

Lesson 36 – Our Place in Free and Living Congregations

After studying the birth and development of the Early Church in Acts, what are some marks of a healthy congregation? Acts 2:42-47 describes post-Pentecost meetings that featured preaching, teaching of God's Word, prayer, and the breaking of bread. Acts 6:1-6 tells about duties in the congregation that were shared. Everyone had a voice and opportunity to serve. They were free congregations not bound by Jewish traditions and authority. They were living congregations as believers learned, fellowshiped, shared, and prayed together. The early Christians built up one another as the Holy Spirit strengthened them.

We are members of that same body of believers that has existed since Paul's time. So what does that mean for you and your role in your congregation?

Titus

Paul's letter to Titus, a trusted friend and coworker in the church, includes instructions regarding godly living and good church leadership. This letter Paul shared with Titus 2,000 years ago is still helpful for congregations today.

Paul begins by giving guidance to the elders and overseers in the congregation. Then he addresses other members of the church.

Whom does Paul address in the following verses of Titus 2?

- v.2 *older men*
- v.3 *older women*
- vv.4-5 *young women*
- vv.6-8 *young men*

Clearly, it mattered to Paul that members of all ages in the congregation support, encourage, and teach one another to live well.

From Scandinavia to America

Following the work of Martin Luther in Germany, the Protestant Reformation made its way to Scandinavia. By 1536, Lutheranism became the official religion of Norway. However, the tradition in Scandinavia, as in other areas of Europe, was the "state church." This meant that the government and religion were united and that the citizens were expected to follow the religion that their government had chosen.

When church and state are united, freedom of individual believers is often limited by the power of the state. In Norway at this time, only ordained pastors were allowed to preach the Word of God.

In the early 1800s, a peasant farmer named Hans Nielsen Hauge started preaching God's Word among his fellow Norwegians, which led to a spiritual revival. His efforts, however, conflicted with the controlling state church, and he was imprisoned for much of his life. The revival God started through Hauge spread throughout Norway with lasting results.

Near the end of the nineteenth century, God raised up two Norwegian men, Georg Sverdrup and Sven Oftedal, who shared a belief that the way the original New Testament congregations operated was the way congregations should still operate. For example, after Paul planted a church and equipped leaders, he moved on to begin a new congregation in another place. He still encouraged and advised them, but the congregations were free. The New Testament does not describe elaborate church structures involving bishops and popes.

Sverdrup and Oftedal soon realized that the state church of Norway would never give up its power, and there was little chance for a Lutheran free church to be established in Norway. As a result, they came to the United States in the 1870s with the dream of planting "a free church in a free land" made up of congregations modeled after those in apostolic times.

In 1897, Sverdrup and Oftedal began the Lutheran Free Church with the biblical idea that there should be no power over the congregation except the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. To make certain each congregation's

freedom could not be taken away, they wrote twelve Fundamental Principles. These principles, which deliberately emphasize the Word of God, serve as a guide for “free and living congregations.”

- **Free:** The members have spiritual freedom found through salvation in Jesus Christ. Also, the congregation is free from human authority, being preserved and held together by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God.
- **Living:** The congregation is kept spiritually alive by the Holy Spirit through the quickening preaching of the Word of God. Members build up each other in Christ and also reach out to the lost in their community and around the world. [TM note: AFLC Fundamental Principles may be found in “Roots of Freedom” by Loiell Dyrud) The Word quickening refers to life. Quickenings, being made alive, is the result of clear preaching of the Law which shows us that we are dead in our sins and the Gospel which assures us that only Christ’s payment for our sin will make us alive through faith in Christ Eph. 2:4-5]

In 1963, most of the Lutheran Free Church congregations merged with a larger church body. However, the congregations that remained true to the principles established by Sverdrup and Oftedal continued as The Association of Free Lutheran Congregations. Today the AFLC still consists of free and living congregations based on the inerrant Word of God and with a mission emphasis.

New People:

- **Georg Sverdrup** (1848-1907) was born into one of the more famous families in Norway. His great-uncle was chairman of the committee that wrote Norway’s constitution, his uncle had been Prime Minister of Norway, and his father was the pastor called on to revise Norway’s Catechism (still used in the AFLC today). He was a brilliant scholar known for his extensive writings promoting the congregation and missions.
- **Sven Oftedal** (1844-1911) came from a family of mission-minded pastors in Stavanger, Norway, the center for the Norwegian Mission Society. Oftedal was an eloquent speaker and was fluent in twenty different languages. If Sverdrup could be called the “mind” of the Lutheran Free Church, Oftedal was the “heart.” He was engaging and outgoing and loved to be with people.

Every life is different, but God’s call and His promises are the same for every person, old or young. As Christians, we are part of the same body of believers that reaches all the way back to the beginning of the Christian church. Paul’s words to the Thessalonian believers in I Thessalonians 5:23-24 are a blessing for all believers:

Memory Verse

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely;
and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete,
without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.
I Thessalonians 5:23-24

Extra Memory Challenge

Matthew 5:16

Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in Heaven.

Discussion Questions

Each teacher should encourage, as much as time permits, discussion and inquiry on the part of students. Not every aspect of the following questions is addressed here, and students may have thoughts related to but not mentioned in this guide. The obligation of the teacher, then, is to understand as deeply as possible the Scriptures that are being discussed, in order to answer as well as possible any questions a student might have.

What does life in the church look like for someone living 2,000 years after Acts was written? Read the following verses and discuss how they help us better understand what it means to be a member of a **free** and **living** congregation:

FREE

1. What sets a Christian free from sin and death? Romans 8:1-2
The Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.
2. To what authority is the church subject? II Timothy 3:16-17 and II Corinthians 3:17
God's Word and the Holy Spirit
3. In Acts 6:3-6, how were people chosen to fill a ministry need in the early church?
The members chose men from among them. How does that apply to a modern-day church? The members of that congregation can choose the people who will fill ministry roles in the congregation, being guided by God through His Word and prayer.

LIVING

4. Acts 2:42 gives a picture of what a living church looks like: "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' *teaching* and to *fellowship*, to the breaking of bread, and to *prayer*."
5. The church is one body in Christ but has many members with different God-given gifts to share (I Corinthians 12:18). What gifts has God given you to share in your congregation?
Answers will vary. Other verses to read may include I Corinthians 12 and Romans 12:4-8.
6. Spreading the Gospel message both locally and globally was vital to the early church and is vital to the AFLC today. According to Acts 1:8, from where does the power to spread this message come? The Holy Spirit. How can you participate in this work personally through your congregation, in your community, and around the world?
The Word of God is trustworthy and dependable. The same message that the apostles taught is still true. There is sin. We are sinful. But Jesus Christ came to save a lost world. Jesus took our sin to the cross and freely offers us His righteousness in exchange. By faith in this wonderful work of Jesus we become right with God. This is the Gospel message. Consider the Third Article of Apostles' Creed and the explanation. Note the verbs in the explanation-calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies and preserves. The Holy Spirit's work in our lives allows us to spread the Gospel message.
Participate in your Sunday School class, encourage your friends in your church and in school, pray for others, help with VBS, be active in Christian groups in your community, maybe Fellowship of Christian Athletes, volunteer in food pantry ministries, homeless shelters, Discussion could include AFLC Home Missions and World Missions endeavors, AFLBS Summer Team Ministries. Information about these ministries can be found on the aflc.org website.

Daily Devotions

Sunday:	John 8:31-36
Monday:	II Corinthians 3:4-11
Tuesday:	John 6:63-69
Wednesday:	John 13:3-17
Thursday:	John 13:31-35
Friday:	Mark 10:35-45
Saturday:	Matthew 25:14-30

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH AND ITS CHURCH YEAR

* What other festivals are often observed during the Church Year in the local congregation?

Ascension Day: 40 days after Easter

Reminds us that Jesus went to heaven to prepare a place for us.

Reformation Day October 31

Recalls Martin Luther posted the Ninety Five Theses to challenge false teachings in the church and restore emphasis on the Word of God.

All Saints Day November 1

Celebrates the lives of those who have died in the faith.

1. What is the most important thing to remember whenever we worship? John 4:23-24

Jesus said we must worship in spirit and in truth, with sincere hearts and genuine faith, wherever and whenever we worship God.