

Series Apostles' Creed

This Message I Believe in the Holy Catholic Church

Scripture Ephesians 1:3-10, 15-19, 22-23

In the Apostles' Creed, we affirm our belief in the triune God. The first part of the Creed refers to the work of God the Father Almighty in creation. The second section is an overview of the Son's work of redemption. The third section of the Creed is a summary of the Holy Spirit's work of transformation in the lives of believers.

Last week we thought about the statement "I believe in the Holy Spirit." This statement is followed by the listing of five blessings brought to us by the Holy Spirit — blessings which make our lives as believers significant. The Holy Spirit unites us with Jesus Christ, giving us membership in the "holy catholic Church." This is the phrase we will think about today. Because we are members of the "holy catholic Church," we can have communion with other believers. Our new relationship with Jesus Christ and other believers is the result of "forgiveness of sins." The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit is our assurance of forgiveness. The future "resurrection of our bodies" will be accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit (*Rom 8:11*), after which we will be forever free of the curse of sin and qualified to spend eternity in the presence of God. These are the blessings provided to us by the Holy Spirit.

The "holy catholic Church." Two adjectives and one noun. Let's begin with the noun. The word "church" in our English language goes back to the Greek word "kuriake," which simply means "belonging to the Lord." ("*Kurios*" is the word for "Lord.") The Greeks had another word which is also translated "church," the word "ekklesia." "Ekklesia" means "called out" (*ek = out; kaleo = call*). When we put the two terms together we learn that the church is "called out to belong to the Lord."

The Church is a corporate body. It is comprised of individuals who are called out from the world and gathered by God to Himself. The Church is the assembly of true believers who represent the cultures of the world and all generations between the founding of the Church on the day of Pentecost and the second coming of Jesus Christ. The Church is still growing. It will not be complete until the end of the age.

The Church has a close relationship with all members of the Godhead. The Church is the family of God the Father. The Apostle John affirmed the family relationship in his writings: "To all who received him (Jesus Christ, the Word of God), to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God" (*John 1:12*). The Church is the body of Christ, God's Son. Paul wrote: "God ... appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (*Ephesians 1:22-23*). The Church is the temple of the Holy Spirit, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? ... God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple" (*I Corinthians 3:16-17*).

These thoughts are combined in a passage in Ephesians, the portion of Scripture we will refer to frequently in this lesson. Paul wrote: we are "fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (*Ephesians 2:19-22*). We need to keep our definition in mind; the Church it is comprised of individuals who are called out from the world and gathered by God to Himself.

We also need to keep in mind that the Church is the Body of Christ. Christ is declared to be the Head of this Body, and His followers function as His arms and legs and voices which interact with the world. The Head controls the Body, which is to function in such a way that the purposes of God will be achieved here on earth. The Apostle Peter stated that we are "a people belonging to God that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light." Peter then gave these instructions: "Live such good lives among the pagans that They may see your good deeds and glorify God" (*I Peter 2:9, 12*).

The Church is the means whereby God is working out His purposes here on earth. I want to examine this point in some detail. Paul informs us that it is "through the church the manifold wisdom of God should be made known according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (*Ephesians 3:10-11*). What is the purpose of the Church? The Church exists to make known "the manifold wisdom of God."

What does this mean? Scripture indicates that God had a carefully thought out plan for His creation before the work of creation began. Peter explained that Christ “was chosen before the creation of the world” to be the sacrificial Lamb to provide redemption for humanity (*1 Peter 1:18-20*). In our Scripture reading, we read that God “chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” and “He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will” (*Ephesians 1:4-6*).

It is clear in Scripture that God had an eternal plan for the Church, but the revelation of that plan in human history unfolded slowly. Following the disobedience of Adam and Eve, there were promises and prophecies about the plan. We learn in the Old Testament that God’s chosen Messiah would come to deliver people from the deadly consequences of sin and separation from God. Also in the Old Testament we learn the practical steps through which God prepared for the arrival of the Messiah.

In the New Testament, we learn that when all the conditions were ready, the Messiah was supernaturally conceived and incarnated into the human race. He was born into the specific cultural group which God had prepared hundreds of years previously. Through His life, the Messiah revealed the glory of the Father. By His death He satisfied the righteous demands of the Father and atoned for the sins of people.

Throughout this long historical process, the “manifold wisdom” of God was unfolding and being revealed to humanity, but most of humanity did not recognize what God was doing. Happily, there were a few individuals through the ages who caught little glimmers of what was happening and by faith they rejoiced in the remarkable way that God was expediting His eternal plan.

Incredibly, even during the years in which Messiah was on the earth, very few individuals grasped the significance of His presence. The Apostle John summarized the situation: “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (*John 1:10-11*).

It was not until after Pentecost, after the arrival of the Holy Spirit, after the call of the Apostle Paul, that the full revelation of God's plan was understood. This is what Paul wrote concerning his role in explaining God's plan: "Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This grace was given to me to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known" (*Ephesians 3:2-5, 8-10*).

I am sure that you can recognize from these verses the strategic role of the Church in God's plan. The Church exists to make the eternal purposes of God known, and to communicate the good news concerning Jesus Christ, to be witnesses to all that God has done for humanity, to declare the praises of God, and to bring glory to God.

Now we come to another important responsibility of the Church — to glorify God. Paul stated it this way: "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!" (*Ephesians 3:20-21*). "Glory in the Church" and "glory in Christ Jesus" are almost the same thing because the Church is the Body of Christ and Christ is the Head of the Church. It is impossible to honor one without the other.

In the verses I quoted, there is a reference to the Holy Spirit: "according to his power that is at work within us." The verses which lead up to the quotation are a prayer. Paul wrote, "I pray that out of his glorious riches he (the Father) may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being And I pray that you may have power together with all the saints that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (*Ephesians 3:16-19*). The word "power" is used three times in these verses. Paul wants the Church, which, you must realize, is comprised of many individual members, to be the conduit by which the Holy Spirit is able to carry out God's work. God wants each one of us to "be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." When this happens, the purposes of God on earth will be accomplished, and God will be glorified.

Now we come to the adjectives in the Creed which describe the Church. The word “holy” has the general meaning of “being sanctified” or “separated,” that is, being set apart or consecrated for some special purpose. In the Bible, the word “holy” has the meaning “set apart for God.” When we say, “I believe in the holy church” it means that we believe the Church belongs to God and exists for His purposes and must have the quality of God. The Spirit wants believers, the members of the Church, to be distinct from earthly groups in order to bring glory to God.

God expects His Church to be holy in the sense of being pure from evil. The Apostle Paul used these words to describe the desired appearance of the Church: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy.” He wanted the Church to be “radiant ... without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (*Ephesians 5:25-27*). In order for the corporate Church to have the qualities of purity and holiness, it is necessary for each individual in the Church to be holy and blameless in personal conduct and attitude. This is what Christ wants.

The next adjective is the word “catholic.” Some protestants are uncomfortable with this word, and the word in the Creed is often changed to “Christian.” Unfortunately, the word “Christian” is not a good substitute because the word “catholic” means “universal.” At the time of the Reformation, there were Protestant leaders who wanted to put some distance between themselves and the Roman Church, so they stopped using the word “catholic” even though it was small “c” and not capital “C,” and put in the word “Christian.” The picture that we need to keep in mind is that the Church is a universal Church.

I don’t have time to discuss this in detail, but here are some reasons why the Church is universal:

The Church responds to a universal need — “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (*Roman 6:23*).

The Church tells of a universal remedy — “Christ died for all” (*I Peter 3:18*).

The Church has a universal membership — “whoever believes in him (Christ) shall not perish but have eternal life” (*John 3:16*).

The Church has a universal mandate — “Go into all the world, preach the gospel and make disciples of all nations” (*Matthew 28:20*).

How shall we summarize this message? We understand from Scripture that the Father loved the Church and had a plan whereby humans could become members of the Church, and we know that the Son loved the Church and gave His life to redeem the people who make up the Church, and we understand that it is the Holy Spirit who actually created the Church by His indwelling presence. We also understand that it is the Church, through its ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit, that gives witness to the truth of God and the good news about Jesus Christ. The first of the five blessings of the Holy Spirit for believers is membership in the Church of God.

Let me close with two verses from the letter written to the Hebrews. I quote these verses because they give good instructions about our involvement in the Church: “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (*Hebrews 10:24-25*).

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