

## The Apostles' Creed: ...holy catholic Church; ...communion of saints (14)

*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth*

*I believe in Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, our Lord*

*Who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary  
He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell*

*The third day He rose again from the dead*

*He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty*

*He will come again to judge the living and the dead*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit*

***The holy catholic Church; the communion of saints***

*The forgiveness of sins*

*The resurrection of the body*

*And the life everlasting*

- Having begun our study of the section of the Apostles' Creed, which is organized around the Holy Spirit, and, having looked specifically at His person, work, and procession, we come in this study to the subject of the Church.
- It is an interesting and somewhat telling observation that many versions of the Apostles' Creed actually consider this line that we are considering, the beginning of a fourth and final section. In other words, there are three *credos* before each of the members of the Trinity, but then, here, there is a fourth and final *credo* in relation to the Church. We believe *in...God the Father...in Jesus Christ...* and, *...in the Holy Spirit*, and because we believe IN them, we therefore believe A *holy catholic Church*. That is, in some versions of the Creed, it says here, *I believe a holy catholic Church*.
- This is somewhat telling in that throughout the history of the Christian Faith, individual Christians have had a very high regard for the Church. Unlike today, there was no such thing as being a Christian, without being a member of the Church. Indeed, the fathers of our faith from Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) to John Calvin of Geneva (1509-1564) have agreed that, "No one can have God as his Father who does not have the church as his mother."<sup>1</sup>
- This sentiment is not Roman Catholic...it is biblical. Each time we sing Psalm 87 we are singing of this truth (vs. 5), *And of Zion it shall be said, "This one and that one were born in her"; for the Most High Himself will establish her*. And, it is what we read in Galatians 4:26, *...the Jerusalem above is free, she is our mother*. Dr. Venema has expressed it well saying, "Unless we have been gathered by the Word and Spirit into the fellowship of the church of Jesus Christ, we may not presume to call ourselves members of the household of God, children of the Father in heaven."<sup>2</sup> And another has said, "While stressing the importance of a personal faith, the New Testament has no time for individualism, whether of the eccentric type that led some to become cave-dwelling hermits in days of old, or of a more modern kind that stresses self-sufficiency."<sup>3</sup>
- In 1 Corinthians 1:2 (NAS) Paul writes, *To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours*. In Ephesians 4:1-6 (ESV) he says, *I...urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all*. These passages tell us that the Church is a specially called community and has four basic characteristics: Unity, Sanctity, Catholicity, and Apostolicity.
- The **Unity** of the Church refers to the fact that there is only one Church. That means that our denominations and distinctions are not the most fundamental issues concerning the Church, but rather that we are part of the one people of God, called out by Him to faith in Christ. We are not first and foremost Reformed Presbyterians, nor even Calvinists, but Christians.
- The **Sanctity** of the Church refers to the fact that the Church is "holy" or "set apart". The word "church" comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*, meaning, "called out". We are not saints or holy because of anything that we are

<sup>1</sup> They are both, as well as others, credited with this quote.

<sup>2</sup> Venema, p. 113.

<sup>3</sup> Alister McGrath, *I Believe*, p. 121.

in ourselves, but because of the holy calling of God, who is holy.<sup>4</sup> That is, we are holy because of our **calling**...not because of our **goodness**. Thus Paul says in 2 Timothy 1:8-9, *Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of His own purpose and grace,* and the writer of the Book of Hebrews says (3:1), *Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession.* In other words, as Paul succinctly says in 1 Cor. 1:2, we are, *saints by calling*. And thus, the Church is not a humanly devised institution, it is a Divinely created fellowship...called into being by God.

- The **Catholicity** of the Church refers to the fact that it is a universal fellowship, defying both time and geography. The word “catholic” is not a reference to the Roman Catholic Church, but simply and literally means “according to the whole” or, again, “universal”. As Alister McGrath helpfully points out,

“In saying the church is catholic we are affirming that its message is valid and relevant to every age and every situation. It is not as if there is one church with a message suited to the needs of the second century, and another with a message suited to the needs of the twentieth—it is the same church, throughout the ages and across the world, which seeks to apply the same gospel in whatever situation it may happen to meet. It is an affirmation of the universal validity and relevance of the gospel.”<sup>5</sup>

- The **Apostolicity** of the Church refers to the fact that its beliefs can be traced back to, and established from, the writings of the Apostles. Jesus commissioned the Apostles to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to observe whatsoever He had command (Matt. 28:18-20). If you want to know where to find the Church, you must look for those who confess Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, and who are endeavoring to holdfast and practice the teaching of the Apostles’.
- The Apostles’ Creed reflects here, these four characteristics of the Church, affirming the **Unity** of the Church by having us confess *the holy, catholic Church* (not churches), the **Sanctity** of the Church, when it says, *the holy, catholic Church*, the **Catholicity** of the Church, when we confess *the holy, catholic Church*, and, although it is a bit of a stretch, the **Apostolicity** of the Church when we remember that the “church”—as in *the holy, catholic Church*—is the called out community of Jesus’ disciples, built upon the foundation of the Apostles (cf. Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:20; Rev. 21:14).
- There is both an **invisible** and a **visible** aspect to the Church. The Church considered in its *invisible* aspect, “...consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof” (WCF 25.1). The Church considered in its *visible* aspect, “...consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children” (25.2). But, while there are two aspects, there is only one Church that is “catholic or universal” in both aspects (cf. 25.1-2). The point of this distinction is to recognize that just because someone is IN the Church as a member that does not mean that they are OF the Church, being vitally united to Jesus Christ by faith. As John says, *They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us* (1 Jn. 2:19).
- And so that we do not succumb to an unbiblical form of institutionalism—replacing faith in Christ with membership in a church—the Creed adds here, *the communion of saints*. This makes the point that the Church is a group of people, a living body, a fellowship of spiritual pilgrims, a family that dwells together and shares life with one another in love...not a building. Indeed, the covenant promise of God, as He calls the Church into being is, *“I will be Your God, and you shall be My people.”* (cf. Ex. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 30:22; Eze. 36:28; etc.).
- This phrase further fleshes out the fact that we are called “saints” because of our union with Jesus Christ and with one another, which binds us together in love. The best commentary on this phrase is Chapter 26 of our own *Westminster Confession of Faith* entitled (and the title is taken straight out of the Apostles’ Creed), “Of the Communion of Saints”:

All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by His Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with Him in His grace, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory: and, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man. Saints by profession are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offers opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus. This communion which the saints have with Christ, does not make them in any wise partakers of the substance of His Godhead; or to be equal with Christ in any respect: either of which to affirm is impious and blasphemous. Nor does

<sup>4</sup> Of course there should be a reflection of God’s righteousness and holiness in the lives of His people, but this is akin to the way that the moon reflects the light of the sun, even though in itself, it has no natural light (see Alister McGrath, *I Believe*, p. 128).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 120

their communion one with another, as saints, take away, or infringe the title or propriety which each man has in his goods and possessions.