

DISCIPLESHIP. SUPPLEMENT 13

[FELLOWSHIP]

FUNCTION AND FORM IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

What is the difference between functions and forms in the Christian Community (Church). The same function can have a diverse number of forms that contribute to the great diversity in the one Body of Christ.

1. **Function and diversity.**

How should the worldwide Christian Church and the local independent churches function?

(1) **Christians ought to accept diversity.**

Read Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-7,18,28.

Notes. Although there is only one Body of Christ (the worldwide Christian Church), it consists of many different members and many different local independent churches/congregations.

Different backgrounds. The diversity within the one Body of Christ is on the one hand derived from the fact that the members come from different countries, nations, tribes, languages and cultures (Revelation 5:9).

Different spiritual gifts. The diversity within the one Body of Christ is on the other hand derived from the fact that the members have received different spiritual gifts.

Different tasks. The diversity within the one Body of Christ is also derived from the fact that the members have been called to a great variety of tasks (responsibilities) (Mark 13:34). Some have ordinary tasks like evangelism, disciple making, showing mercy, and doing other kinds of good works (1 Corinthians 3:5; Ephesians 2:10). Some have special tasks like doing great things by faith or by healing people (1 Corinthians 12:9). Others have official tasks as elder, pastor, teacher, evangelist, disciple maker, etc. (1 Corinthians 12:28).

Different places. The diversity can also be derived from the fact that a ministry (service. task) is carried out within a local congregation, within the worldwide Church (1 Corinthians 12:18) or within society.

(2) **The disadvantages of uniformity and advantages of multiformity (variety).**

The disadvantages of uniformity. Uniformity leads to gaps in the ministry and incomplete congregations. If everyone wants to be the teacher, who will be the students? If everyone wants to be the leader, who will be the followers? Who is going to take care of mercy, encouragement, serving and doing good works?

Uniformity leads to disunity. Many Christians find no place to exercise their spiritual gift or task.

- *Social uniformity* leads to discrimination, oppression and even exclusion of for example the poor and illiterate (James 2:1-10). Striving after uniformity of race leads to discrimination (Acts 10:9-16,28,34-35).

- *Cultural uniformity* leads to exclusion of people with another language or culture and often to maintaining sinful cultural patterns, for example, to the institution and maintenance of authoritarian leadership, to demanding unconditional obedience of adult children to their parents and other older people in the congregation and to replacing biblical teaching with cultural traditions (Mark 7:15-13).

- *Doctrinal uniformity* that is not based on “the whole will of God” (Acts 20:27) or that “distorts the Word of God” (2 Corinthians 4:2) leads irrevocably to forming “sects” (groups that break away from other Christians).

The advantages of diversity. The hall mark of a biblical church/congregation is diversity (1 Corinthians 12:14-20). Spiritual diversity leads to real unity, because the service of every Christian is necessary and every Christian needs the service of other Christians (1 Peter 4:10-11). Social diversity enables Christians to share: the rich can share their possessions with the poor (James 2:5). A diversity of race makes missionary work possible: the unreached people groups can be reached (Acts 8:27-31; Acts 10:24-28,34-35). Cultural diversity makes the demonstration of unity within the Body of Christ possible (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). The worldwide Church can only do what she ought to do when she is governed and controlled from one Head, namely, Jesus Christ

(3) **Christians ought to be mutually dependent.**

Read 1 Corinthians 12:21-27.

Notes. There is in the Church not a single ground for inferior or superior feelings or judgments. The eye needs the ear and the hand needs to foot. Every member is indispensable within the Body of Christ. The members “have equal concern for each other” (1 Corinthians 12:25). This means exercising “the one another responsibilities”¹ not only in the local church, but also in the worldwide Church! This is true ecumenism!

¹ DOTA Manual 1, lesson 11.

2. Function and form.

(1) Historical forms in the Christian Church.

Question. What are historical examples of forms in the Church?

Notes. Christians ought to express its functions in appropriate and contemporary forms.

- In the beginning Christians had daily meetings (Acts 2:46), but later weekly (Acts 20:7).
- Initially Christians gathered in the court of the temple (Acts 2:42,46), but later in houses (Acts 20:20; Romans 16:5).
- Christians originally combined “the breaking of bread” (the Lord’s Supper) with their meals at home (Acts 2:42,46), but later combined it with the official meetings of the congregation (1 Corinthians 11:17-22).
- The first Christians expressed their generosity by sharing their possession with the poor (Acts 2:44-45; Acts 4:34-35), but later by conducting regular collections (1 Corinthians 16:1-2).
- The first congregation solved unexpected problems by choosing and appointing special men as “deacons” (Acts 6:1-7), but later more and more ordinary Christians took up these challenges to serve (Mark 13:34; 1 Peter 4:10-11).
- The Christians baptised new believers with water in the beginning standing in a river (Mark 1:4-8; cf. John 3:23; 4:1), but later standing in a house (Acts 9:17-18; Acts 10:47-48; Acts 22:16).
- The early Christians greeted one another by hugging (Acts 20:37) or by giving a holy kiss (2 Corinthians 13:12).
- And Christians prayed as the believers during the Old Testament period with uplifted hands (1 Kings 8:22; Psalm 28:2; 1 Timothy 2:8), but later also by kneeling (Acts 20:36; Ephesians 3:14).

But note. Nowhere in the Bible are Christians taught or commanded to follow the same forms! Nowhere in the Bible are such forms enforced on Christians!

(2) Functions which in history were changed into unchanging traditional forms.

Question. What are examples in the Bible of functions that were changed into outward forms?

Notes. The worldwide Church is warned not to change some functions into traditional forms.

- Sometimes spiritual circles teach traditional forms that are completely against the Bible. For example, Christians may not include the following in their church services: occultism or paranormal elements as yoga (meditation forms derived from Hinduism and Buddhism), spiritism, reiki, hand palm reading, etc. from their cultures (Deuteronomy 18:9-13)!
- Christians may not continue traditional forms in their congregations when these forms nullify the Word of God (the Bible). Upholding traditional forms that nullify the Word of God must be terminated immediately. For example, the Pharisees turned outward forms like the washing/rinsing/baptising of hands before the meal and the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles) into compulsory functions (Markus 7:1-5)!
- The appointment of one (and often a very authoritarian) person to be the leader in the congregation (church) (3 John 9-11) instead of a council of several elders (Acts 20:17,28; 1 Timothy 4:14) violates the clear teaching of the Bible (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-4). In the Bible churches (congregations) are independent and every congregation is led by a council consisting of a plural number of elders (Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17,28; Titus 1:5). Leadership in the Bible is always shared leadership and servant leadership (John 13:12-17).
- Enforcing one particular form of baptism with water, for example, baptising with water only through sprinkling with water or immersion in water (that are as a matter of fact nowhere taught or commanded in the Bible), violates the clear teaching in the Bible “not to go beyond what is written in the Bible” (1 Corinthians 4:6). The meaning of Christian baptism with water² is very clearly taught in the Bible, but the form of baptism with water is not taught or commanded in the Bible.
- Christians must not hold on to traditional forms when these forms have lost their meaning. Jesus Christ condemned outward forms when they are maintained only to make a show of piety (Matthew 23:25-29).
- Although every Christian function is expressed in one or another form, the traditional forms in the church may never violate the clear teaching of the Bible (Matthew 15:1-9), they must continue to have significance, and they may never be enforced on other Christians (who may prefer another form). The apostle Paul warns against enforcing and maintaining forms (for example: circumcision) only for the sake of “making a good impression outwardly” or “to avoid persecution by others who advocate a particular traditional form” (Galatians 6:12-16)!

(3) Historic forms that are Biblical and contextualised.

Question. Which contemporary forms are Biblical and at the same time contextualized (adapted well to the culture of a nation)?

Notes. A church (congregation) ought to express its functions in “contextualised forms” (adapted well to the culture of a nation) and that are biblically sound. The forms in the church/congregation should never violate the clear teaching of the Bible. Examples of this are:

² Baptising *with water*. Greek: third case = indication of the means by which; *with water* and *with the Holy Spirit* (Mark 1:8) and Greek “en” = an indication of the place where: *in the desert* (Mark 1:4) and *in the Jordan river* (Mark 1:5), *not immersed* in the desert or *immersed* in the river. Philip baptised the eunuch *with water* (Acts 8:36-39) at a place where there “*was some water*” (verse 36) and by “*standing in the water and not by immersion*”, because they both came up out of the place where there was some water and not from below the surface of the water (verse 38-39). The method of baptising with water is not prescribed in the Bible!

A group having a common network of relationships (Family and friends.) (Acts 10:24,27). The military centurion invited the apostle Peter to speak in his house (Greek: oikos) to his family and friends. This group of Gentiles (non-Jews) that met together in an ordinary house were probably the first church/congregation (a house church) among the Gentiles.

Which group of family members, friends, neighbours and their colleagues could you gather together in a house to tell them the good news?

A group with a common social structure (Household.) (Acts 16:13-15,29-34). The apostle Paul spoke to a group of people who were gathered together for prayer at a riverside. Lydia could have been the first disciple of Jesus Christ in Europe. The most members of her household (Greek: oikos) also became Christians. Paul also spoke to a jailor in Philippi and he and all his household (Greek: panoikei) became followers of Jesus Christ.

A “family or household” (Greek: oikos) is a group of people with a common social structure that includes things like: living in the same area, working together (as employer and employees) and worshipping God together.

Which group of similar people form a family or household in your place that you could share the gospel with? For example: students, military personnel, self-employed persons, young married couples, factory workers, a minority group, asylum seekers, caste or casteless, mountain tribe, etc.

A group with a common interest (A Bible study group or disciple group) (Acts 17:1-4; Acts 18:7-8; Acts 19:8-10). As his custom was, Paul gathered a group of people in the local synagogue together in order to discuss the Bible together. His purpose was to convince these people to become disciples of Jesus Christ.

Which group of interested people could you gather together in a congregation, in another religion and culture, in a sports club or other kind of club, etc. in order to discuss (study) the Bible together?

(4) Guidelines for forms in the church (congregation).

Question. Which guidelines should determine the (traditional) forms in the Christian Church?

Notes. Four guidelines are important for choosing appropriate and contemporary forms in the church/congregation.

The guideline for a form is to worship God in spirit and truth (John 4:19-24). Jesus Christ announced that the time has come to express all forms of worship “in spirit and in truth”. The attitude with which Christians ought to worship the God of the Bible may not consist of “outward show” (cf. Isaiah 1:13-15), but must be “inner reality (in spirit)”. Christians ought to forgive others genuinely (in truth), subject themselves and dedicate themselves genuinely to Christ and focus especially on knowing God and fellowshiping with God.

The guideline for a form is to serve God in complete accordance with the Bible (1 Corinthians 4:6). The prophets in the Old Testament always said: “This is what the LORD Almighty says” (Jeremiah 29:4). And Jesus Christ always said, “It is written” (Matthew 4:4). Therefore the apostle Paul applied the following rule to himself and his co-workers: “Not to go beyond what is written (in the Bible)”! Christians must not worship and serve the God of the Bible with religious traditions that violate the Bible (cf. Isaiah 1:10-18; Isaiah 58:2-12)! Christians ought to serve the God of the Bible in accordance with the revelation in the Bible.

The revelation in the Bible is progressive: the old covenant passed into the new covenant (Hebrews 8:5-13). Therefore the Old Testament must always be interpreted in the light of the New Testament (and not the other way round). Many functions and forms in the Old Testament have been *fulfilled* (Matthew 5:17) and have therefore been *cancelled* (Colossians 2:14) and *abrogated* (Ephesians 2:15).

The apostle Paul clearly recorded how the church (Greek: ekklesia) as God’s household (Greek: oikos) ought to conduct itself and which leaders must be chosen (1 Timothy 3:15). He gave “instructions” (in the first Letter to Timothy) about sound doctrine, public worship, relationships between men and women in the congregation, the appointment of elders and deacons, about special groups in the congregation like older women, slaves and the rich, and about pursuing godliness, righteousness, faith, love and gentleness He urged Timothy: “Watch your life and doctrine closely” (1 Timothy 4:16).

The guideline for a form is that it must be beneficial and constructive (1 Corinthians 10:23). Certain functions in the church are compulsory; others are permissible, but not necessarily constructive. Though certain functions in the congregation may be permissible, they are not beneficial and constructive in all circumstances. For example, eating meat and drinking wine are permissible, but are not always beneficial or constructive, because certain groups of people are vegetarians or teetotallers. However, people who are convinced that eating meat or drinking wine is wrong, may not judge people who do these things. And the people who do these things may not look down upon those who do not do these things (Romans 14:1 – 15:7). The guideline is love and genuine love shows consideration for the convictions and consciences of other people. The only motive to do something or to refrain from doing something is to do everything to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:23-33).

The guideline for a form is that it must be in accordance with the calling and assigned task of the Christian (1 Corinthians 3:5-15). Although the worldwide Church performs all the biblical functions, God’s calling limits each Christian to certain functions. It is God who calls people to particular functions. Each task may have several different forms, because the God-given talents (skills) and spiritual gifts are different, the stages of growth of Christians are different and their dedication and performances are different. Not all Christians build with “gold and costly stones”.

The calling of God and the training of God makes every Christian responsible and answerable to God, but is at the same time a relief, because not every glorious opportunity need to be pursued and you do not need to carry out every ministry in the world! Christians may have different functions (tasks) in the Body of Christ. And their functions may be expressed in different forms, provided that they are biblical and contextual. Christians may certainly limit themselves to their calling and assigned task!