



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Chapter 13

The Doctrine of Church and Ministry



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Lesson 13.1 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Meaning of the Word “Church”

The English word “church” has many different meanings. It may refer to a building, a congregation, an organization, a worship service, or a denomination. But the meaning of the word “church” in the Bible almost always refers to people, a special group of people who in their hearts believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin. In the Greek New Testament, the Greek word that is translated as “church” is the word ἐκκλησία *ekklesia*. It may refer to all these believers in Christ throughout the whole world, or it may refer to believers in Christ in a certain location on earth. But it almost always refers to people who believe in Jesus. As we study the uses of this word, we get a good idea of the Bible’s definition of “church” and what we must teach as the doctrine of the church and its ministry.

As we have learned in previous lessons, the Holy Spirit works through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament to bring unbelievers to faith in Jesus Christ. Out of the darkness of unbelief they learn to know who Jesus is and what He has done for them to rescue them from unbelief and eternal punishment. They now trust in Jesus as their Savior from sin and death. Since the Holy Spirit creates this faith in Jesus in more than one person, He creates a community of believing persons. This group or community of believers in Christ is the Church, the Church of Jesus Christ.

Think of what happened on the fiftieth day after Jesus rose from the dead, that is, the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit moved Peter and the other apostles to talk about “**the wonderful works of God**” (Acts 2:11). Many people, attracted by the special miracles that occurred on that day, listened to Peter, as he told them about Jesus’ death and resurrection and what this meant for them. When they were alarmed by their sins, Peter extended to them the gift of forgiveness of sins because of what Christ had done for them. The Holy Spirit worked through Peter’s speaking, and three thousand individuals “**gladly received his word**” and “**were baptized**” (Acts 2:41). Thus, the Holy Spirit created a community of believers in Christ through the Good News of Christ as spoken by Peter and the other apostles. These three thousand who gladly received the Good News (the Gospel of Christ) became the “Church” of Christ. They are described as “**all who believed**” (Acts 2:44). What did they do as believers in Jesus, that is, as the Church of Christ? “**They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers**” (Acts 2:42). “**And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved**” (Acts 2:47).

The apostle Paul often compared the Church, made up of believers in Christ, to a human body with many members. He wrote to the Corinthians: “**For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. ... For in fact the body is not one member but many**” (1 Corinthians 12:12-14). The Christians in Rome heard the same message from Paul: “**As we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another**” (Romans 12:4-5). To the Ephesians he wrote: “**There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all**” (Ephesians 4:4-6).

Notice what all the members of this Church have in common: They all have the same hope of eternal life through Jesus Christ. They were all brought to faith in Christ by the same Holy Spirit. They are all

members of the same body. They all have the same Lord, Jesus Christ. They all have the same faith in Jesus. They were all baptized with the same baptism, the baptism instituted by Christ. They all believe in the same God. They all have this God as their spiritual Father who is over them all and through them all and even in them all.

Questions

1. What are some of the different meanings of the English word “church”?
2. If your primary language is not English, what is the word for “church” in your primary language? Does this word also have different meanings?
3. What is the Greek word that is translated into English as “church”?
4. What does this Greek word almost always mean in the New Testament?
5. Who creates the Church of Christ and how does He create it?
6. How did the Church of Christ come into being on the day of Pentecost?
7. Who are the members of the Church of Christ?
8. What do all these members of the Church have in common?



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Lesson 13.2 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

Other Expressions That Refer to the Church

Sometimes the apostle Paul compares the Church of Jesus Christ to a building. He wrote to the Christians in Corinth: **“You are God’s building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ”** (1 Corinthians 3:9-11). Every believer is built on the foundation of Christ. The missionary Paul established Christian congregations by preaching Christ, and any Christian leader who followed him should be careful to build on that foundation with good Scriptural materials and not build on human opinions or ideas.

In several places the building that is the Church of believers in Christ is called a temple. Paul asks: **“Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?”** And he continues: **“If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are”** (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). Heathens thought of temples as the places where their gods lived. But the Spirit of God, the true God, dwells not in buildings but in the people who believe in Jesus Christ. Every believer’s body is a temple of God, and all believers in Jesus, thought of collectively, are God’s temple, in whom He dwells. When Paul warned against sexual immorality, he asked: **“Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you?”** (1 Corinthians 6:19). And in his warning against working together with unbelievers Paul asked: **“What part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will dwell among them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people’”** (2 Corinthians 6:15-16).

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul again describes believers in Christ as a building. In this comparison he calls Christ **“the chief cornerstone”** of the building, and the **“foundation”** is **“the apostles and prophets”**. The apostles and prophets were those through whom God chose to reveal His Word. In other words, believers in Jesus Christ rest their faith on what the apostles and prophets have written about Christ. This is his comparison: **“Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit”** (Ephesians 2:19-22).

The apostle Paul also compared the Church of Christ to a bride. Jesus Christ is the Bridegroom. Paul wrote: **“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church, and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the water, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish”** (Ephesians 5:22-27). In writing to the Corinthians, Paul used the same picture: **“I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ”** (2 Corinthians 11:2). John the Baptist also used this picture, calling himself the friend of the Bridegroom, whereas Jesus Himself was the Bridegroom: **“He who has the bride is the bridegroom”** (John 3:29).

Jesus Himself spoke of the members of His Church as His sheep. He called Himself the good Shepherd, and said that He knew His sheep, and they knew Him. He said: **“I lay down My life for the sheep. ... And 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 10:14-16). Jesus also said: **“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). In His description of the last judgment Jesus spoke of His sheep as being at His right hand, and to them He will speak these wonderful words: **“Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”** (Matthew 25:34).

The apostle Peter used several terms to describe believers in Christ. In his greeting to them in his first letter he called them **“elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father”** (1 Peter 1:2). Later he wrote to them: **“You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood”** (1 Peter 2:5), and he added a bit later: **“You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God”** (1 Peter 2:9-10). In his letter to Titus the apostle Paul also called the believers in Christ **“His own special people”** (Titus 2:14).

Since God chose Jerusalem as the city where His temple was built and one of the hills of Jerusalem was called Mount Zion, God's people were also called **“the city of God”** (Psalm 46:4 and Psalm 87:3). **“Mount Zion”** (Psalm 48:11 and Psalm 125:1) also became a term for the people of God, as well as **“Jerusalem”** (Psalm 122:2 and Psalm 147:2). The letter to the Hebrews uses these terms to describe all Christians when it says: **“You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speak better things than that of Abel”** (Hebrews 12:22-24). The believers on earth become part of the great company of believers of all ages, who are destined to live forever with their God through their trust in the blood of Christ, their Savior.

The book of Revelation shows us in advance the beauty and glory of the Church triumphant: all the believers in Christ from all the ages of time and from all the corners in the earth. The apostle John was privileged to see the Church of Jesus as it will be forever, and he recorded what he saw in these words: **“I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, ‘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’”** (Revelation 21:1-3).

Questions

1. In what way is the Church of Christ like a building?
2. Which two things does Paul say are the foundation of such a building?
3. In what way is the Church of Christ like God's temple?
4. In what way is the Church of Christ like the bride of Christ?
5. Why are Christians compared with sheep?
6. In what way are Christians like living stones?
7. Why is it fitting that Christians are called Mount Zion and Jerusalem?
8. What did the apostle John see in the vision he received from God?



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Lesson 13.3 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Difference between Church and Kingdom

Although we sometimes speak of Christ's Church as the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven, there is a difference between the Bible word for "church" (ἐκκλησία *ekklesia*) and the Bible word for "kingdom" (βασιλεία *basileia*). The word "church" refers to people. The word "kingdom" refers to the ruling *activity* of the king. We can define the kingdom of God as any activity God undertakes in connection with His plan of salvation. There are some passages where this definition of the kingdom does not fit, but in most cases it does fit.

For example, Jesus compared the kingdom of Satan with the kingdom of God when He was accused of driving out an evil spirit through the power of the devil. Jesus said: "**If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? Because you say I cast out demons by Beelzebub ('the ruler of the demons' v. 15). ... But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you**" (Luke 11:18-20). The two kingdoms refer to the activity of Satan as opposed to the activity of God. Satan puts demons into people; that is his kingdom. Jesus, as God, casts out demons; that is His kingdom. Jesus further explained: "**When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace. But when a stronger than he comes upon him and overcomes him, he takes from him all his armor in which he trusted, and divides his spoils**" (Luke 11:21-22). Satan is the "strong man", but Jesus is the One "stronger than he".

When Jesus' enemies accused Him of breaking the Sabbath law by healing a man on the Sabbath day, Jesus responded by saying: "**My Father has been working until now, and I have been working**" (John 5:17). God keeps working on the Sabbath day, and so does Jesus, for Jesus is God, and He is ruling over all the world together with His Father at all times. Jesus at this very moment is "**head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all**" (Ephesians 1:22). The church is Jesus' people, those who believe in Him. The kingdom is Jesus' activity on behalf of His people. That is the way His kingdom comes. Thus, wherever the King is active, that is where the kingdom of God is present and at work.

The work of God that He is most interested in is His work of gathering a people of believers for Himself through the preaching of His Gospel Word. Jesus told His parables of the kingdom to show how His kingdom works. He told His listeners that the kingdom of God is like a sower going out to sow his seed. Some of it falls by the wayside, and the birds eat it. Some falls on stony places, where it starts out well but dries up in the heat. Some of the seed gets choked out by weeds and bears no fruit. But some falls on good ground and yields a good crop, in some places even a hundredfold. Jesus explained that in this parable "**the seed is the word of God**" (Luke 8:11). In other words, the kingdom of God comes through the speaking and spreading of God's Word. God works through His Word with the aim and purpose of bringing people to faith in Christ and producing good fruit in them. Jesus' other parables bring out other aspects of how Christ does His work in the world, and how God the Father and God the Holy Spirit are also active through the Word to gather and sustain Christ's Church of believers. Examine Matthew 13 to see how the kingdom of God works.

Jesus explained to Pontius Pilate the nature of His kingdom in these words: "**My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here. ... You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause**

I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice” (John 18:36-37). Notice that Jesus’ kingdom comes through the proclaiming of the truth. This truth is centered in Jesus Himself and the salvation that He established for the world through His suffering and death and resurrection. Wherever this truth is spoken, there the kingdom of God is at work. The apostle Paul wrote: **“The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”** (Romans 14:17). The Holy Spirit uses the Good News of Jesus to give the righteousness of Christ to sinner. This righteousness can be received only by the faith created by the Holy Spirit. This faith is then accompanied by peace and joy in the knowledge that our sins have been taken away and we stand as righteous in the sight of God.

For further discussion of the kingdom of God, please refer to the closing paragraphs of our study in Christology in Chapter 6. The word “kingdom” in the Bible sometimes refers to a place or a possession when referring to earthly kingdoms, but it is always good to keep in mind that the principal meaning is the ruling *activity* of the king. A good understanding of this truth helps us grasp the meaning of the prayer Jesus taught us: **“Thy kingdom come”**.

Questions

1. What is the difference between “church” and “kingdom”?
2. How did Jesus show His power over Satan in His ministry?
3. How did Jesus show His power over Satan in His death?
4. In what way are Jesus and His Father working every day?
5. Explain the parable of the sower and the seed.
6. Explain one of the other parables of Jesus recorded in Matthew 13.
7. Why can we call the kingdom of God a kingdom of truth?
8. How does God's kingdom come, as we pray in the Lord's Prayer?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.4 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

Jesus' Use of the Word "Church"

The four Gospels record only two times Jesus Himself used the word *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) in His teaching. In the first time Jesus was together with His twelve apostles in the mountainous area of Caesarea Philippi. In response to Jesus' question: "**Who do you say that I am?**", Peter said: "**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God**" (Matthew 16:15-16). Jesus was pleased with this answer, and He told Peter in the presence of the whole group: "**Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter (petros πέτρος), and on this rock (petra πέτρα) I will build My church (ekklesia ἐκκλησία), and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you (singular) the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven**" (Matthew 16:17-19).

It is important that we understand the context and meaning of Jesus' words in this passage, for the Roman Catholic Church interprets these words in a way that goes far beyond what Jesus actually said. By asking what His apostles had to say about Him, Jesus was calling for them to make their confession that He was no ordinary person, but that He was in fact "**the Christ**", that is, the Messiah (Anointed One) prophesied throughout all the days of the Old Testament. As was often the case, Peter spoke up first among the apostles. He said that Jesus was indeed the Christ, the very Son of God. Peter could not have come up with this better confession on his own. Jesus said that Peter was blessed because the Father had revealed this great truth to him.

Then Jesus repeated the name that He Himself had given to Simon Bar-Jonah, the name Peter, *Petros* (Πέτρος), which means a stone or a rock. (Cephas also means a stone, and sometimes Peter is given that name in the Bible.) Then Jesus introduces a new word, *petra* (πέτρα), which means a solid rock foundation. *Petra* (πέτρα) is not the same word as *petros* (πέτρος), and therefore we should not make the mistake of thinking that the man Peter is the foundational rock on which Jesus will build His Church. Rather, it is Peter's confession (given to him by the Father) of Jesus as the Christ that is the *petra* (πέτρα) on which Christ intends to build His Church. Jesus Himself is the foundation of the Church. Jesus will build His Church by creating in men's hearts the conviction and confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, as God had worked in Peter's heart. Thus, Jesus' Church consists of those who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and are willing to confess Him as such.

The Church of Christ is made up of those who believe as Peter confessed and are willing to join Peter in this confession. Those who believe in Jesus as the Christ are the Church of Christ, and "**the gates of Hades**" will not be able to prevail against this Church. Hades refers to the kingdom of Satan, who is engaged in a perpetual battle against Christ and His Church. But God's people, His band of believers, will not be stopped. They will continue to confess the name of Christ so long as the earth endures, and when Jesus returns triumphantly in glory at the end, they will continue to confess His name in heaven. Christ's Church is eternal and invincible.

Jesus then gives to the individual believer, Peter, the keys of the kingdom of heaven. With these keys Peter is given the privilege and duty of binding and loosing on earth, and his binding and loosing on earth will be carried out in heaven as well. The same keys are given to every individual believer in Christ – everyone who believes and confesses as Peter has just done. The binding and loosing are

explained by Jesus' words to His disciples on Easter Sunday evening: "**Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained**" (John 20:22-23). Loosing is the same as forgiving sins. Binding is the same as retaining sins, that is, not forgiving them.

Now that we have studied Matthew 16:13-19 in its context, let us briefly outline the Roman Catholic false understanding of these verses. They claim that Jesus is making Peter the visible head of Christ's Church on earth. In their opinion Jesus is calling Peter *himself* the rock on which Christ builds His Church. By giving Peter the keys, they believe that Jesus was giving Peter the authority to make laws for all the Christians on earth. Moreover, they say that Jesus intended this headship of Peter over the Church to be handed down to his successors, the Roman popes, who therefore are the rightful rulers of Christ's Church on earth. This Roman Catholic interpretation has no foundation in the rest of the Scriptures and goes way beyond what Jesus' words actually say. In fact, this explanation of Jesus' words was not the way the early Christians understood these words. It was not until hundreds of years later that this interpretation was invented to increase the authority of the Roman pope.

We turn now to the second time the word *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) is used in the Gospels. Again we find Jesus with His apostles, this time giving instructions to them concerning what we call "church discipline". These are Jesus' words: "**Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church (ekklesia ἐκκλησία). But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you (plural) bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you (plural) loose on earth will be loosed in heaven**" (Matthew 18:15-18).

Jesus' followers are not to ignore open sinning. Christians sin daily, confess their sins daily, and are forgiven daily, for Christ's sake. But when a Christian notices that another Christian is continuing to sin openly without repenting, their concern for the person will lead them to talk privately with them about their sin in the hope of leading the person to repentance. When it is clear that the sinning person is not listening, the matter should be discussed in the presence of one or two others; these others will again try to bring the unrepentant sinner to repentance. When it is clear that this is not leading the person to repent either, Jesus' instruction is this: "**Tell it to the church.**" In this case the word "church" cannot mean all of Christ's believers throughout the world. It would be impossible to tell every believer everywhere. The "church" in this case means the believers in Christ who are near at hand, that is, the group of believers who know the person who is unrepentant. These then are called on to add their testimony to that which has already been given, in the hopes of gaining the sinning person, that is, leading them to repentance. Finally, when the person will not listen to this larger group of believers, there remains nothing else to be done except to regard this impenitent sinner as no longer a believer in Christ – no longer a Christian – but rather a non-Christian, a heathen.

After giving these instructions to His followers, Jesus repeated the words He had said to Peter about binding and loosing. Notice in this case, however, Jesus uses the plural you, not the singular you. In other words, the keys of the kingdom of heaven were not just given to Peter alone, but to the whole group of believers. The keys are given to Christ's church on earth.

Questions

1. What important question did Jesus ask His apostles near Caesarea Philippi?
2. What did Jesus have to say about Peter's answer?
3. What is the difference between *petros* (πέτρος) and *petra* (πέτρα)?
4. On what does Christ build His Church?
5. What is meant by binding and loosing?
6. How does the Roman Catholic Church understand Matthew 16:17-19?
7. Give some evidence to show that this understanding is incorrect.
8. What is meant by church discipline?
9. What are the four steps outlined by Jesus regarding open sin?
10. What did Jesus mean when He said: "**Tell it to the church**"?
11. To whom have the keys of the kingdom of heaven been given?
12. How do we open heaven to sinners?
13. How do we close heaven to sinners?



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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?



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.6 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Church as Invisible and Visible

Since the Church of Christ is made up only of believers in Jesus Christ, and faith in Christ is a matter of the heart and cannot be seen, it has become customary to call Christ's Church of believers the invisible Church. Christ Himself is invisible on earth at the present time; we cannot see Him with our own eyes, nor can we see Him in other Christians. The Holy Spirit is an invisible spirit, and we cannot see His presence in Christians either. The Christians themselves are not invisible, but we cannot look into anyone's heart to determine whether that person is a believer in Christ or not. Faith in Christ always brings forth fruit, and we can see this fruit to some extent. Nevertheless, there are unbelievers who pretend to be believers in Christ, and the external works they do so closely resemble the good works of believers that there is no foolproof way to distinguish between believers and unbelievers.

God knows who His believers (His sheep) are. The invisible Church is not invisible to Him. At one time the prophet Elijah thought that he was the only believer left on earth and cried out to God: "**I alone am left; and they seek to take my life**" (1 Kings 19:10, 14). But God assured him: "**Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him**" (1 Kings 19:18). Elijah was not as alone as he thought. Later the prophet Nahum declared about God: "**He knows those who trust in Him**" (Nahum 1:7).

Jesus told His disciples that the Last Day would reveal that some who profess to be Christians in this life were not truly Christians at all. Their hypocrisy will finally be exposed. Jesus said: "**Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'**" (Matthew 7:21-23). Jesus made the same point in His parable of the ten virgins. Five virgins were not prepared for the coming of the Bridegroom, and when they wanted to attend the wedding feast, they were told: "**Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you**" (Matthew 25:12).

Unless the evidence clearly indicates that a person is an unbeliever, we who are Christians refrain from judging the hearts of those who profess Christ through their words and actions. The apostle Paul warns us: "**Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts**" (1 Corinthians 4:5).

Notice that the *Apostles' Creed* does not say that we see the Holy Christian Church, but that we "believe in the holy Christian Church". The *Nicene Creed* is worded in the same way. The presence of the Church is a matter of faith. The *Brief Statement* of 1932, one of the statements of faith of the Church of the Lutheran Confession, plainly says: "*The Christian Church on earth is invisible and will remain invisible till Judgment Day.*"

But even though we do not know the individual members of the Church, we do have a way of knowing where Christ's Church is on earth. Since the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith in Christ through the means of grace, the Church of Christ is surely present where the means of grace are used. Since the means of grace were used in the various congregations founded by the apostle Paul, he confidently addressed his letters to them in this way: "**To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints**"

(Romans 1:7); “**to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints**” (1 Corinthians 1:2); “**to the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in all Achaia**” (2 Corinthians 1:1); “**to the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus**” (Ephesians 1:1); “**to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi**” (Philippians 1:1); “**to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colosse**” (Colossians 1:2); “**to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**” (1 Thessalonians 1:1); “**to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**” (2 Thessalonians 1:1). How did he know there were Christians in these places? Why did he address them as churches? He knew that the Church of Christ was in those places because the means of grace were being used by those who professed Christ in those places.

Notice that the “church” in all of these places is described as “saints” or as “sanctified”. Paul is addressing believers (Christians). The Church is made up of nothing but Christians. So also in Acts the church in Jerusalem is made up of “**those who gladly received his word**” and “**were baptized**” (Acts 2:41), “**those who were being saved**” (Acts 2:47), “**those who heard the word**” and “**believed**” (Acts 4:4). The means of grace were being used there, and therefore we can be confident that there were believers there.

Many years before this, the prophet Isaiah had assured his readers: “**For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it**” (Isaiah 55:10-11). Where the means of grace are being used, God is at work through His Word, and His Word accomplishes what He wants it to accomplish: it creates faith in Christ and sustains persons in that faith.

For this reason the various groups in the world that gather around the means of grace can be called churches because the invisible Church of Christ (true believers in Jesus Christ) is present in those places,. Paul addressed his New Testament letters to these churches.

Believers in Christ generally also confess Christ. “**For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation**” (Romans 10:10). “**For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks**” (Matthew 12:34). Christians are known for their allegiance to the Word of God. For Jesus said: “**If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free**” (John 8:31-32). The early Christians in Jerusalem “**continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers**” (Acts 2:42). Believers in Christ are also concerned that the Gospel of Christ be proclaimed where they live as well as in other places in the world. They want others to be brought to faith through this same Gospel as the Holy Spirit has brought them to faith. And so they heed the word of their Savior to go into all the world and preach the Gospel and make disciples of all nations.

But it is possible and even probable that in many of these gatherings where the means of grace are in use, unbelievers or hypocrites may also be present. These unbelievers are not really members of Christ’s Church, and Paul’s letters were not really addressed to them. But we do not have the ability to separate these unbelieving hypocrites from the true believers. The Lord knows those who are His, but we do not know who are His. Therefore, unless these hypocrites show themselves to be obvious sinners who are impenitent, we, in love, consider them to be Christians and members of Christ’s Church, even though God knows they are not Christians and therefore not members of Christ’s Church.

Therefore, membership in a visible church organization, such as an organized congregation with a membership list or a larger church body with a stated membership is no guarantee of membership in Christ’s spiritual, invisible Church. Believers in Christ who have wrongly been excommunicated by a visible church organization may still be true believers in Christ and members of Christ’s spiritual Church. Martin Luther, for example, was excommunicated by a visible church organization, the Roman

Catholic Church, and yet we have confidence that he remained a believer in Jesus Christ to the end of his life because of his confession of Christ in words and actions. A man born blind said good words about Jesus, who had healed him, and the Jewish synagogue “**cast him out**” (John 9:34). But when this man then saw Jesus again, he confessed his faith in Jesus as the Son of God and “**worshiped Him**” (John 9:38). On the other hand, certain Pharisees were told by Jesus that there was no forgiveness of sins for them, because they refused to admit their sin. “**Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, “We see.” Therefore your sin remains’**” (John 9:41).

Jesus told His disciples in advance that they would be persecuted, condemned, and even excommunicated by religious organizations (even those professing Christianity), and that the ones persecuting them would think they were serving God by treating them in that way. Jesus said: “**They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service**” (John 16:2). We are also read that a member of a visible church organization named Diotrephes was “**putting them (true Christians) out of the church**” (3 John 10). Note that this verse is one place where “church” does not mean Christ’s invisible Church but rather some visible church organization or congregation.

When the Bible calls believing Christians “**saints**”, it does not mean that Christians are free from sin or perfect in their understanding of Christian teaching. It simply means that God counts their faith in Christ as righteousness. Their sins are forgiven, and they are regarded as holy saints in God’s sight. Martin Luther liked to use the Latin phrase *simul justus et peccator*, which means that a Christian is at the same time both sinner and saint. In addition to confessing the sins that we aware of, the we need to say with David: “**Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults**” (Psalm 19:12).

Even as Jesus was about to ascend to heaven, His disciples showed a weakness in their understanding when they asked their Lord: “**Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?**” (Acts 1:6). It seems they still had not fully grasped the concept that Christ’s kingdom is not an earthly one. Jesus replied: “**It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority**” (Acts 1:7).

On one occasion the apostle Paul had to rebuke the apostle Peter publicly (Galatians 2:11-21). Luke tells us that Paul and Barnabas disagreed about whether to take Mark with them on a mission journey, and “**the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another**” (Acts 15:39). Paul wrote: “**Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face**” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Members of Christ’s Church are still afflicted with their sinful flesh. Their knowledge and understanding of spiritual things will not be perfect in this world. In weakness Christians may still subscribe to erroneous ideas and doctrines. And Christians will never become perfect in their Christian living on this earth.

As Christians we enjoy total forgiveness of our sins through faith in Christ. But we need to be on guard lest we consider the forgiveness of sin as meaning that we have permission to sin. In his letter to the Romans Paul asks two questions that we need to consider carefully: “**Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?**” (Romans 6:1). “**Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?**” (Romans 6:15). Paul’s answer to both questions is a strong “**Certainly not!**” Sinning in the hope of future forgiveness is always dangerous. It is also dangerous to cling to any kind of false teaching, whether in major or minor matters. When such a false teaching alters the Gospel of Christ, we need to remember Paul’s curse: “**Even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed**” (Galatians 1:8-9). If the false teaching is about something that seems insignificant, we need to remember Paul’s warning: “**A little leaven leavens the whole lump**” (Galatians 5:6). Reckless living or adherence to false teaching endangers our faith in Christ and may even destroy it.

In contrast to what the Bible teaches about Christ’s Church, the largest visible Christian organization, the Roman Catholic Church, teaches that Christ’s Church is a visible organization under the pope. This

is the wording of an official statement from Vatican II: “Christ, the one Mediator, established and continually sustains here on earth His holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as an entity with visible delineation through which He communicated truth and grace to all. ... This Church constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him. ... They are fully incorporated in the society of the Church who, possessing the Spirit of Christ accept her entire system and all the means of salvation given to her, and are united with her as part of her visible bodily structure and through her with Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops” (Vatican Council II, *The Constitution of the Church*; §8 and §14). In their opinion, one can be sure of membership in Christ’s Church only by being an obedient member of the Roman Catholic Church and submitting to the authority of the pope and his bishops.

Because the word “church” can mean different things to different people, we need to be careful in how we speak. When we are speaking of Christ’s invisible Church, made up of only believers in Christ (sometimes called the *Una Sancta*, the one holy Church), we need to make that clear to our hearers. When we are talking about some visible church organization, such as an organized or incorporated congregation or an organized church body such as a synod, we need to make that clear to our hearers.

At all times we need to remember that Christ’s Church is made up only of those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior in their hearts. Paul distinguished between believing Jews and those who were Jews in name only, saying: “**He is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh, but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God**” (Romans 2:28-29). Even as “**they are not all Israel who are of Israel**” (Romans 9:6), so also not all who are called Christians or who call themselves Christians are really Christians.

Questions

1. What do we mean when we say Christ's Church is invisible?
2. How is it possible that some who think they are Christians are not?
3. Why would it be wrong for us to try to determine who the believers are?
4. Why does our creed say that we *believe* in the Holy Christian Church?
5. How can we determine where Christ's Church is on earth?
6. How is it possible that an excommunicated person may still be a Christian?
7. What promise has God given us concerning His Word?
8. How can a person be both a sinner and a saint at the same time?
9. Why can we call visible church organizations churches?
10. Why is it important to know that forgiveness of sin is not permission to sin?
11. What is the Roman Catholic teaching concerning the Church?
12. What is wrong with this teaching of the Roman Catholic Church?



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.7 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Church Is One – Its Members Are United Spiritually

Members of Christ's Church on earth may be separated from one another in many ways. Believers in Christ may be separated physically from other believers, living on opposite sides of the world, speaking different languages, following different customs, belonging to different denominations and different church bodies. The bond that unites Christians with one another is a spiritual bond. All believers in Christ are joined to Christ by faith in Christ. All of them are branches attached to the Vine which is Christ. Through their attachment to Christ, they are also attached to all the other branches. They are all members of the same body. There is only one Church of Christ, and all of its members are united with one another spiritually.

The apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians stresses the oneness of Christ's Church in these words: **"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all"** (Ephesians 4:4-6). To the Christians in Philippi Paul wrote: **"You all are partakers with me of grace"** (Philippians 1:7). **"Faith in Christ Jesus"** is what all members of Christ's Church have in common, even though they may not have much else in common (Galatians 3:26). Paul says, **"You are all one in Christ Jesus"** (Galatians 3:28). When a person no longer believes in Christ for salvation but trusts in himself or in someone or something other than Christ, he is then **"estranged from Christ"** and **"fallen from grace"** (Galatians 5:4), and thus no longer a member of Christ's Church.

The apostle John shared the Gospel of Christ with his readers, so **"that you also may have fellowship with us"** (1 John 1:3). John says: **"Our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ"** (1 John 1:3). When we have this connection with Christ, we are connected to all the others who are connected to Christ. But **"if we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin"** (1 John 1:6-7). As soon as our connection with Christ is broken, our connection with other Christians is also broken. The bond that joins us with other Christians in Christ's Church is a spiritual bond, namely, faith in Christ.

The Roman Catholic Church has a different understanding of Christ's Church. In their view a person belongs to Christ's Church if he is outwardly a member of the Roman Catholic Church and follows the outward practices of the Roman Catholic Church, regardless of whether they have spiritual faith in Christ in the heart. In other words, the Roman Catholic idea of unity in the Church is an external union, membership in the same external organization. The alleged unity of the Roman Catholic Church under the one pope and demands unity in outward observances is an external union without any real spiritual unity.

Many Protestants also seem to be more interested in external union rather than spiritual unity by faith in Christ. Much emphasis is placed on the union and merger of church bodies and congregations into one united organization. This is the aim and purpose of the ecumenical movement among Christians. The desire is to have all Christian groups, and even sometimes non-Christian groups, unite as one religious organization. External union is stressed rather than true spiritual unity. The ecumenical movement minimizes the dangers of false teaching and false practice. They want all those who call themselves Christians to worship together, to pray together, to work together, to preach the Gospel

together, even though they are not agreed in what the Bible actually teaches about worship and prayer and church work, and even though they are not even agreed in what the Gospel of Christ is. The many warnings of Christ and His apostles concerning false teaching and ungodly living are mostly ignored in the interest of external union.

Questions

1. Who are the members of Christ's one Church?
2. What is it that unites Christians with other Christians?
3. What are some of the external things that divide Christians?
4. What is the difference between external union and spiritual unity?
5. When does a person lose his membership in Christ's one Church?
6. What is the Roman Catholic understanding of the one Church?
7. What is the aim of the ecumenical movement among Protestants?
8. How is the ecumenical movement contrary to the Scriptures?
9. What would you say to someone who tries to convince you to become a partner with churches or groups that teach or allow false teaching?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.8 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Church Is Holy (Imputed and Incipient)

Both the *Apostles' Creed* and the *Nicene Creed* speak of Christ's Church as "holy". It is important that we understand in what sense the Church is holy. The term "holy" comes directly from the Bible. The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus: "**Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish**" (Ephesians 5:25-27). It is clear that the holiness of the Church, as spoken of in this passage, is a perfect holiness; the church is described as being "**without blemish**" and "**not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing.**" Only if the Church is perfectly holy can the Church be described as "**glorious**".

It is also clear from this passage why the Church is called holy. The Church is holy because Jesus gave Himself for the Church. He took all the sins of the members of the Church on Himself when He suffered and died on the cross. It was this substitutionary suffering of Christ on the cross that gives baptism ("**the washing of water by the word**") the power to sanctify and cleanse the Church. For baptism is baptism into Christ's death, and that is why baptism imparts to those who are baptized the benefits of Christ's death, the forgiveness of sins.

Baptism gives the forgiveness of sins. Peter said on Pentecost: "**Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins**" (Acts 2:38). Ananias, the Christian who baptized Paul in Damascus, said to him: "**Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord**" (Acts 22:16). The forgiveness of sins given to us in the Gospel through Word and Sacrament is always a total forgiveness. In other words, God regards those who are baptized in His name and who trust in the salvation won by Christ as totally forgiven and therefore also as perfectly holy. Thus, all believers in Christ, all the members of Christ's Church, are forgiven and therefore holy. They are the communion of saints, the fellowship of the holy people, having eternal life by faith and they will eventually enjoy eternal life by sight. Jesus said: "**Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved**" (Mark 16:15-16).

It is important to remember that the holiness of Christ's Church is *Christ's* holiness, which is imparted to the believers in Christ as a covering for their sins. It is the robe of Christ's righteousness that is counted as their own. Paul said that what was most important in his life was to "**be found in Him (Christ), not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith**" (Philippians 3:9).

We can call this righteousness a foreign righteousness. That is, it is not our own internal holiness, or a personal holiness of attitude and behavior, but a holiness from outside of us that God counts as our holiness through our trust in Christ. In other words, Christ's righteousness is imputed to us or accounted as ours when we believe in Jesus. And this faith becomes ours either through baptism or through our hearing of the Gospel of Christ. The book of Genesis says that God came to Abraham with a promise. Then it says that Abraham "**believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness**" (Genesis 15:6). That is why we speak of the holiness of believers in Christ as "imputed" holiness. Since Christ's holiness is perfect holiness, and His holiness is counted as ours when we believe in Him, the holiness of the Church is perfect, without spot or blemish.

The apostle Paul used the example of Abraham to explain imputed righteousness to the Christians in Rome. He wrote that Abraham “**did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore ‘it was accounted to him for righteousness.’ Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification**” (Romans 4:20-25). In the same way the Church is holy through the perfect imputed holiness of Christ.

But it is also important to remember that every Christian, that is, every member of Christ’s Church, also has the Holy Spirit living in him that leads him through Word and Sacrament to begin to live a new life of love and obedience and gratitude. But this holiness of life is far from perfect, for every Christian still has his sinful flesh living in him also. For this reason, this personal holiness of the Christian in their attitude and behavior is called an incipient holiness, that is, a holiness that is just beginning and that remains imperfect even to the end of the person’s earthly life. But there is no Christian who is totally lacking this incipient holiness. For Peter said on Pentecost: “**Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit**” (Acts 2:38). The apostle Paul wrote: “**Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His**” (Romans 8:9). And again Paul wrote: “**If you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God**” (Romans 8:13-14).

Thus, the Church of Christ is holy in a twofold sense, perfectly holy through the imputed perfect righteousness of Christ, and also imperfectly holy through the working of the Holy Spirit in all of the members of Christ’s Church, bringing forth in their attitude and conduct an incipient holiness that continues to grow in this life but does not reach perfection until the life hereafter. Paul wrote: “**Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me**” (Philippians 3:12).

Martin Luther explained the imputed holiness of Christ’s Church like this: “Since we are baptized and believe in Christ, we are holy and righteous in Christ and with Christ. He has taken our sin from us and has graced, clothed, and adorned us with His holiness. Thus the whole Christian Church is holy, not by itself or by its own work but in Christ and through Christ’s holiness, as St. Paul says: ‘**He has cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word**’ (Ephesians 5:26). Anyone who hesitates to boast and confess that he is holy and righteous is actually saying: ‘I am not baptized. I am not a Christian, I do not believe in Christ. I do not believe that Christ died for me. I do not believe that He took away my sins. I do not believe that His blood has cleansed me, or that it can cleanse me. In short, I do not believe a word of what God has declared or Christ and all Scripture testifies’” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 14, p. 93).

Luther also explained the incipient holiness of Christ’s Church. He wrote: “They are called a Christian people and have the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies them daily, not only through the forgiveness of sins acquired for them by Christ, but also through the abolition, the purging, and the mortification of sins, on the basis of which they are called a holy people” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 41, pp. 143-144).

Questions:

1. Why can we call Christ's Church the holy Christian Church?
2. In what sense is Christ's Church perfectly holy?
3. When were the sins of Christ's Church taken away?
4. How does the benefit of Christ's death come to us?
5. How can baptism wash our sins away?
6. What did God impute to Abraham?
7. What did God count as righteousness in Abraham?
8. How can we also be counted as righteous by God?
9. Why is imputed righteousness absolutely perfect?
10. What is meant by incipient righteousness?
11. Which kind of righteousness can grow and increase?
12. What did Luther say about a Christian who says he is not holy?
13. What is the difference between imputed righteousness and incipient righteousness?



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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 are 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?



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.10 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Church Is Apostolic

The apostle Paul describes Christ's Church as "**built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone**" (Ephesians 2:20). For this reason, Christ's Church is the apostolic Church, as we confess in the *Nicene Creed*. The apostles and prophets were selected by God Himself to receive words from God and reveal them to others on earth. The Old Testament prophets declared their message to be the very Word of God. The apostle Peter wrote: "**Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit**" (2 Peter 1:21).

In the same way Jesus promised His apostles that the Holy Spirit would guide them "**into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you**" (John 16:13-15).

Thus, the foundation of Christ's Church is what God gave the apostles and prophets to put into words. The revelation from God that we have in the Old Testament and the New Testament was given by the Holy Spirit to the prophets and apostles to be a written revelation that remains for all time as the foundation of Christ's Church. It is from the Bible (the Old Testament and the New Testament) that Christ's Church learns what it should believe, teach, and confess about God. God's Word is truth, as Jesus prayed to His Father on the night before He died: "**Sanctify them by Your truth, Your Word is truth**" (John 17:17). In that same prayer Jesus said: "**I do not pray for these (apostles) alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word**" (John 17:20). Notice that Jesus said all future believers in Christ will believe in Him through the word given to His apostles. In this way the apostles are the foundation of Christ's Church.

Our Christian faith is not built on the persons of the apostles or prophets. They were sinners like us, as the Bible makes abundantly clear. Our Christian faith is built on what they wrote as moved by the Holy Spirit. The words God gave them to write are God's words, and that is what makes their words a solid foundation for Christ's Church. The early congregation in Jerusalem has given us a good example of how an apostolic Church should conduct itself: "**They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers**" (Acts 2:42). They continued to listen to what the apostles were teaching. We cannot listen to the voices of the actual apostles, as they did, but we have their writings in the New Testament; and we have the writings of God's prophets in the Old Testament. We can read these writings and listen to Christian teachers explain them to us. Anything that is contrary to the apostolic teaching or that goes beyond this teaching or subtracts from it is not from God.

The Roman Catholic Church and other church bodies have introduced the idea of apostolic succession. By this they mean that the original apostles passed down their authority to their successors, who in turn passed this down to their successors, all the way down to the present time. In their opinion Peter was the chief apostle of Christ and the first pastor and bishop of the congregation in Rome. Peter then passed down his leadership position to the bishops who followed him in office. Eventually these bishops were called popes (fathers of the church) and their teaching was considered to be the ultimate authority in Christ's Church. In their opinion the Church is thus built on the foundation of the pope and the various cardinals and bishops who are the successors of the apostles.

But when we compare what these popes and bishops have taught as so-called successors of the apostles, it is clear that their teaching is not apostolic teaching at all, but man-made teaching. The same is true of other church bodies that claim that their leaders are the rightful successors of the apostles. There are even some Lutheran groups that claim apostolic succession, because their bishops were ordained by bishops who were ordained by other bishops who can trace their ordinations, supposedly, to the apostles themselves. But we do not need anything other than apostolic doctrine to be an apostolic church. All true Christians base their faith on what the prophets and apostles have written in the Bible, for that is the way the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith in Christ.

Along with the apostles and prophets Christ has given many other gifts to His Church on earth. The apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians: **“To each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift. ... He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ”** (Ephesians 4:7-12). **“From whom (Christ) the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love”** (Ephesians 4:16).

Every Christian has been given some gift or gifts they can use for the benefit of other members of Christ’s Church and for the benefit of non-members as well. Peter wrote: **“As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen”** (1 Peter 4:10-11). Notice that pastors and teachers are to teach nothing but God’s Word. They are to speak with one voice as the oracles of God, that is, in accordance with God’s written Word.

In his letter to the Romans Paul refers to various gifts Christ has given to His believers. He says: **“We, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness”** (Romans 12:5-8).

Paul devotes one whole chapter in his letter to the Corinthians on the subject of Christ’s gifts to His Church. Before listing some of these gifts, he says: **“The manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all”** (1 Corinthians 12:7). He compares the Church of Christ with a human body, saying: **“You are the body of Christ, and members individually. And God has appointed these in the church: first, apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues”** (1 Corinthians 12:27-28). The apostles are listed first, because to them Christ gave His Word – His teaching – with this instruction: **“teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you”** (Matthew 28:20). The apostles are the authoritative teachers of Christ’s Church for all time, and no one will ever replace them.

After the apostles and their associates died, there have been no new revelations from the Lord. Christ continues to give many gifts to His Church, but He has not provided new apostles and new prophets with additional apostolic teaching. Until Christ comes again, Christ’s Church remains the Apostolic Church.

Questions

1. What is special about the writings of the prophets and apostles in the Bible?
2. What did Jesus promise to His apostles before He died?
3. In what way are the prophets and apostles the foundation of the Church?
4. How was first congregation apostolic?
5. What is meant by apostolic succession?
6. What is wrong with the concept of apostolic succession?
7. List some of the various gifts Christ has given to His Church.
8. For what purpose have these gifts been given?
9. How does Christ's gift of apostles continue to benefit His Church?



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.11 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Use of the Means of Grace in the Church

Since the Holy Spirit has chosen to create and sustain faith in Christ through the means of grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, Christ's Church on earth uses the means of grace in this world to carry out its work of sustaining the faith of its members and to create faith in those who are not yet believers in Christ. Christ said He will build His Church (Matthew 16:18), and He does build His Church by using the members of His Church to carry out His work. He is the Vine; they are the branches. Without Him they can do nothing. But with Him they can bring forth abundant fruit.

After Christ told His disciples that He would build His Church, He told them that He would give to each individual believer who confessed His name as Peter did "**the keys of the kingdom of heaven**" (Matthew 16:19). In fact Jesus promised all of His disciples the keys of heaven when He said to them: "**Assuredly, I say to you** (plural), **whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven**" (Matthew 18:18).

What did Jesus mean by this binding and loosing? That becomes clear from what Jesus said to His disciples on Easter Sunday evening. After showing Himself alive to them in the place where they were gathered, "**Jesus said to them again, 'Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.' And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'**" (John 20:21-23).

As Jesus gave them the Holy Spirit, He also gave them the authority to forgive sins and to retain sins. The loosing Jesus had spoken of refers to the forgiving of sins, and the binding refers to the retaining of sins, that is, not forgiving them. The the forgiving of sins, the loosing of sins, was their chief duty and responsibility. For just as the Father had sent His Son Jesus into the world to seek and save lost sinners, so Jesus sent His disciples into the world to seek and save lost sinners.

This is clear also from the fact that after His resurrection Jesus repeated several times His instructions to his disciples that they should preach the Gospel everywhere in the world. He told them to use that one means of grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. That was their main assignment. Every one of the four Gospels contains these instructions.

In the Gospel of Matthew we read: "**Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age'**" (Matthew 28:18-20). The binding key is not even mentioned in these words. The emphasis is on the loosing key, and this loosing key is the Gospel. The sacrament of baptism is specifically mentioned, and the Lord's Supper is also referred to indirectly by the reference to observing all the things that Jesus commanded. The Lord's Supper is one of the things Jesus commanded.

The Gospel of Mark quotes Jesus' words to His disciples: "**Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned**" (Mark 16:15-16). Again the emphasis is on the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins. But the binding is also referred to by the mention of condemnation for those who reject the Gospel.

Luke refers to the use of the means of grace in both his Gospel and in the book of Acts. After Jesus rose from the dead, He said to His disciples: **“Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem”** (Luke 24:46-47). Notice here that Jesus' disciples were also to preach repentance as preparation for the preaching of the remission of sins. This refers to the preaching of God's law to sinners to make them aware of their sins and the punishment their sins deserve. This preaching of the law is not a means of grace, for the law by itself can bring no one to faith in Christ. But it is a necessary first step in most cases, for without the law most people are not aware of the seriousness of their problem and the hopelessness of their situation. But every Gospel preacher is eager to get to the main point: the preaching of the remission of sins through Christ.

In his book of Acts Luke also refers to Jesus' instructions concerning the means of grace. He said: **“You shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”** (Acts 1:8).

The mention of the Holy Spirit should have reminded them of what Jesus had said to them about the Holy Spirit on the night of His arrest, as recorded in the Gospel of John. **“The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you”** (John 14:26). **“When the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning”** (John 15:26-27). **“If I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment. ... When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth, and He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you”** (John 16:7-14).

Jesus' words to His disciples most surely indicate that the emphasis is on the loosing key, not the binding key, that is to the remission of sins, not the retaining of sins. Nevertheless, there is a time and place for the binding of sins, as Jesus made clear: **“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them”** (Matthew 18:15-20). Notice the care with which the Christ's Church is to deal with an impenitent sinner. The purpose of the Church's action is to gain the brother, that is, to lead him to repentance so that he can be reclaimed. It is not God's will that any sinner should perish in impenitence and forfeit the forgiveness that Christ has won for the world and also for the impenitent person.

The proper use of the binding key is illustrated by an incident that took place in the Christian congregation at Corinth. One of the members was continuing to live in open adultery, and the congregation was doing nothing about it. The apostle Paul therefore called attention to their inaction and gave them this instruction: **“In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus”** (1 Corinthians 5:4-5). Notice that this action should be taken for the purpose of saving the sinner. Just as the law of God must be taught for the purpose of presenting the Gospel of forgiveness and salvation, so the action of excommunication is a preaching of the law to lead the sinning person to repentance,

so that he may be saved. That is why Paul gave this instruction: **“Put away from yourselves the evil person”** (1 Corinthians 5:13).

As the Church uses the means of grace, it is important that the Church exhibits the spirit and mind of Christ. The Church is not to do its work like an earthly business or a government authority. Jesus told His disciples: **“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many”** (Matthew 20:25-28). The Church, and especially its leaders, should imitate their Master in His self-sacrificing and loving service to others.

Jesus told His followers not to imitate the proud scribes and Pharisees, who liked to give harsh orders and receive honor and respect from those lower than they. **“Do not do according to their works. ... All their works they do to be seen by men. ... One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. ... But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted”** (Matthew 23:3-12).

When Jesus entered a certain village and the people did not want to receive Him, His disciples James and John thought that fire should come down from heaven to destroy that village. But Jesus said: **“The Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them”** (Luke 9:56). The desire to save others is the attitude and spirit Jesus wants His Church to have. The most important element in the Church’s work is the salvation of souls. **“For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost”** (Luke 19:10).

When there were some tensions between some of the members of the congregation at Philippi, the apostle Paul wrote to them: **“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross”** (Philippians 2:3-8).

The way the Church administers the means of grace is very important. If one speaks the words of Christ’s Gospel in an angry or cruel way or acts in a way that is contrary to the spirit of the Gospel, he is hindering the gracious working of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **“Let all that you do be done with love”** (1 Corinthians 16:14).

Questions

1. What is meant by the means of grace?
2. What are the keys to the kingdom of heaven?
3. What two things do these keys do?
4. When did Jesus give these keys to His disciples, to His Church?
5. What is it that Jesus wants proclaimed throughout the world?
6. How does the Church use the keys Jesus gave them?
7. When would the Church use the binding key?
8. Why is it important to teach the law, even if it is not a means of grace?
9. What is the purpose of excommunication?
10. With what attitude should the Church carry out its ministry?
11. Why did Jesus tell His disciples not to be like the Pharisees?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.12 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

Forms of the Church and Its Ministry

The chief work of believers in Christ is to administer the means of grace: to proclaim God's law as preliminary, and to preach the Gospel of Christ for the salvation of mankind. This includes using baptism and the Lord's Supper according to Jesus' instructions, and teaching the whole counsel of God, as God has revealed it to us in the Bible. This then is the work of Christ's Church on earth.

But our Lord did not give detailed instructions as to how this work is to be done. He has equipped His Church with His Holy Spirit. He has given special gifts of personnel to His Church according to His own plans and purposes. But He has given His Church freedom to do its work in whatever ways it seems best. In His wisdom He has given His Church general guidelines, rather than specific rules. For example: **"Let all that you do be done with love"** (1 Corinthians 16:14). **"Let all things be done decently and in order"** (1 Corinthians 14:40). **"Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him"** (Colossians 3:17). **"Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God"** (1 Corinthians 10:31). And Christ's Church needs to show its love for God and for man by being obedient to God's moral law.

The book of Acts tells us how the early Christians carried out the work of the Church. The congregation in Jerusalem was at first lead by the twelve apostles. But we also hear of James, the half-brother of Jesus, who was not one of the twelve, taking a leadership role in the congregation. Whether he was appointed to this position by the apostles, or whether he was chosen as leader by a vote of the congregation, we do not know. When Peter was released from prison by an angel of the Lord, he told a gathering of Christians: **"Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren"** (Acts 12:17).

When there was a complaint in the congregation about how the food for the widows was being distributed, the apostles gathered the whole congregation together and suggested (they did not command) that seven helpers be chosen for the distribution of the food. The apostles themselves had been in charge of this work, but they already had enough to do. They needed assistance. This was their reasoning: **"It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables"** (Acts 6:2). **"We will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word"** (Acts 6:4). The Jerusalem congregation accepted this suggestion and chose seven men for this work. The apostles did not appoint these seven men; the congregation chose them. Exactly how they were chosen we do not know.

Does this then mean that every Christian congregation should choose seven men as helpers, so that the spiritual leaders can concentrate on prayer and the ministry of the Word? The book of Acts gives us descriptions, not prescriptions. That is, we are told what they did in their freedom. We are not told we must do things the same way; we are not told how we must do things in our congregations today.

We read that the congregation of Christians in Antioch of Syria had five **"prophets and teachers"** (Acts 13:1). In some way that we do not know the Holy Spirit told them that they should choose two of the five to become missionaries to the Gentiles. These two were Barnabas and Paul, called by God through the congregation at Antioch for this special work. When they concluded their first mission journey, they returned to Antioch and **"reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles"** (Acts 14:27).

When a dispute arose between some Jerusalem Christians and the two missionaries about their methods of doing mission work, “**they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question**” (Acts 15:2). We do not know how they came to this decision – whether it was by vote or by common consent or in some other way. The meeting took place in Jerusalem, and it was attended by “**all the multitude**” (Acts 15:12), including “**the apostles and elders**” (Acts 15:6). Both sides were given the opportunity to present their case, and the matter was finally decided by God Himself, who had demonstrated in the house of Cornelius that Gentiles could be Christians without having to become Jews first. Peter was the apostle who spoke the Word of God on this occasion. It seems that James, the brother of Jesus, was the chairman of the assembly, and he then proposed a practical way in which Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians could work side by side in the preaching and spreading of the Gospel. They wrote letter and it sent to all the congregations involved in this dispute.

It was natural that those brought to faith in Christ by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace should gather together in groups called congregations. These groups were free to make their own rules regarding their organization and type of worship and methods of using the means of grace. Circumstances differed from place to place and from one period of time to another. There is no one correct way in which these things must be handled. The apostle Paul warned against arrogance and pride: “**I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith**” (Romans 12:3). “**Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another**” (Romans 12:10). “**Do not be wise in your own opinion**” (Romans 12:16).

The congregation in Corinth had all kinds of serious problems. The apostle Paul wrote his first letter to them to help them resolve these difficulties. Their main problem was selfish pride. It was to this congregation that Paul wrote his description of love (1 Corinthians 13), which would solve most of their difficulties. Their greatest concern should be the salvation of souls, not their personal preferences. Paul put himself before them as an example: “**I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some**” (1 Corinthians 9:22).

The gatherings of the Corinthians for hearing the Word of God had become disorderly. Paul wrote to them: “**If ... there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind?**” (1 Corinthians 14:23). He said: “**Let all things be done for edification**” (1 Corinthians 14:26). No one can be edified, or built up in his faith, by chaos. Even their celebrations of the Lord’s Supper had become disorderly and loveless. Despite these problems, Paul did not prescribe a specific order of service that they should adopt. They were free to make their own changes according to the general guidelines he gave them.

Down through the ages Christians have made the mistake of setting up certain types of organizations and saying that their type is the only correct type. The Roman Catholic Church insists that their *hierarchical* organization ruled by the pope with his cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests, and deacons is the way Christ Himself has set up His Church. Other groups follow similar hierarchical, top-down organizational systems, such as the Episcopalians (Church of England). Many Protestant churches believe that a *presbyterian* system is taught by Scripture. In this system authority is shared by pastors and ordinary Christians (elders) by means of synods and other such gatherings. Another popular method of church organization is *congregational*. In this system the highest authority for decision-making lies in the local congregation, and no one has the right to impose any rules governing them.

The fact is, however, that Christ has not given His Church any specific type of organization or order of service (liturgy). Christians are free to develop whatever type of organization or order of service that is best suited to the preaching and spread of the Gospel of Christ in their circumstances in their area for their particular time. Circumstances change, and therefore also the type of organization can change. The congregation at Jerusalem saw the need for helpers, and so they chose them. The

congregation at Antioch in Syria saw the need for missionaries to the Gentiles, and so they sent them. The congregations of Antioch and Jerusalem saw the need for a joint meeting between the two congregations to resolve a serious problem, and so they organized such a meeting. The order of service followed by Jewish Christian congregations was no doubt considerably different from that followed by Gentile Christian congregations.

It is important to remember that each believing Christian is a child of God and a priest in Christ's Church. The apostle Peter wrote: "**You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light**" (1 Peter 2:9). Christians proclaim the praises of their Lord and Savior. Some of the Gospel preachers in Rome did not like the apostle Paul very much. But Paul was not very concerned about this. He said: "**What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice**" (Philippians 1:18).

Since Christ Himself did not prescribe any particular type of church organization and no specific order of service (liturgy), Christians need to resist any attempt by leaders or groups to impose any forms on them, as if these forms were necessary. Christ taught His disciples: "**You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you**" (Matthew 20:25-26).

When some Jewish Christians insisted that Paul's Gentile assistant had to be circumcised, Paul reported: "**To whom (that is, to those who insisted) we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the Gospel might continue with you**" (Galatians 2:5). Paul taught the Galatian Christians that they also should not yield to those who insisted on certain rules that God had not given them: "**Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage**: (Galatians 5:1). To the Corinthians Paul wrote: "**You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men**" (1 Corinthians 7:23).

Therefore, if anyone insists that we must have a hierarchical or episcopal or presbyterian or congregational form of organization in order to please God, we should not yield. If anyone insists that we follow a certain order of service in order to please God, we should not yield. And if we are in a position of leadership, we should not insist on getting our own way if that way is not required by God's Word. The apostle Peter told church leaders: "**Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly, nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock**" (1 Peter 5:2-3).

Among Lutherans all sorts of organizational forms have been used through the years. Lutherans in the United States were troubled for a time by leaders who claimed the right to have the members obey them even in matters not decided by the Word of God. There have been other Lutherans who insisted on a certain form of congregationalism as being the only proper form of church organization.

With respect to forms of church organization, we Lutherans who are members of the Church of the Lutheran Confession have subscribed to the following principles:

"If... the minister, in his teachings and injunctions, were to go beyond the Word of God, it would be the duty of Christians not to obey, but to disobey him, so as to remain faithful to Christ. Accordingly we reject the false doctrine ascribing to the office of the ministry the right to demand obedience and submission in matters which Christ has not commanded" (Brief Statement of 1932, paragraph 32).

"The outward organizational form or a congregation is of human arrangement and may vary widely as it did even in the apostolic church. Compare Corinth with Jerusalem" (Concerning Church and Ministry, p. 6).

"The office of the public ministry is not limited to any divinely fixed form as such. ... In Christian liberty, as circumstances require and as the Lord supplies diversity of gifts, operations, and ministries, the church may separate the various functions of the public ministry of the Word and apportion them to whatever number of qualified persons it may choose to call" (Concerning Church and Ministry, pp. 32-33).

Questions

1. What is the chief work of Christ's Church on earth?
2. What does it mean that Christ has given His Church general guidelines, rather than specific details, for doing this work?
3. What problem arose in the early congregation at Jerusalem?
4. How was this problem resolved?
5. What does it mean that the book of Acts describes what was done, rather than prescribes what ought to be done by us?
6. Who sent out Barnabas and Paul as missionaries to the Gentiles?
7. Why is selfish pride such a problem for church organization?
8. In what way is the Roman Catholic organization contrary to Scripture?
9. Which form of church organization is commonly used in your locale?
10. What should we do when someone insists on a certain kind of organization or order of service?
11. What are some of the guidelines we should follow in setting up our organization or order of service?



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.13 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

Church and State

In the Old Testament the descendants of Jacob (Israel) were not only the people of God (the Church) but were also a nation, a government, a state. The nation of Israel was a *theocracy* in which God Himself was the ruler who gave the people not only the moral law, but also civil laws for the state, and ceremonial laws for their worship. At first God appointed Moses as their leader, followed by Joshua. In the period of the judges there was often disorder in the land, because **“everyone did what was right in his own eyes”** (Judges 21:25). From time to time God sent them deliverers (the judges) who saved them from their enemies and exercised authority in the land. The last of the judges was the prophet Samuel.

When the people asked for a king to be their ruler, God told Samuel to anoint Saul as king. When Saul failed to listen to God’s orders, God told Samuel to anoint David as king, and from that time on, David and his descendants ruled under God as kings in Jerusalem. Even then there was a kind of division between church and state, for the high priest was God’s appointed head in matters of worship, and the king was God’s appointed head in matters of civil government.

The Jewish priesthood continued until the time of Christ and beyond, until the Roman government destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. There was also a seventy-year period when the priesthood did not function normally, because of the Babylonian captivity. The royal government under David’s family continued until the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem around the year 600 BC. After that time the royal family of David still existed, but it did not wield any earthly authority until the great Son of David, Jesus Christ, came into the world. The angel Gabriel informed His mother Mary before He was born: **“You will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end”** (Luke 1:31-33). Jesus is now the Head of His Church, and the King of His people and all peoples, having **“all authority ... in heaven and on earth”** (Matthew 28:18).

Since Jesus was the Son of David, who had been an earthly king, many Jews, including His own devoted followers, expected Jesus to be an earthly king and restore Israel’s earthly power, as in the days of David and Solomon. But Jesus testified at His trial before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate: **“My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here”** (John 18:36). Because Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world, we should not expect to find the same system in the New Testament that prevailed in the Old Testament. In the New Testament there is a distinct division between state and church. There are two kinds of authority, and it is important to distinguish them from one another.

Civil government gets its authority from God. When Pilate said to Jesus: **“Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?”**, **“Jesus answered, ‘You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above’”** (John 19:10-11). All earthly government gets its power from God.

The apostle Paul explained this at length to the Christians in Rome. **“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are**

appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor" (Romans 13:1-7).

God gives the ruling government, whatever kind it may be, the authority to punish evildoers and reward those who are obedient. There is no specific type of government that has been established by God. The ruling authorities are "**the authorities that exist**", that is, those authorities that actually have the power in the land. This may be a dictatorship, a kingdom, a republic, a democracy, or any other type of government. It is the Christian's duty to honor whatever government they are under, pay taxes, obey the laws, and accept punishment if they have broken the laws. The only exception is when the government's commands conflict with the plain Word of God. In that case the Christian says with Peter: "**We ought to obey God rather than men**" (Acts 5:29), and the Christian accepts the consequences, even to the point of death.

The Church of Christ has an altogether different job from the secular state. Its assignment is to work with the Word of God: to preach law and Gospel, administer the sacraments, spread the Gospel to other places, and strengthen and train the believers in doing the will of God. The civil government makes laws, enforces them, and punishes the disobedient. But the Church has no such authority to punish the disobedient. Paul says: "**The weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ**" (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). In other words, the only weapon the Church has is the Word of God and the spiritual resources listed in Ephesians 6:13-18. The Church also needs to obey the laws of the state, unless the state forbids what God has commanded or commands what God has forbidden.

In the history of the church the proper separation of church and state has rarely been practiced. At some points in history the church has exercised power over civil government or asked the government to enforce the resolutions of the church. Roman Catholicism claims that the Roman pope has power over both church and state. On the other hand, it has often happened that the state has controlled the church, having both civil and religious authority. The United States has been one of the only countries in the world where a kind of separation has been attempted and has existed over a long period of time, to the benefit of both church and state. At the present time, however, the separation that has prevailed in the past is being threatened by powers that do not understand the right distinction between church and state.

Martin Luther and some of our Lutheran fathers understood this distinction very well. For example, the *Augsburg Confession* states in Article XXVIII: "*Inasmuch as the power of the church or of the bishops bestows eternal benefits and is used and exercised only through the office of preaching, it does not interfere at all with public order and secular authority. For secular authority deals with matters altogether different from the gospel. Secular power does not protect the soul but, using the sword and physical penalties, it protects the body and goods against external violence. That is why one should not mix or confuse the two authorities, the spiritual and the secular. For spiritual power has its command to preach the gospel and to administer the sacraments. It should not invade an alien office. It should not set up and depose kings. It should not annul or disrupt secular law and obedience to political authority. It should not make or prescribe laws for the secular power concerning secular affairs. ... Our people distinguish the offices of the two authorities and powers and direct that both be honored as the highest gifts of God on earth*" (Book of Concord, Kolb- Wengert Edition, p. 92).

The Lutheran churches in Europe, however, were unable to fully put into practice a separation between church and state. The government gradually took over more and more of the duties of the church. When the leaders in the state were themselves confessing orthodox Christians, the Lord used them for the benefit of His Church. However, throughout history, the concept of a state church has largely proved detrimental to the Lord's kingdom.

In many countries today Christians in general and Christian churches in particular are persecuted and hindered in their Christian work in one way or another. But our Lord Jesus is in control of all world events and all governments and promises to work all things together for the good of those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

Questions

1. What is a theocracy?
2. In the Old Testament who was in charge of the ceremonial worship?
3. Why was King Saul rejected by God?
4. What happened to the royal family of David?
5. How was God's promise to David of an eternal kingdom fulfilled?
6. What did Jesus say about His kingdom when He was on trial?
7. What is the main duty of the government?
8. If there is civil war, how do we know which government to honor?
9. How does the duty of the church differ from the duty of the state?
10. Has any form of civil government been commanded by God? Explain.
11. What is the main duty of the church?
12. What do Lutherans confess in the Augsburg Confession concerning the distinction between church and state?
13. What form of civil government is in power in your locale?
14. What is the relationship between church and state in your locale?



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.14 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

Local Congregations

As the Holy Spirit creates believers in Christ through the Gospel in various places, local congregations of Christians come into being. The first such New Testament congregation was the group of believers at Jerusalem, which numbered 120 before Pentecost (Acts 1:15) and soon thereafter numbered at least five thousand (Acts 4:4). Since this was such a large number that kept increasing, there were probably several different locations in the city where they gathered together to hear the Word of God from the apostles and to join together in receiving the Lord's Supper.

It is likely that in every larger group of Christians there are some people present who are not true believers in Jesus Christ, even though their words and actions seem to indicate that they are true Christians. Ananias and Sapphira, husband and wife (Acts 5:1-11), were exposed by Peter as hypocrites in the group at Jerusalem, and through the years since then there have no doubt been many more. Nevertheless, it is right to call every assembly that uses Christ's means of grace a "church" because of the presence of genuine believers in such a gathering. Since the Holy Spirit uses the means of grace to create Christians, a gathering of Christians is surely present where the means of grace are used.

Jesus Himself promised to be present in such gatherings, even if there were only as few as two or three, for He said: "**Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them**" (Matthew 18:20). Many of the earliest Christian congregations were formed when Christ's Jewish enemies persecuted the Christians in Jerusalem and "**they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria**" (Acts 8:1). Soon groups of confessing Christians were found in many of the neighboring towns and villages. This is the way many Christian congregations came into existence then, and the same is still true today when many Christians are forced to move to new locations because of persecution or perhaps also because of economic or business reasons.

When Paul went on his mission journeys, accompanied by Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Titus, Luke, and others, the people that learned the Gospel from him and his team formed local congregations in the various towns and cities mentioned in the book of Acts. We read that for the sake of order and leadership in these congregations they "**appointed elders in every church**" (Acts 14:23). We are not given the details of how these congregations were organized, however, or exactly how they conducted their Gospel work.

The congregation at Ephesus was the one where Paul spent the most time. He worked there for three years before moving on to another place. In his address to the elders of the Ephesian congregation, recorded in Acts 20:17-38, Paul gives us some indication of how he did his work. Among other things he says: "**I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ**" (Acts 20:20-21). "**I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God**" (Acts 20:27). These elders were spiritual overseers. To them in particular Paul says: "**Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood**" (Acts 20:28). Because of the dangers posed by false teachers, Paul tells them: "**Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears**" (Acts 20:31).

In his letters the apostle Paul called these groups of Christians “**churches**” (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 11:16; 1 Corinthians 16:1). They are called churches because of the believers in these groups, even though some of the people assembling in these gatherings may not have been real Christians. The purpose of these congregations was to proclaim the Gospel of Christ in the world and to edify or build up those who were already believers in Christ. Jesus said: “**Whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven**” (Matthew 10:32). These congregations confessed their faith and allegiance to Christ publicly. They also practiced church discipline, using the binding and loosing keys as Jesus instructed in Matthew 18:15-18. When the circumstances favored it, they sent out missionaries to other places, like the congregation in Antioch of Syria (Acts 13:1-3). They helped the poor and needy among them, and even concerned themselves with the physical needs of outsiders (Galatians 6:10). As they were able, they provided for the earthly needs of those who taught God’s Word to them. Paul said: “**Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel**” (1 Corinthians 9:14).

We could say that a congregation is a church group consisting of more than one Christian. When the group is small, not much organization is necessary. When the group becomes larger under the Lord’s blessing, it is usually helpful to establish some kind of an orderly way of doing things. This may mean adopting a constitution, and devising some kind of system to call church workers as they are needed. The organization may then find it useful to become incorporated or registered according to the laws of the civil government, in order to buy and sell property or to build buildings for worship or education, as they are needed. It is important that these external arrangements all serve the same spiritual purpose: the use of the means of grace, the proclamation of the Gospel.

In the United States at this time, our local congregations usually adopt some kind of constitution, and have definite membership lists of all those baptized persons for whom the congregation is spiritually responsible, as well as lists of those who are eligible to partake of the Lord’s Supper and those who have been given the authority to make decisions for the congregation through voting privileges. The members usually live in the same general geographical area, and when they move to another location, they transfer their membership to the nearest congregation that confesses the same teaching. Decisions are made concerning such matters as the time and place and language of the gatherings, the calling of pastors and teachers and other church workers as needed, the regular hearing of the Word, the regular use of the sacraments, prayer, adult education and children’s education, the edification of the members, the spread of the Gospel to others, the caring for the needy, and the practice of church discipline.

Such details need to be worked out by each congregation according to its circumstances. There will be differences from one place to another, and from one country to another. In some places the congregation may have to go underground, so to speak, because of persecution. They may have to carry out their work in dangerous circumstances, and they may have to adjust their practices accordingly. Our Lord has given us freedom to organize our Christian congregations in various ways, in order to fulfill Christ’s assignment to preach the Gospel.

Questions

1. What does the Bible tell us about the Jerusalem congregation?
2. What led to the formation of many congregations in Judea and Samaria?
3. List some places where congregations were formed by Paul and his team.
4. What may be found in Christian gatherings beside believers in Christ?
5. Why do we call local congregations churches?
6. How did Paul describe his work in Ephesus to the elders of that church?
7. What are some of the main purposes of local congregations?
8. How are congregations generally organized in the United States?
9. How are congregations organized in your locale?
10. Should all congregations be organized in the same way? Explain.



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?



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?



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?



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.18 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Rightful Work of the Church

The rightful work of the Holy Christian Church and all of its members (all believers in Christ) is ministry. This ministry (or service) is the ministry of the Word, that is, the ministry of the Gospel, the ministry of the keys. Thus, the Church has one task: the preaching of the Gospel. This requires the preaching of God's law as preparation for the preaching of the Gospel, and also the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. This ministry is given to every individual Christian and to every group of Christians.

In the New Testament every Christian is a priest. For the apostle Peter wrote to the Christians dispersed in "Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" (1 Peter 1:1): "**You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ**" (1 Peter 2:5). "**You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who were once not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy**" (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Everyone who has been called out of the darkness of disbelief into the light of faith in Christ is privileged to proclaim the praises of his Savior-God. To proclaim the praises of God is to proclaim the Gospel of Christ, announcing to all what great things God has done. He has sent His Son Jesus Christ to save sinners from their sin and its consequences: guilt, the power of the devil, and eternal death.

Thus, each Christian man, woman, and child is encouraged to use the loosing key and spread the Word that there is forgiveness of sins for all because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Jesus said to His disciples: "**Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature**" (Mark 16:15). "**Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations**" (Matthew 28:19). On Easter Sunday evening, when Jesus gave the keys to His disciples, the eleven apostles were not the only ones who were present.

Every believer in Christ is called on to confess Him "**before men**", for Jesus said: "**Whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven**" (Matthew 10:32-33). Jesus has promised His blessing also on groups of Christians that carry out this ministry, no matter how small these groups are, saying: "**Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them**" (Matthew 18:20).

This ministry is described by the apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians: "**All things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you, on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He has made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain**" (2 Corinthians 5:18 – 6:1).

Notice that God is the One who did the reconciling of the sinful world to Himself through Jesus Christ. He laid the sin of the world on Jesus, and in return He gives us in Christ the righteousness of God. Our

sins have been taken away. The ministry of reconciliation is given to Christians to speak the word of reconciliation: to tell sinners what God has done for them in Christ. Christians practice this ministry when they tell others in Christ's name, as His ambassadors or representatives, what Christ has done for them, pleading with them to receive God's gift of forgiveness in Christ, to receive the reconciliation that Christ has won for all.

The book of Acts is the record of how some of the early Christians carried out this ministry of reconciliation, this ministry of the Word. The number of Christians who returned to Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension was "**a hundred and twenty**" (Acts 1:15), and this number included the apostles, Jesus' brothers, His mother Mary, and some of the other women that followed Jesus. It was to these men and women that Jesus poured down the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The prophet Joel's prophecy was fulfilled. "**Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy**" (Acts 2:17-18).

The record shows that these believers in Christ became deeply involved in working with Christ's Gospel, and the Lord blessed their testimony so that in a short time the group of believers in Jerusalem numbered in the thousands. We read in Acts 6:1 that "**the number of the disciples was multiplying.**" The chief occupation of the apostles was "**prayer and ... the ministry of the word**" (Acts 6:4). But the apostles were not the only ones involved in preaching the Gospel of Christ. Two of the seven helpers chosen by the congregation to distribute food to the poor, Stephen and Philip, became involved in preaching the Gospel, and God blessed their labors. Then we are told that when "**a great persecution arose against the church which is at Jerusalem, ... they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles**" (Acts 8:1). Were these scattered Christians silent about the Gospel of Christ? Not at all! "**Those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word**" (Acts 8:4).

And so this ministry has continued to the present time, and all Christians are involved in this ministry in one way or another. Our Lord even accepts the praises of small children, as we learn from what happened on Palm Sunday (Matthew 21:15-16).

The apostle Paul calls the preaching of the Gospel "**the ministry of the Spirit**" (2 Corinthians 3:8), because it is the Holy Spirit who works through believers to proclaim the Gospel and make it effective in the hearts of the listeners. He also calls it "**the ministry of righteousness**" (2 Corinthians 3:9), for the Gospel offers the perfect righteousness of Christ in exchange for the sin that was given to Christ on the cross. In contrast to God's law, which Paul calls "**the ministry of death**" (2 Corinthians 3:7) and "**the ministry of condemnation**" (2 Corinthians 3:9), Christians are "**ministers of the new covenant**" (2 Corinthians 3:6), which is the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins in Christ.

Questions

1. What is the rightful work of Christ's Church?
2. To whom has this work been given?
3. How can individual Christians participate in this work?
4. How can groups of Christians participate in this work?
5. Give some examples of how this work was carried on by early Christians.
6. What is meant by the ministry of reconciliation?
7. Show that the apostles were not the only ones involved in this work.
8. How did God use the persecution of Christians to spread the Gospel?
9. What is the difference between the ministry of condemnation and the ministry of righteousness?
10. How can little children contribute to the work of the Church?
11. How can you share in the work of the Gospel in your locale?



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.19 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

Christ's Gifts of the Public Ministry to His Church

Christ has given the ministry of the keys to every individual Christian and to every group of Christians. To help the Christians carry out this Gospel service to the world, Christ has also established what we call the public ministry. That is, Christ has given special gifts to His Church on earth, and He has instructed His Church on how to use these gifts for the benefit of all. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome: **"As we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them"** (Romans 12:4-6). **"The manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all"** (1 Corinthians 12:7).

All Christians are equal before God in the sense that each of them is a son or daughter of God, with the same blessing of forgiveness of sins in Christ, the same presence of God in their lives, the same hope of eternal life, and the same full access to God in prayer. The apostle Paul has made that very clear by his words: **"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).

But Christians differ from one another in the special gifts God has given them, and therefore Christians have different functions or tasks in the Church in accordance with the gifts God has given them, just as the various members of the human body have different functions. Christians have the privilege of recognizing the special gifts God has given to some of them and calling these gifted individuals to use their special gifts in the ministry of the Gospel. This is what is meant by the public ministry. Certain individuals with special gifts are called by Christian congregations or larger church bodies to use their gifts for the benefit of and in the name of the Christians who called them. That is why it is called the public ministry. These public ministers do their work not in their own name as individual Christians, but in the name of the Christians who called them. In this way they are servants or ministers not only of God but also of the Christians who called them, whether it is a small congregation of two or three, or a large congregation of hundreds or thousands, or a church body made up of few or many congregations. While these called ministers are servants of those who called them, if there is any conflict between what Christ says and what the calling group of Christians says, what Christ says has to come first.

It is important that these gifted individuals not consider themselves as lords and masters over Christ's Church. Jesus told His disciples that they were not to imitate the Pharisees, who did their works **"to be seen by men"** (Matthew 23:5), or to be honored by men by having **"the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces"** (Matthew 23:6), and other such privileges. Rather, He said: **"One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greater among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted"** (Matthew 23:8-12).

On the very night of Jesus' arrest **"there was also a dispute among them, as to which of them should be considered the greatest. And He said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over**

them, and those who exercise authority over them are called “benefactors.” But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves” (Luke 22:24-26).

The Bible mentions some of the gifts Christ gave to the early Christians. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **“Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the best gifts”** (1 Corinthians 12:27-31).

Notice that it was God who gave these gifts to His Church. In many cases God Himself at first *directly* appointed these persons to their positions. For example, Christ Himself personally chose His apostles. Later on, God called or appointed persons to their offices *indirectly*, through the Christians, as He did, for example, in the choosing of the seven helpers in the congregation at Jerusalem (Acts 6:1-6). In either case we should regard such servants of the Church as having been called by God. The apostle Paul reminded the elders of Ephesus that it was the Holy Spirit who made them overseers in Christ’s Church. Paul said: **“Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood”** (Acts 20:28).

After the teaching of the apostles was put into writing in our New Testament, the Lord no longer saw fit to give His Church so many supernatural gifts, such as the gift of prophecy, miraculous healings, or the sudden ability to speak in foreign unlearned languages. But the gifts of teaching, helping, and administering have been continued through the years and are still found in the Church today.

These gifts that Christ has given to His Church are discussed in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians: **“To each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore He says: ‘When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.’ ... And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, 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”** (Ephesians 4:7-13).

The apostles are listed first, for these gifts are foundational for the work of the Church. We have their writings in our New Testament, and we use these gifts constantly. The prophets referred to are those like Agabus (Acts 11:28 and 21:10) who received special messages from God in those early days for the benefit of His Church. There is no reason to believe that our Lord is still providing His Church with such prophets today. We have the writings of the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles as God’s sufficient Word for us. Evangelists are Gospel preachers, and Christ still supplies them to His Church. Pastors are shepherds watching over Christ’s flocks of believers in different places. Such pastors are also teachers of God’s Word. Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus are called pastoral letters because it is in these letters in particular that Paul lays out what the duties of such pastors are. The Lord also supplies other workers in His Church, such as schoolteachers, congregational elders, musicians, administrators, and deacons, all of whom may be called by Christians for specific duties in His Church.

When the congregation at Jerusalem needed assistants for the task of distributing food to the needy, the apostles said: **“Seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business”** (Acts 6:3). They were to look for those persons to whom the Lord had given certain traits, both spiritual and practical. So, when we Christians today need persons to carry out certain church duties, we look for those to whom God has given the necessary gifts for the work to be done.

Paul told Timothy what gifts were needed for a “**bishop**”, that is, a spiritual overseer, a spiritual shepherd or pastor. “**If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, keeping his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil**” (1 Timothy 3:1-7).

Therefore, when a spiritual shepherd is needed for a group of Christians, they should not just pick names at random. They should very carefully consider the gifts God has given and choose that man who has been blessed with these gifts. This is a very serious matter, for the devil can create chaos in a church through a poor leader. When the Christians in Antioch of Syria were in the process of choosing missionaries to go into Gentile territories, they “**fasted and prayed**” (Acts 13:3) before sending Barnabas and Paul on their way.

Many of the gifts they were to look for in a candidate are gifts that every Christian should strive for, but there was one gift in particular that is not found in every Christian. That is the gift of being “**able to teach**”. Paul stressed this same gift in his letter to Titus, where he again lists the qualifications that we should look for in those who are to be spiritual shepherds: “**I left you in Crete that you should ... appoint elders in every city as I commanded you – if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, 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 1:5-9). Spiritual leaders should have a good knowledge of God’s Word so that they will be able to detect false teachers and correct them from the Word of God.

Notice that Jesus chose men, not women, to be His apostles and leaders of His Church. In the same way the apostle Paul speaks of men only as being qualified to be spiritual leaders of God’s people and teachers in Christ’s congregations. In fact, Paul wrote specifically to Timothy: “**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). Notice that this instruction was based on God’s original plan for man and woman at creation: man to be the head, and woman to be his helper. Paul wrote the same thing to the congregation in Corinth: “**Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak**” (1 Corinthians 14:34). What is forbidden is for women to teach men or to have authority over men in the church; they are not permitted to address an assembly that includes men. Women may be teachers of other women and of children. If someone says that this was just the opinion of Paul and it no longer applies today, remember that after giving this instruction, Paul wrote: “**The things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord**” (1 Corinthians 14:37).

In his first letter to Timothy Paul also listed the qualifications for deacons (or helpers) in the church. “**Likewise deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless. Likewise, their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be the husbands one one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well**” (1 Timothy 3:8-12).

Notice that these deacons (helpers) did not need to be “**able to teach**”, for their work did not include the teaching of God’s Word. Because the Greek word translated “wives” in 1 Timothy 3:11 is not used

earlier with respect to the wives of bishops or pastors, it is likely that 1 Timothy 3:11 is best understood as referring to women who served the church in a similar way as the male deacons. Such women “**must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things.**” In his letters the apostle Paul mentions the service of various women who helped him in his work and who served the church. See Romans 16:1-15.

The public ministry in Christ’s Church may take many different forms. Christian congregations and church bodies are free to call individuals to take over the entire spiritual supervision of Christians in a certain area, or, if they prefer, to divide the various duties among several individuals who have the necessary gifts and training. For example, one minister could be called to be in charge of the Christian training of the children. Another minister could be called to conduct the Sunday services. Another minister could be called to visit the sick. Whenever there is a special need, the Christians can call someone to fill that need. If there is a man in the congregation who has some special talent, the congregation may want to call that person to use that talent in some special way, such as to write hymns or teach singing or lead the worship, or perhaps to preach God’s Word on the radio or television. A church body such as a synod needs men with special talents, such as someone to establish new congregations in neighboring villages, or to be in charge of the Christian schools in a certain area, or to be in charge of a seminary to train men to be pastors, or to teach the Bible languages of Greek and Hebrew.

There are two basic principles that need to be followed in setting up various ministries in Christ’s Church. One: “**Let all things be done decently and in order**” (1 Corinthians 14:40). “**For God is not the author of confusion but of peace**” (1 Corinthians 14:33). Two: “**Let all that you do be done with love**” (1 Corinthians 16:14).

The Church of the Lutheran Confession has adopted the following statement as a reminder of how we understand God’s Word. *“In Christian liberty, as circumstances require and as the Lord supplies diversity of gifts, operations and ministries, the Church may separate the various functions of the public ministry of the Word and apportion them to whatever number of qualified persons it may choose to call. It is essential that each call thus extended shall specify the area of responsibility and the type of duty thereby assigned, and that each laborer abide by the terms of his call”* (Concerning Church and Ministry, pp. 32-33).

Questions

1. To whom did Christ entrust the ministry of the Gospel?
2. What is meant by the public ministry?
3. In what ways are all Christians the same? In what way are they different?
4. Why should Christian leaders today not imitate the Pharisees?
5. What are some of the gifts Christ gave the early Christians?
6. What new church position did the congregation at Jerusalem create when there was a special need?
7. Why is it not necessary for all congregations to have the same kinds of Gospel ministers?
8. What are the qualifications for ministers in Christ’s Church?
9. What type of church office should not be granted to women?
10. What special skill should all spiritual shepherds have?
11. In what ways are women able to serve the Christian congregation?
12. If there are special needs in the Gospel ministry in your locale, name these needs and suggest ways they could be satisfied.
13. What are some of the special needs of a synod or church body?



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.20 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Various Forms of Ministry in the Church

We have already considered the fact that Christians have the freedom to create different forms of ministry as needed for the sake of the Gospel of Christ. In this section we want to explain the various forms of ministry churches in the United States that we have found useful at the present time. Christian congregations in other countries may use these forms or create their own forms that are more useful in their circumstances.

In the Church of the Lutheran Confession the most common form of public ministry is the pastorate of a congregation or several congregations. Such a pastor is called to preach the Gospel at the regular worship services of the congregation (usually held on Sunday mornings, but in some cases at other times on Saturday or Sunday) and administer the sacraments. The pastor is expected to become acquainted with all the members of the congregation in order to help them in their Christian walk. He visits the sick, counsels the troubled, conducts marriages and funerals and services on other special occasions. He is in charge of the educational program of the congregation, for both children and adults. In particular he is responsible for the instruction of the youth to prepare them to be communicant members. After a course of instruction of two or three years that includes a study of Bible history and Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*, he declares them eligible for the Lord's Supper by means of a confirmation ceremony. At the present time the age of confirmation is around 13 or 14, although this may vary from one congregation to another. The pastor is also expected to encourage his members to bring the Gospel of Christ to those who do not know Him or who know Him imperfectly because they have been misled by false teachers. The pastor is expected to warn his flock of dangers that threaten their faith in Christ.

The pastor is assisted in his work by members of his congregation who have been elected to their offices by the voting members of the congregation. These voting members represent all the members of the congregation. Such officers may be called pastoral assistants, elders, deacons, or council members. Each congregation has its own constitution which the voting members have adopted. Voting membership is generally held by male members over a certain age (usually 18 or 21, as the constitution specifies) who are willing to attend church business meetings. These meetings are held about four times a year or more, as needed. Other helpers in the congregation may include secretaries of various kinds, teachers, trustees in charge of the church property, musicians of various kinds, and congregational officers such as chairman, secretary, treasurer, and financial secretary.

In the field of Christian education most congregations conduct a Sunday School for elementary school children, from ages three or four to around thirteen or fourteen or perhaps beyond that. For young people and for adults there is usually some sort of Bible class led by the pastor or an elder or one or more teachers.

Some congregations have a day school that meets five days a week except for the summer season. Such a school teaches the regular school subjects (reading, writing, arithmetic, science, history, geography) as well as Bible history and Christian doctrine. Trained Christian teachers teach all subjects from a Christian viewpoint. The pastor may teach some classes, but the congregation generally calls one or more teachers to teach most of the classes. Some congregations elect a board of education to supervise the school, together with a principal, who is usually one of the school's teachers.

In most cases congregational constitutions specify that the congregational business will be conducted by a church council, which is made up of various officers in the congregation. The final decisions on church matters are made by the voting members. The voting members are the ones who call the pastor and teachers and elect other officers in the congregation, including the members of the church council.

In keeping with Paul's instructions that women should not have authority over men, only male members may be voting members. In matters that affect the women and girls of the congregation, the voters seek and consider their opinions. Some congregations form women's societies that have their own organization for regular meetings, Bible study, and congregational projects that benefit all the members. Women regularly serve as teachers of the younger children in Sunday School and in the day schools.

In the United States most congregations voluntarily become members of an association of congregations known as a synod or church body. The constitutions these associations adopt state their purpose and how their work is to be conducted. Leaders of such associations are chosen by means of elections during the regular meetings of the association. Such elected persons are also ministers of the Gospel and part of the public ministry, carrying out the duties which they have been given. Synods need various officers and board members to carry out the work the congregations that part of the association have asked them to do.

Among the projects of the Church of the Lutheran Confession is the operation of a synodical high school, college, and seminary for the training of pastors, teachers, missionaries, and other church leaders. Such a school need special gifts: administrators, teachers, counselors, and helpers of various kinds. God gives gifts to His Church, and it is up to Christians to recognize these gifts and call individuals who have these gifts to be the teachers of future pastors and teachers, to teach specialized subjects such as the Bible languages of Greek and Hebrew as well as other languages useful for church work. The school also needs teachers of such subjects as mathematics, science, history, social studies, and language.

Another main project of a synod is mission work – the spreading of the Gospel of Christ in United States and other countries as well. Missionaries need to be called for special work in these areas. The Church creates and develops forms of ministry according to the needs of the Church.

Another main project is congregational education, including the preparation and printing of materials that will help in Christian mission work and Christian education. Thus, the synod authorizes the publication of journals and magazines that contribute to the cause of the Gospel.

As the Gospel goes out into the world and reaches other countries and other cultures, other forms of the public ministry may be created that better suit the circumstances in these other countries. We would not expect the congregations in India, Nepal, or Nigeria, for example, to use the same forms that American congregations use, although they may do so if it benefits their churches. There are many ways in which Christian work can be done.

It is especially important for those who have been asked to serve in some form of public ministry to be on guard against spiritual pride and a feeling of superiority over Christians who have not been chosen for such an office. Jesus' twelve disciples were in danger of exalting themselves over others. To teach them a lesson, **"Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea'"** (Matthew 18:2-6).

Those in the public ministry need to remember that ministry means service, not domination. They need to imitate their Master, Jesus, who said: **“Whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many”** (Mark 10:44-45). Ministers in Christ’s Church need to keep in mind the example of Jesus, their Master, who washed the feet of His disciples as a servant. On that same night Jesus said: **“Who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves”** (Luke 22:27).

The aim of a minister in Christ’s Church is not to tear others down, but to build them up, that is, to edify them. The apostle Paul wrote: **“Let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel”** (1 Corinthians 14:12). **“Let all things be done for edification”** (1 Corinthians 14:26). On the other hand, he said: **“If you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another”** (Galatians 5:15).

Teachers in Christ’s Church should recognize their responsibilities and carry out the duties of their office to the best of their ability. James writes: **“My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment”** (James 3:1). Since ministers often do not have an earthly supervisor watching over them but set their own hours and keep track of their own responsibilities, they can be tempted to become lazy and get by with doing as little as possible. But Paul teaches us something different: **“Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them; if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it for ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness”** (Romans 12:6-8). And again Paul says: **“It is required in stewards that one be found faithful”** (1 Corinthians 4:2). **“He who judges me is the Lord”** (1 Corinthians 4:4).

One very important ministry is the training of future Christian pastors, teachers, and other leaders. As Paul awaited the sentence of execution as a prisoner in Rome, he wrote to Timothy: **“You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ”** (2 Timothy 2:1-3). Notice Paul’s concern for future generations. The Gospel of Christ must be passed on to them. This work requires faithful teachers. The Lord Himself delivered the Gospel of Christ to Paul. He then passed it on to Timothy. Timothy, in turn, was to pass this same teaching on to faithful men, who will teach yet another generation. Therefore, one of the foremost duties of a church body is to train future leaders. Every effort should be made to train these future leaders as thoroughly as possible.

Questions

1. What are the usual duties of pastors in American Lutheran congregations?
2. What forms of the public ministry are common in your locale?
3. Who is responsible for the weekly church services in your locale?
4. What are common organizational practices in American congregations?
5. What forms of organization are found in congregations in your locale?
6. What is meant by voting membership in a congregation?
7. What is special about the instruction given in Christian day schools?
8. How can church bodies or synods assist local congregations?
9. How can synods help congregations in doing mission work?
10. Why is it useful for congregations and synods to have constitutions?
11. Why is it so important for Christian leaders to be humble servants?
12. What is meant by the term “edification”?
13. How are ministers and church leaders trained in your locale?
14. How can this training be improved?



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.21 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Calling of Ministers for the Church

Since all Christians are priests in Christ's Church, no one priest may set himself up over other priests as a public minister without a call from God. Remember, a public minister does not function only as an individual Christian, but he does his work on behalf of other Christians. In the Old Testament God chose those who were to be prophets, priests, and kings over His people. The letter to the Hebrews makes this claim: "**No man takes this honor (of being high priest) to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but it was He who said to Him: 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You.'** As He also says in another place: '**You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek**'" (Hebrews 5:4-6). Even Jesus Christ Himself was called by God to His position as High Priest.

There are two ways in which God calls public ministers: directly and indirectly. The Angel of the Lord, who is the Lord Himself, came to Moses as he was tending his flock, and said to him: "**Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt**" (Exodus 3:10). Earlier Moses had pushed himself forward to be the leader of his people, but that attempt did not have God's blessing, and it failed. But now God called him, and Moses was finally persuaded to accept the Lord's call. The prophet Isaiah was called when God asked for volunteers, and Isaiah answered: "**Here am I! Send me.**" Then God said: "**Go**" (Isaiah 6:8-9). God told Jeremiah that He had chosen him as a prophet before he was born. Although Jeremiah was hesitant, God insisted: "**You shall go to all to whom I send you, and whatever I command you, you shall speak**" (Jeremiah 1:5-7).

Jesus Himself chose twelve men to be His disciples (followers) at first, then later He chose these same twelve to be His apostles. He sent them out on preliminary missions to the Jewish people while He was still with them, and He then sent them out as missionaries to the whole world after His resurrection. Many of them had been fishermen, fishers of fish, but Jesus said to them: "**Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men**" (Matthew 4:19). After a certain period of training, Jesus sent these same twelve men out as His apostles. "**He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons**" (Mark 3:14-15). A disciple is a follower, but an apostle is someone who has been sent out by the Lord Himself to proclaim His teachings. Jesus prayed to His Father for His apostles: "**Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world**" (John 17:17-18).

When Jesus ascended to heaven, there were only eleven apostles. Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, had betrayed his Master, and was no longer with them. The Scriptures had foretold this betrayal and had given instructions that another should be chosen to take his place. The eleven therefore named two men as candidates to fill the vacancy, and asked God to decide between the two of them. "**They cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles**" (Acts 1:26).

Later the risen Jesus Himself chose a Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, to be His chosen apostle to the Gentiles. Since Saul had viciously persecuted the Christians in Jerusalem and elsewhere, he was an unlikely candidate for apostleship, but Jesus called him from heaven in a miraculous way, so that there could be no doubt that Saul, or Paul, as he was known, was an apostle on the same level as the twelve. When

Paul wrote to the Galatians, he called himself “**Paul, an apostle (not from men nor through men, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead**” (Galatians 1:1). Paul proved that he was a chosen apostle by the signs and miracles he did. He wrote to the Corinthians: “**In nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing. Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds**” (2 Corinthians 12:11-12).

But already in the days of the apostles most public ministers were called by God indirectly, that is, by a call from God through Christians. The apostles’ helpers in the Jerusalem congregation, the seven deacons, were chosen by God indirectly. The apostles “**summoned the multitude of the disciples and said: ‘...Brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. ...’ And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen**” and the others (Acts 6:2-5). God chose these seven men through the decision of the multitude of disciples, and thus these men had an indirect call from God to do the work entrusted to them.

We do not know exactly how they carried out the calling process, whether by acclamation or by counting votes or in some other way. But it was the congregation, not the apostles, who chose the seven men as their assistants. A short time later, news came to the Jerusalem congregation that there were Christians in Antioch of Syria. We read: “**News of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch**” (Acts 11:22). Barnabas received his call to serve as minister in Antioch from God through the Jerusalem congregation. A bit later we are told that the Antioch congregation sent Barnabas and Paul as missionaries to the Gentiles: “**The Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’**” (Acts 13:2). We do not know exactly how the Holy Spirit made this choice known. Was it through one of the apostles or prophets in the congregation? Or was it through the decision of the congregation? This may have been a direct call or an indirect call. In either case the call came from God the Holy Spirit.

That a call comes from God the Holy Spirit is evident from what Paul said to the elders of the congregation at Ephesus: “**Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God**” (Acts 20:28). When groups of Christians gather together in Jesus’ name and choose some person or persons for some special task in the church, it is the Holy Spirit who guides the Christian group and chooses and calls individuals into the public ministry through them. No one should set himself up as a minister of God to speak for other Christians, unless he has been called by God through Christians. Paul wrote to the Romans: “**How shall they preach unless they are sent?**” (Romans 10:15).

The calling Christians may be a congregation, a number of congregations, an association of congregations like a synod, or a smaller committee appointed by the larger group to issue a call in their name. When there was a need for someone to handle the offering for the poor Christians in Jerusalem, we read that a “**brother ... was also chosen by the churches to travel with us with this gift**” (2 Corinthians 8:18-19). Jesus said: “**Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them**” (Matthew 18:20). This is true whether the two or three (or more) are the Christians of a certain congregation or a synod or some other Christian group, as long as the precepts of love and good order are being followed.

In church history there have been individuals, both men and women and perhaps even some children, who have claimed that God has called them directly to preach and teach one thing or another. They claim that God is speaking through them, and that Christians need to listen to them and obey them because their voice is the voice of God. It is highly unlikely that any of these self-proclaimed preachers have been called by God. When their message is put to the test by comparing it with God’s authentic Word in Holy Scripture, it generally fails the test. Anything that goes beyond what God has told us in Scripture is false teaching as is any teaching which is contrary to Scripture. Anyone claiming that God

has called him directly into the public ministry needs to substantiate that claim by doing an apostolic sign or miracle as well as by teaching God's Word in truth and purity. Our Lutheran fathers declared in the *Augsburg Confession*, Article XIV: "*No one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper call*" (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 46). Proper calls are those issued by Christian congregations and Christian synods through whom the Holy Spirit makes His choice known.

No particular method of calling public ministers is prescribed in Holy Scripture. No single person or group in the church has the authority to impose a pastor or a teacher on a congregation without the congregation's full approval. Experienced Christians may give advice as needed in unusual situations, but the calling group of Christians needs to agree on a procedure for calling someone before the process begins. One such experienced pastor has given this advice: "Methods are a matter of Christian liberty. The calling church generally follows a procedure similar to that used in Jerusalem: determine the needs, adopt a list of qualified candidates, and complete the election by majority vote. The congregation agrees to make the election its unanimous choice. This may appear to differ little from the methods any group may use to decide whom to hire for a certain job, but the church will remember that the Lord is involved in what it is doing. He is the one who calls. The members will pray that the Lord be with them and bless them, and they will ask the Holy Spirit to guide them in all they do. With such a prayer in their hearts and on their lips, they will act in the fear of God, using their best judgment in accordance with the Lord's will as revealed in the Scriptures" (Armin Schuetze: *Church — Mission — Ministry*, p. 110).

What is most important is that those who are called into the public ministry remember that a minister is a servant of God and a servant of His people, a servant through whom God has chosen to do His work. They should remember Paul's words: "**Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor**" (1 Corinthians 3:5-8).

Questions

1. What is the difference between a public minister and other Christians?
2. How many people are priests in the Holy Christian Church?
3. Name some persons who were called directly by God for ministry.
4. What is the difference between a disciple and an apostle?
5. To whom did Jesus send His apostles before He died and rose again?
6. To whom did Jesus send His apostles after He rose from the dead?
7. What is the difference between a direct call and an indirect call?
8. How did Paul prove that he was an apostle of the Lord?
9. How were the seven deacons in Jerusalem called to their ministry?
10. Why do we say that the call given to pastors a divine call?
11. What method of calling is used by the Christians in your locale?
12. What should all called ministers remember about their work?
13. How would you respond to someone who claims that God called them directly into the public ministry?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.22 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Ordination and Installation of Ministers

When a person who already has a call into the public ministry is serving in that call and then receives another call to a different position in the public ministry or in a different location, he needs to determine where God wants him to serve. He has two calls, and he cannot accept both of them at the same time. In order to determine where God wants him to serve, he will examine himself and the gifts God has given him and the needs of the Christians who have called him, he will consult both groups of calling Christians and his Christian friends and associates, he will pray to God for guidance, and then he will make a decision to either serve under his present call or accept the new call.

When he accepts a new call and is ready to begin his service under the new call, it is customary among American Christians that he be installed into his new position. This usually involves some kind of church service during which the Word of God is proclaimed by someone chosen for this purpose, and both the calling congregation and the new minister are reminded of their duties and privileges as Christians and Christian servants. The person called is asked whether he is willing to teach God's Word in its truth and purity, according to the Bible and the congregation's public confessions.

This procedure is a matter of custom rather than a command from God, just like confirmation and other church practices that have been in use for a long period of time. God's instructions for pastors are summarized in the words of the apostle Peter: **"The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; not as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away"** (1 Peter 5:1-4).

It has also become customary among many Christian groups for a person who has accepted a call into the public ministry for the first time to be ordained. By accepting a call into the public ministry, such a person is already a minister by virtue of the call he has received and accepted. Ordination is a public declaration that the person to be ordained has been called into the ministry indirectly by God through the congregation or synod and that he possesses the required qualifications. As part of the ordination ceremony those who are already serving in the public ministry in the area or who have some office in the congregation or synod lay hands in blessing over the person who is being ordained and installed.

The laying on of hands in blessing was practiced in the early church. When the seven deacons were chosen as assistants to the apostles in the Jerusalem congregation, we are told that these men were set before the apostles, **"and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them"** (Acts 6:6). After Barnabas and Paul had been chosen as missionaries to the Gentiles, the same procedure was followed. **"Having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away"** (Acts 13:3). Paul wrote to his assistant, Timothy: **"I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands"** (2 Timothy 1:6).

Nevertheless, description of what was done in those times is not the same as God commanding us to do it. Our Lord did not institute ordination, as He instituted baptism and the Lord's Supper. Therefore, we do not consider ordination an absolute necessity before a called minister of God can begin his work.

When Jesus gave the ministry of the keys to His disciples, He did not lay His hands on them. “**He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’**” (John 20:22). Another practice that was common in those days was the “**holy kiss**” (Romans 16:16); it was an expression of fellowship among the early Christians. That practice is no longer customary among us.

There are some Lutherans today who insist that ordination is a necessary practice commanded by God. But since there is no word of command in Scripture concerning ordination, the Church of the Lutheran Confession declares with the *Brief Statement*: “*Regarding ordination we teach that it is not a divine, but a commendable ecclesiastical ordinance*” (#33).

Questions

1. How may a person who has two calls determine where God wants him to serve?
2. What does it mean when a called minister is installed into his new position?
3. List some of the important points the apostle Peter makes in his address to elders, or called servants of the Word.
4. What is meant by ordination?
5. List some instances when Christians laid hands on ministers in the Bible.
6. What is meant by the laying on of hands?
7. Why should we consider ordination a custom rather than a sacrament?
8. How did Jesus convey the Holy Spirit to His disciples?

