



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.9 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Church Is Universal (Catholic)

The ancient creeds use the term “catholic” to describe Christ’s Church. The term “catholic” means “universal” and it is a fitting term to describe Christ’s Church. Nevertheless, since the largest visible Christian church organization, the Roman Catholic Church, uses this term in its name, many Lutherans substitute the word “Christian” (or “Universal”) for “catholic” in order to avoid confusion. The term “catholic” does not really fit the Roman Catholic Church at all, since there are many Christians in many countries that are not members of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Holy Christian Church, however, is truly universal. It includes all believers in Christ wherever they have lived, are living, or will be living on the earth. It includes all believers in Christ from the past, the present and the future. Jesus told His disciples: **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature”** (Mark 16:15), and this instruction has been followed and is still being followed. The result is that now almost all people living everywhere on earth have been exposed to the Gospel in one form or another. Modern communication methods have made it possible for the Gospel to reach every corner of the world. The Bible has been translated into every major language and into many of the languages used by isolated groups. Wherever the Holy Spirit has used the means of grace to bring someone to faith in Christ, that person becomes a member of Christ’s universal Church. Jesus foretold the universality of His Church when He told His disciples: **“Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd”** (John 10:16).

God Himself intervened in a supernatural way to push His disciples to take the Gospel to non-Jewish peoples. God directed Peter through a special vision to visit the Gentile centurion, Cornelius, and preach the Gospel in his home. At that time Peter recognized what God was doing. He told Cornelius and his friends: **“In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him. ... He (Jesus Christ) is Lord of all. ... Whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins”** (Acts 10:34-43).

The Lord chose Paul to be His missionary to the Gentiles, and Paul carried out his assignment zealously, as indicated by the book of Acts and his New Testament letters. He told the Christians in Rome: **“Now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed ... to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for 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 3:21-24).

God planned from eternity to build a universal Church. He promised to Abraham: **“In you all the nations shall be blessed”** (Galatians 3:8). In fact, there were two times in history when 100% of the world’s population heard the Gospel of Christ: at the time of Adam and Eve and their family and at the time of Noah and his family. There are no limits or boundaries to Christ’s Church. **“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 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 3:26-29).

One of the early Christians formulated the phrase: *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. This means: “Outside of the Church there is no salvation.” This is true. All those who are saved are believers in Christ, and all believers in Christ are members of Christ’s Church. But if the word “church” in the above quotation is understood to mean a certain (visible) church organization, such as the Roman Catholic Church, then it becomes a false and very dangerous statement, because believers in Christ may be found in many different church organizations, as long as the means of grace are used to some extent in that organization and among those people. In fact, there may be believers in Christ who are not members of any visible church organization, and yet they are members of Christ’s Church.

The universal Church is divided into two groups, the Church “militant” and the Church “triumphant”. Christians who are still living on this earth and are fighting against the devil, the world, and their flesh are members of the Church militant. Those believers in Christ who have finished their lives on earth and are with the Lord (like the thief on the cross) are members of the Church triumphant. But both the Church militant and the Church triumphant make up one universal Church.

The apostle Paul pictured Christians on earth as involved in a lifelong struggle – a military action – against all the forces of evil. He wrote in his letter to the Ephesians: **“Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints”** (Ephesians 6:11-18).

The apostle Peter had the same struggle in mind when he wrote: **“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith”** (1 Peter 5:8-9). The individual Christian needs to struggle every day against his own flesh, as the apostle Paul spells it out in Romans 7:14-25. The apostle John speaks of overcoming the world in his letter (1 John 5:4-5).

In his last New Testament letter Paul spoke of his lifelong struggle against evil while looking forward to life in the Church triumphant: **“The time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing”** (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

There is no better description of the life of the Church triumphant in heaven than in the last chapters of the book of Revelation. **“Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away”** (Revelation 21:3-4).

Membership in the Church militant leads most surely to the Church triumphant. The Lord Jesus wrote to the congregation at Smyrna: **“Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life”** (Revelation 2:10). The lifelong struggle of Christians on earth leads to eternal glory.

Questions

1. What is the meaning of the word "catholic"?
2. Why do some Lutherans substitute the word "Christian" for "catholic"?
3. What do we mean when we say that Christ's Church is universal?
4. How have modern communication methods contributed to the Church?
5. In what ways are all Christians everywhere the same?
6. In what ways may they be different?
7. How did God guide the early Christians to bring the Gospel to Gentiles?
8. Why is it true that there are no believers outside of Christ's Church?
9. What is the difference between the Church militant and the Church triumphant?
10. Against whom must Christians fight as long as they live?
11. What does God promise to those Christians who endure to the end?