It seems that we should be able to work together with them, since most of them say they accept the *Augsburg Confession* as their confession, even as we do. But it would be a mistake on our part to test a church body only based on a document that is listed in some constitution or on some piece of paper. We must test a group based on what is actually taught and practiced in their churches and schools. The *Brief Statement* of 1932, to which the Church of the Lutheran Confession subscribes, states: *“The orthodox character of a church is established not by its mere name nor by its outward acceptance of, and subscription to, an orthodox creed, but by the doctrine which is actually taught in its pulpits, in its theological seminaries, and in its publications. On the other hand, a church does not forfeit its orthodox character through the casual intrusion of errors, provided these are combated and eventually removed by means of doctrinal discipline”* (#29, emphasis added).

False teaching is so dangerous that Christians must always watch out for an intrusion of any kind of teaching in the church that is not from God’s Word and take steps to remove it. Complete agreement in doctrine and practice is the basis for the practice of Christian fellowship. When this agreement is threatened, the matter needs to be dealt with until unanimity in teaching prevails. For it is written: **“May the God of patience and comfort grant you to be likeminded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (Romans 15:5-6).

Unity in doctrine and practice does not mean that all teachers need to say things in the same way and in the same words. The content needs to agree with Scripture, but the way of saying it can be different. God does not give the same gifts to all Christians. He gives many different kinds of gifts. Those who are chosen as church leaders also have different gifts. Groups of Christians may also have many different customs and ways of dealing with problems. These differences do not mean that the groups need to separate from one another or declare one another to be false teachers. The music that is used in worship does not need to be the same in all places, as long as it is in agreement with God’s Word. The order of service that is used does not need to be the same in all places. The language used for worship does not need to be the same.

Sometimes there are differences of opinion on various methods of handling the church’s business. At one point the missionaries Paul and Barnabas disagreed with each other on whether John Mark should accompany them on their planned mission journey. John Mark had been with them on their first journey, but he had left them before the journey was completed. Paul thought that this was a good reason that they should not take him along on their second journey. Barnabas wanted to give him another chance. The Bible tells us: **“The contention became so sharp that they parted from one another”** (Acts 15:39). Paul and Barnabas then went on separate mission journeys, but they still regarded each other as faithful teachers of God’s Word. Their difference was not a doctrinal difference and not a difference in teaching or practice, for God’s Word did not condemn the judgment of either man.

But if Paul had called Barnabas a false teacher because of Barnabas’ opinion, or if Barnabas had called Paul a false teacher because of Paul’s opinion, that would have been contrary to God’s Word. We should not terminate fellowship with another group on matters that are not decided by God’s Word. That kind of termination or separation is called *schismatic*, that is, breaking fellowship with another group because of some matter that is not settled in God’s Word.

It is important that Christians and Christian groups who are agreed in doctrine and practice cooperate with each other and help each other as circumstances indicate. **“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”** (Psalm 133:1). The letter to the Hebrews tells us: **“Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching”** (Hebrews 10:24-25). The Day is the last day, the day of judgment when

Christ will return. Since there are so many false teachers in the world, and so many evils in society, it is important for Christians who do agree with each other in what God says in His Word to work in harmony for the sake of the Gospel. For no mission work will be possible after Jesus returns.

Questions

1. What is that same thing that all Christian teachers should teach?
2. What does it mean when Paul says Christians should not be like children?
3. How does God want us to deal with groups that do not worship Jesus?
4. Why do we not work together with the Roman Catholic Church?
5. Why do we not work together with Reformed or Protestant churches?
6. Why do we not work together with some Lutheran groups?
7. With whom should we work together in doing Christ's work?
8. What is the basis for Christian fellowship between two church bodies?
9. Why did Paul and Barnabas go on separate mission journeys?
10. Why is it not wrong for one Christian group to follow a different order of service from another Christian group?