



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.5 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Church as Believers in Jesus

Christ's Church is made up of all believers in Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul tells us that faith in Jesus is a matter of the heart: "**With the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation**" (Romans 10:10). God can read hearts, but we cannot. Therefore, it is not possible for us to know exactly who believes in Jesus in their heart, and who does not believe in Jesus. This is no problem for Jesus, however, as the apostle Paul says: "**The Lord knows those who are His**" (2 Timothy 2:19). Jesus Himself said: "**I know My sheep**" (John 10:14). "**My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand**" (John 10:27-28). Thus, the Church of Christ is a definite entity or quantity of persons known to God and known by God. On the other hand, Jesus has this to say to unbelievers: "**You do not believe, because you are not of My sheep**" (John 10:26).

All the members of Christ's Church recognize themselves as sinners unable to save themselves. They all trust in the redemptive work of Christ for their salvation. In every case this trust in Christ was produced in them by the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace: the Gospel in Word and sacraments. Paul says: "**By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free – and have all been made to drink into one spirit**" (1 Corinthians 12:13). In the Old Testament there was a God-designed division between Jew and Gentile. But Christ has erased that division, and Christ's Church knows no such divisions. "**For He Himself (Christ) is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that he might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity**" (Ephesians 2:14-16). All members of Christ's Church have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them, for Paul says: "**If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His**" (Romans 8:9).

Divisions based on language, culture, region, social status, skin color, state of health, income, occupation, age, gender, intellect, or size are erased in Christ. It is written: "**There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise**" (Galatians 3:28-29). In Christ's Church "**there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all**" (Colossians 3:11).

All the members of Christ's Church have been brought into the Church by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel, and they all have the same interest: teaching and spreading of the Gospel and living a Christian life that is worthy of the Gospel. Members of Christ's Church share the sentiment of the apostle Paul and the prophet Isaiah: "**How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!**" (Romans 10:15).

The faith that all members of Christ's Church have in common is not merely a historical faith, that is, a belief that God exists, that Jesus actually existed on earth and died on the cross, and that events took place as the Bible describes them. James tells us that even the devils have that kind of faith: "**You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe – and tremble!**" (James 2:19).

Nor is the Christian's faith simply an admiration of Jesus as a moral man, or a belief that God's laws are just and fair, or the idea that it is good and beneficial for society to live a moral life. Nor is Christian faith simply a trust that God gives good health and wealth to those who pray to Him and acknowledge Him as their God. This kind of trust in Jesus as a provider of earthly blessings is spreading in all parts of the world today and is accepted by many as authentic Christian teaching. Self-proclaimed evangelists proclaim this so-called "health and wealth gospel" and generally make themselves rich at the expense of their gullible hearers. Jesus is not interested in becoming our bread king, providing nothing but earthly food (John 6:15).

The faith that all members of Christ's Church have in common is a personal trust in Jesus and His work as the Substitute for sinners in His life and death and resurrection. This is the faith that the Holy Spirit creates and maintains through the means of grace. Christ said He would build His Church on Peter's confession: "**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God**" (Matthew 16:16). Every member of Christ's Church rejoices in Christ Jesus and places no confidence in the flesh (Philippians 3:3). Every member of Christ's Church puts his trust in the Gospel as summarized by Paul in these words: "**All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus**" (Romans 3:23-24).

The people living in this world are either believers in Jesus Christ and thus members of Christ's Church, or they are unbelievers and thus not members of Christ's Church. As long as unbelievers are still living on earth in their time of grace, the Holy Spirit is eager to create faith in Christ in their hearts and thus make them members of Christ's Church. After they have been called out of darkness into the light of Christ these former unbelievers are also "**a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people**" (1 Peter 2:9). On the other hand, when former believers in Christ "**depart from the faith**" (1 Timothy 4:1), as the apostle Paul said would happen, they lose out on these blessings; they are no longer members of Christ's Church. Those who are not members of Christ's Church are "**without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world**" (Ephesians 2:12).

The first New Testament Christian congregation in Jerusalem has shown us how it ought to be in Christ's Church. We read: "**Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul**" (Acts 4:32). But even in Jerusalem not all those associated with the congregation were necessarily members of Christ's Church. Ananias and Sapphira were in that congregation – a man and wife, who tried to deceive the congregation by saying that they had bought a piece of land and were giving the entire amount of money raised by this sale to the congregation. But this was a lie. Ananias and Sapphira had kept back part of the sale money for themselves. The Holy Spirit enabled the apostle Peter to know what was going on, and Peter said to Ananias: "**You have not lied to men but to God**" (Acts 5:4). Shortly thereafter, Peter said to Sapphira: "**How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?**" (Acts 5:9). Both husband and wife fell down dead at Peter's feet when confronted by Peter with their sin. The result was that "**great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things**" (Acts 5:11). God wanted His Christian Church to know that He can detect hypocrisy. Not all those who profess to be Christians are true members of Christ's Church.

Questions

1. What does it mean when the Bible says that Jesus knows those who are His?
2. How can all members of Christ's Church be described?
3. What Old Testament division has been erased by Jesus Christ?
4. What are some of the differences between believers in Christ and unbelievers?
5. What are some present-day differences between people that have no significance for membership in Christ's Church?
6. What is meant by historical faith?
7. What is meant by the health and wealth gospel?
8. How do people become members of Christ's Church?
9. What happens to those who lose their faith in Christ?
10. What is meant by the time of grace given to unbelievers?
11. What was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira?
12. If there are any health and wealth gospel preachers in your locale, what specific promises do they make to their listeners?