

# I Believe

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.  
(Genesis 1:1 ESV)*

*And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.  
(Hebrews 11:6 ESV)*

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God,  
that you may know that you have eternal life.  
(1 John 5:13 ESV)*

## **The Holy Catholic Church**

**May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

**Ephesians 4:1-6**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Ephesians 4:1-6. My wife informed me last Sunday that I accidentally referred to a 7 year water only fast instead of a 7 day water only fast. Hopefully you caught that. If you should undertake a 7 year water only fast I suspect that you would experience God but perhaps not in the way you are hoping for.

This morning we are talking about the most misunderstood clause in the entire Apostles' Creed. The good news is that the confusion is very easy to clear up. Many evangelicals choke on the phrase "I believe in the holy catholic church" because they think that by saying that they are pledging allegiance to the church of Rome.

The only catholic church most of us know anything about is the ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH – but the word "catholic" actually means something very close to our English word "universal". The Roman Catholics like that word, just like we like the word "Baptists" – but all Christians believe in baptism in some form or another – so we don't own the word "baptist" any more than Roman Catholics own the word "catholic". These are just words and doctrines and concepts that belong to the entire church. And this concept in particular is in desperate need of recovery in the

modern evangelical church, so we're going to look at it today; we're going to attempt to DEFINE IT; we're going to attempt to properly ESTEEM IT and then we'll spend a few minutes at the end talking about how, by God's grace we can RECOVER IT. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 1 of Ephesians chapter 4.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called,<sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,<sup>3</sup> eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.<sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—<sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism,<sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1–6 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

You'll notice that there are 7 uses of the word ONE there in verses 4-6; that's quite intentional. The number 7 was a very special number to Bible reading people. It reminded them of creation, it reminded them of perfection and wholeness and so Paul is saying here that through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God is making something new. Something whole. Something good. He is taking individual STONES – if we can borrow Peter's phraseology from last week – and putting them together into ONE NEW HOUSE.

That's what the word "catholic" is trying to communicate. It means, most immediately, ONE. It means UNIVERSAL.

## What Does It Mean?

### 1. Universal

If you took Latin in High School then you know that the Latin word for ONE is UNUS. So for example on the back of American coins and dollar bills you see that expression "E pluribus unum" – which means "Out of many, **one**" – which is the traditional motto of the United States of America.

So “universal” means ONE.

There is only ONE CHURCH.

There are not “churches of Jesus Christ” or “Bodies of Jesus Christ” there is only one. There is THE CHURCH. There is THE BODY.

The church, according to the Apostle Paul here, is ALL PEOPLE everywhere who have received the one Spirit; it is all people everywhere who have believed the one gospel, the one hope. It is all people everywhere who confess the one Lord. It is all people everywhere who have the one true faith and who have received the one true baptism. It is all people everywhere who worship the one true God who is Father to all.

That’s what we mean when we talk about the universal church – or as the Creed says, the holy catholic church.

But why then, you might ask, are there so many CHURCHES? If there is only one church, then why do we meet in different buildings, in different places at different times? What is the relationship between the ONE CHURCH and the MANY local churches? Is it a sum of the parts sort of thing – meaning are we the eye and Emmanuel across the road is the ear and Calvary Pentecostal is the foot and OCC is the hand and we all together make up the Body – is that what we are saying? D.A. Carson provides some helpful clarity here, he says:

“Each church is the full manifestation in space and time of the one, true, heavenly, eschatological, new covenant church. Local churches should see themselves as outcroppings of heaven, analogies of “the Jerusalem that is above”, indeed colonies of the new Jerusalem, providing on earth a corporate and visible expression of “the glorious freedom of the children of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Are you seeing that? Each church is an OUTCROPPING of the REAL CHURCH, the UNIVERSAL CHURCH, the HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH. We’re embassies and embodiments of the coming WHOLE.

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<sup>1</sup> D.A. Carson, “Evangelicals, Ecumenism, and the Church,” in Kantzer and Henry, *Evangelical Affirmations*, eds. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Carl F. Henry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 366.

So, think of the universal church as being like a MASSIVE, mostly underwater iceberg. An iceberg as big as the State of Texas, floating in the middle of the Pacific Ocean with MULTIPLE outcroppings and uprisings each of which may APPEAR and be EXPERIENCED as separate icebergs – but they’re not. They’re all connected. They are all ONE.

That is what you are affirming when you say: I believe in the holy catholic church. You are saying, I believe in the iceberg. I believe that in Christ, I am a part of something bigger than myself – bigger even than my local outcropping. I am a part of the UNIVERSAL BODY OF JESUS CHRIST.

Amen!

Alright, that is 75 or 80% of what this term means. Bible scholars will often say that the word “catholic” BASICALLY means UNIVERSAL – they are largely overlapping terms, but there are some other ideas and concepts associated with the word “catholic” that we want to grab on to. So let me offer a couple of other overlapping synonyms that will hopefully flesh this out for us. The word “catholic” mostly means “universal” but it also has the sense of:

## **2. Transcultural**

And that was an important concept in the early church, because prior to the ascension of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the church had been largely if not entirely JEWISH. But that all changed on the day of Pentecost – we talked about that last week. On the day of Pentecost the Gospel was preached in the languages of the Medes, the Parthians, the Cappadocians, the Arabians and the Cretans – 3000 people received Christ as Lord, were filled with the Holy Spirit, adopted the one true faith, were baptized into the church and returned to their nations to evangelize their friends and neighbours. And from that point on the church of Jesus Christ was TRANSNATIONAL. We take that for granted but it was a new and exciting concept in the early church and it had to STRESSED and insisted upon time and time again. So Paul says to the Galatians:

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.<sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:27–28 ESV)

He says something very similar to the Colossians:

Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. (Colossians 3:11 ESV)

The church is universal! The church is TRANSCULTURAL!! The Jews don't have an inside track! The Romans don't get to pull rank! None of that matters anymore. We are all united now, in Jesus Christ.

You know, one of the amazing things about Christianity is how ADAPTABLE it is to other cultures. Islam does not adapt. You wore the same clothes in Saudi Arabia as you wear in downtown Toronto. And you read the same version of the Quran. You read it in Arabic. Muslims all over the world learn Arabic so they can read the Muslim Scriptures – but Christianity ADAPTS. It says, take this principle and apply it fresh in your culture. It says take this book and translate it fresh into your language.

This has been happening SINCE THE VERY BEGINNING!

Jesus preached most of his sermons in Aramaic – and yet they were immediately translated by his disciples into GREEK! Why? Because more people in that part of the world spoke Greek. That's why the sermon on the mount sounds a little different in Matthew's Gospel than it does in Luke's Gospel. The disciples were remembering and TRANSLATING and so of course they said things a little differently.

Christianity has always been ok with that.

More than ok.

We DELIGHT in freshly applying the Gospel in new cultural contexts. Form is flexible – but meaning and essence are unchangeable.

It is that approach which explains, to a large degree why there is so much diversity in the universal body of Christ! Because it wraps up and transforms and infuses a diversity of cultural expressions.

You are indicating your affirmation of that when you say, I believe in the holy catholic church.

So it means universal, it means transcultural, and it also means eternal.

### **3. Eternal**

When you become a Christian you become part of a community that stretches across the great divide. Literally!

Ben Myers again is helpful here, he says:

“In the resurrection Jesus has stepped across the barrier and restored communion between the living and the dead. He has formed one family that stretches out not only across space but also across time.”<sup>2</sup>

Timothy George, the old Baptist theologian and historian is famous for beginning his class in church history by saying: “My task is to inform you that there was someone between Jesus and your grandmother and then to convince you that it matters.”

That tended to get everyone’s attention. And it should. Because it does matter. You are part of something OLD. You have joined something with ROOTS. Something that stretches back across the centuries. And something that still lives today in the presence – before the FACE of Almighty God.

Those people who lived somewhere between Jesus and Grandma are alive and according to the Book of Hebrews, they are watching you. The Apostle to the Hebrews says:

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<sup>2</sup> Ben Meyers, *The Apostles’ Creed: A Guide To The Ancient Catechism*, (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2018), 105.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us (Hebrews 12:1 ESV)

So we're part of a RELAY TEAM that is running a race that has been going on now for 2000 years. We each run our lap and then, apparently, we sit down in the stands to cheer on the people on the team who follow us. So the Apostle says: Run a good lap! Great Great Great Great Grandma is watching you and cheering for you – so don't let her down.

You are part of a family now that stretches across the ages. That's what you are saying when you say that you believe in the Holy Catholic Church.

So that's what it means – but why does it matter?

### **Why Does It Matter?**

Obviously it does matter. It is the **FIRST** thing that Paul draws attention to as he transitions from Gospel indicatives to Gospel imperatives in his Letter to the Ephesians. Hopefully you still have your Bible open to Ephesians chapter 4. You've heard me say many times that most of Paul's letters are organized around a two part structure. In the first half of the letter he tells us what is true! He gives us Gospel facts. He tells us what God has done in Christ for our salvation. He tells us about Christ's obedience and suffering and sacrificial death on the cross. He tells us about the resurrection the present reign of Christ and the sure return of Christ to judge the living and the dead.

And then having told us that, he tells us how to live in light of those facts. So there is usually a **THEREFORE** somewhere in the middle of every Pauline Epistle. You are looking at in verse 1 of Ephesians 4. Listen again:

**I therefore**, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called (Ephesians 4:1 ESV)

In Greek it is even more obvious. The Greek literally says: I urge you **THEREFORE** as a prisoner of the Lord, to walk in a manner worthy.

I urge you THEREFORE – based on all of what I just told you – I urge you, I command you, to live in a manner worthy.

That’s how most of Paul’s NT letters are structured. He starts with what Jesus has done and then he tells us what we should do – and look at what he tells us. Look at the FIRST THING he says to people who have believed in Christ; he says:

walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called,<sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,<sup>3</sup> eager to maintain **the unity** of the Spirit in the bond of peace.<sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—<sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism,<sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1–6 ESV)

The first thing he talks to them about is UNITY in the Spirit. The first doctrine he presses home on them as believers is the doctrine of the holy catholic church.

So apparently, this MATTERED to the Apostle Paul and it probably mattered to Paul because he knew that it mattered to Jesus. Jesus in his High Priestly Prayer in John 17 said:

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word,<sup>21</sup> that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.<sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one,<sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” (John 17:20–23 ESV)

So, obviously this matters! It mattered to the Apostle Paul because it mattered to Jesus - and did you hear why it matters to Jesus? He said it twice in his High Priestly prayer.

He said, “I want them to be ONE, Father”:

“**so that** the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:21 ESV)



He said it again in verse 23. “I want them to be ONE, Father:”

“**so that** the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” (John 17:23 ESV)

Apparently, watching people from every tribe, tongue and nation on planet earth GROW into the image and likeness of Christ and GROW in their love and unity with one another is a BIG PART of how the world is going to be convinced of the identity and Lordship of Jesus.

Our unity and our witness go hand in hand!

Am I reading that wrong?

I don't think so. Colin Kruse says here:

“It is the unity of the disciples one with another (based on their common oneness with the Father and the Son) that functions as a powerful witness to the world. And although Jesus did not say so, the converse is also sadly true. The lack of unity among his disciples undermines their witness to him.”<sup>3</sup>

So – this a truth that cuts both ways, isn't it? And that's why it is SUCH A PROBLEM when Christians casually dismiss each other and DIVIDE from each other over secondary issues. Now listen – we've already said, you have to be filled with the TRUE SPIRIT OF GOD, you have to be trusting in the REAL GOSPEL OF GOD, you have to in submission to the REAL JESUS to be a real Christian – to be part of the holy catholic church – so yes there is such a thing as good division. It is good and helpful to divide from people who are denying GOSPEL THINGS! But let's tell the truth for a second – most of the time we are not dividing from people over GOSPEL THINGS. Most of the time – certainly in recent times – we are dividing over PERSONAL THINGS or CULTURAL THINGS or God help us - POLITICAL THINGS.

It's a serious problem. Do you know that being a divisive person is actually treated in the New Testament in the same way that being a persistently sexually immoral person is treated? Sexual

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<sup>3</sup>Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 4 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 341.

immorality AND divisiveness are BOTH treated as capital offences by the NT Apostles. The Apostle Paul said:

As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him,<sup>11</sup> knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned. (Titus 3:10–11 ESV)

The Apostle Paul that if a person can press through multiple warnings and reminders and he is STILL speaking and acting in a divisive way then obviously that person is not filled with the Spirit of God. Therefore he shouldn't be here. He shouldn't be here as a member – because if people think he is one of us, then they will never believe that we belong to Jesus. And they won't believe that Jesus belongs to God. We need to take that seriously because it is DIVISIVENESS – right now - more even than sexual immorality that is ABSOLUTELY DESTROYING the witness of the church in Canada.

I had an older pastor friend of mine send me an email this past week lamenting the state of the evangelical church in Canada – in particular the obscene rhetoric in the church – much of it coming from pastors – around the basket of issues related to COVID19. This pandemic has been a stress test and one of the things it has revealed is some rather MASSIVE CRACKS in our catholicity. My pastor friend said that, in his opinion, the scandal of our present disunity – DISPLAYED ON SOCIAL MEDIA FOR ALL THE WATCHING WORLD TO SEE - will do as much damage to our public witness as was done back in the 1980's by the televangelists.

We're at a low point in our lifetime in terms of Christian catholicity. This is not our finest hour. In fact I heard an Australian church historian<sup>4</sup> say, just yesterday that in his opinion THIS IS the ALL TIME DARKEST moment in the history of the Christian church. And this from a man who has written books on the 12<sup>th</sup> century crusades!

Now listen – big picture – zooming out and seeing the whole 2000 years of church history at a glance – Christianity has been the greatest force for good and for the unity of mankind in the history of the universe. It abolished slavery, it ennobled mercy and charity, it rescued the family, it has done more to create and preserve love and light than anything else you could possibly think

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<sup>4</sup> John Dickson

of or imagine – and yet – zooming in – looking at this moment – it feels like we are experiencing something very close to what Jesus described in Matthew 24. He said:

many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. <sup>11</sup> And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. <sup>12</sup> And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. <sup>13</sup> But the one who endures to the end will be saved. <sup>14</sup> And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.  
(Matthew 24:10–14 ESV)

It sounds like Jesus is saying that we will complete the task of world evangelization in the context of a near total collapse of the faith in areas where it had previously been well established. The love of many will grow cold. Lawlessness will increase. Christians will hate each other. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. The one who keeps preaching the Gospel to the ends of the earth – the one who stays on target and on mission will be saved. And then the end will come.

So – this is a DARK MOMENT – the stress of this pandemic has been a wake up call – but in a sense that has been a kindness! We see now the cracks in our catholicity - and that gives us the opportunity to do something about it. And Ephesians 4:2-3 gives us an idea of where to start.

### **Where Do We Begin?**

Paul talks about 4 Christian virtues that if properly cultivated – can be used by God to maintain or restore the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. He calls on them to live as believers:

“with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup> eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4:2–3 ESV)

Let’s take just a couple of minutes and talk about each of those Gospel virtues.

#### **1. Humility**

The word Paul uses there for humility literally means:

“humiliation of mind, i.e. modesty: — humbleness of mind”<sup>5</sup>

You can see for yourselves this has to do with the mind; it has to do with thinking. It means not taking your own thoughts and opinions so seriously. It means being open to instruction and correction. It means assuming that other people might have something to say that is actually worth listening to.

It means being willing to admit that you are wrong, from time to time. That is a GOSPEL VIRTUE that facilitates Christian unity.

The second word Paul uses there is the word:

## **2. Gentleness**

Gentleness of course is a fruit of the Spirit – it is something that the Holy Spirit of Jesus is GROWING in true believers. Peter O’Brien says here:

“This gentleness is not to be confused with weakness (as contemporary Graeco-Roman thought regarded it), but has to do with consideration for others and a willingness to waive one’s rights.”<sup>6</sup>

A willingness to WAIVE one’s RIGHTS. Not to put too fine a point on it, but it has been the ABSENCE of this particular Gospel virtue that has largely led to the issues we have experienced within the evangelical church over the last 14 months.

You can’t have unity without gentleness. If you are going to insist on the full exercise of all your rights and privileges within the church and within society then you are going to destroy the unity and witness of the Body of Christ. Because we are witnessing to a CRUCIFIED SAVIOR. So fighting for your rights and then preaching Jesus Christ just do not go together. They are opposites. The one OBSCURES and DEFACES the other.

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<sup>5</sup>*Strong's Greek Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “paragraph 1.

<sup>6</sup>Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 278.

So we need Gospel gentleness if we're going to have real Christian unity and we're going to need patience.

### **3. Patience**

We've got to play the long game. We've got to see the process – for individuals and for the church as a whole. We need to remember that immature people grow up; we need to remember that chickens come home to roost – we have to think, speak, pray, plan and play the long game. We spend way too much time thinking in 4 week increments and 6 month increments and nowhere near enough time thinking in terms of decades and generations.

We need to get back into that head space.

For the sake of our unity and our witness we need to cultivate humility, gentleness, patience and then lastly loving forbearance.

### **4. Forbearance**

“bearing with one another in love”, Paul says. The old Irish Bible commentator T.K. Abbott defines forbearance this way. He says:

“It involves bearing with one another's weaknesses, not ceasing to love one's neighbours or friends because of those faults in them which perhaps offend or displease us.”<sup>7</sup>

So you can still disagree, you can still find a person's habits or viewpoints displeasing or offensive – but through it all you must continue treating them as a brother or a sister in Christ. That's the call here. That's what it will take to PROVE TO THE WORLD that we belong to Jesus – and it will work, because that's how Jesus treated us. There were many things that Jesus found HATEFUL about us – weren't there? And yet – amazingly – and undeservingly he treated us like sons and daughters of the King.

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<sup>7</sup>T.K. Abbott, *The Epistle to the Ephesians and to the Colossians (International Critical Commentary)*; Edinburgh, 1897) as cited in Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 10 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 116.

That's the Gospel – isn't it? That:

while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8 ESV)

That is the Gospel! And therefore, this is the LIFESTYLE in the church that is worthy of the calling to which we were called. If we want to be THE BODY OF CHRIST – if we want to be the holy catholic church - then we need to love one another as God has loved us in Christ.

This is the Way – THIS IS THE WITNESS – and this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.  
Let's pray together.