



THE CREED

WHAT WE BELIEVE



The Holy Catholic Church **Apostles' Creed Series**

We are continuing in our series through the oldest Christian confession of faith, the Apostles' Creed, though we are close to the end. We have a just a few more weeks and then we will be walking through 2 Peter on Sundays, in case you wanted to read ahead.

So far we have covered...

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
Creator of Heaven and Earth

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
And born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died, and was buried;
He descended to the dead,
And on the third day rose again.
He ascended to heaven and is at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit...

Which means, this morning, we will be looking at the next line...

...the holy, catholic Church, the communion of saints

So, we are going to talk about the Church today and this is very important I think because the word “church” has a ton of baggage with it and there is a lot of misunderstanding around the word and concept of church.

For example, when I say the word “church,” what comes to mind? Or when you use the word “church” what are you typically describing?

Most common in our culture is to speak of a building where a church meets. So, we might be thinking of 440 East Ave. and we speak of “going to” church. Or we might be talking about another building somewhere else that has white pillars and a steeple.

Or, sometimes the word “church” is used to describe an event that we go to once a week. We go to church, not just the building but the church service and it is an event or an experience where we receive some kind of entertainment in the form of music and inspirational talk or we receive some kind of spiritual good we consume and when the event is done we can go to lunch and go on with our week.

Or, sometimes the word “church” is used in a very ambiguous way that has no real definition or shape and so it can be used to describe any kind of gathering of Christians, whether that is a small group bible study or even an online space in the meta verse.

Or, “church” is used to describe a specific denomination or institution, the Roman Catholic Church, for example. This was the most common experience we had in Italy with our ministry. It was always confusing when we spoke with locals about us planting a church, because in their mind, there is only one church, the Roman Catholic Church, and it was localized in grand, beautiful cathedrals, not some tiny cafe or movie theater that we used.

So, all of that to say, we need to clean up our understanding of the church, and the creed gives us a moment to do that.

We will look at a number of passages this morning but let me invite your attention to Matthew 16.

I. What is the Church?

In Matthew 16, Jesus has a very important interaction with his disciples concerning his identity, and we looked at it a few weeks back when we talked about the creed’s line about believing in Jesus, God’s Son and our Lord, so it speaks to our Christology but we stopped before Jesus goes on to connect belief in Jesus with Ecclesiology, or the Church.

Matthew 16:13-19

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” **14** And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” **15** He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” **16** Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” **17** And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. **18** And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. **19** I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Again, Jesus asks the disciples what others were saying about the identity of the “Son of Man,” but then asks them collectively, the “you” is plural in the original language, who they believe Jesus to be. Peter speaks up for the group and says we believe that you are the Christ, God incarnate, God in the flesh. To which Jesus says that was not something that Peter figured out on his own but was divinely blessed to know. And Jesus then renames Peter, who used to be referred to as Simon, because Peter in Greek means “rock” and Jesus says I will now build my “church” on this rock.

Now, this passage has caused some to believe that Peter is the foundation of the Church, the Catholic Church specifically, believing that he was the first Pope and that there has been an unbroken line of succession to the current pope, among other extra-biblical beliefs concerning the papacy. But a better understanding of this interaction is that this new construction project would be built on Peter in light of his confession of Christ. That is, this “church” is established on those who would confess Jesus as the Christ, Peter and the other apostles as the first.

But notice Jesus says he will build a “church.” This is interesting because the Jews in the time of Jesus met together in synagogues, but, again, Jesus doesn’t say he will build his “synagogue.” He says he will build his “church.” And so this word is really important to understand what and who Jesus would construct.

And the Greek word translated as church is the important word, *ekklesia*, and it literally means an assembly or a gathering. This word was used in other settings outside of the Christian church. For example, it would refer to assemblies in Greek cities that were called together to perform specific tasks. It was used in Acts 19 to describe a riot that gathered together. But the rest of the time in the New Testament, it is used to describe an assembly or gathering of those who profess faith in Christ.

And it used to describe both local gatherings of Christians as well as describing all Christians everywhere. It is used over 100 times in the New Testament to describe the people of God in a particular city, the church in Rome for example, it describes smaller gatherings of Christians that might meet in a home, and it also describes “the sum of

all Christ followers everywhere in the world.”¹ The Bible even speaks of a “heavenly church,” those followers of Jesus who have died and in the intermediate state are in the presence of God (Heb. 12:22-24).

The big picture being that when the Bible speaks of the “church” it is speaking of the people of God, both in a local and universal sense.

And it is important to understand that God’s plan has always been to display his glory not just through individuals but through a corporate body.²

We see this in corporate nature of God’s people all the way back at creation where God creates Adam **and** Eve with both the ability and the charge to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28). We see at later in Genesis when God judges the world with a flood and rather than just saving Noah he saves Noah’s entire family and calls them to, like Adam and Eve, be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 9:7). We see this when God makes his promise to Abraham that he would be blessed with children, grand children, and great-grandchildren, and on and on, so that he had so many descendants it would be a new nation. We see this when this nation is established as the nation of Israel, consisting of 12 tribes made up of hundreds of thousands of people with one identity, the same laws and ceremonies for this one people. And we see this, of course, in the New Testament when Jesus says that he is now building his “Church,” a people for his own possession as Peter describes it (1 Peter 2:9-10).

The “church” then is not a building or physical space, but it is a people who know and love the Lord. And so, part of confessing the Christian faith is to say I believe in that because I identify with that. I am a part of those people. I am counted among that group of people.

Now, not only does the creed confess a belief in this corporate people of God but it also uses two specific adjectives in describing the church, the first being “holy.”

Peter describes the church as a “holy nation,” that is we are a people that are set apart, consecrated, belonging to God and not to this world. We are purified by Jesus our Savior, the One in whom we have our life and ultimate identity.

But then the creed describes the church as “catholic.” And this might throw you off a bit, especially if you grew up in the Catholic Church and you were steeped in it, it might be hard for you to use that word. After all you are here this morning, not at mass, so it might feel strange for us to confess belief in the holy, catholic Church. Well, don’t worry, I can assure you I am a proud and invested Protestant, so there is no hint of ecumenical influence or theological compromising here. But, even as Protestants, we

¹ Gregg R. Allison, *The Church: An Introduction*, 49.

² Mark Dever, *The Church*, ebook.

can confess belief in the holy, catholic Church, because “catholic” in its original sense didn’t describe a specific institution or denomination; it simply meant “universal.”

It’s the belief that there is only one true Church, one body of Christ, one temple of the Holy Spirit, made up of all true born again believers. And that one body, that one Church, is made up of local expressions we call the local church.

So, we can believe in the catholicity of the church, because there is one, universal Church, that is what Jesus was referring to in Matthew 16. And the Church can be called universal because it is an inclusive community, that is, it is a community in which the normal social divisions are torn down and all who profess belief in Jesus are equally in Christ.

Col. 3:11

Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

It is an inclusive community that carries an inclusive message. The gospel is the same message for all people everywhere regardless of culture or language. It is a message that says all people everywhere have the same need for salvation and, thankfully, all people everywhere have the same solution to that need in Jesus.

The Church is catholic, it is universal. So, again, the “Church” according to Scripture is the called out, one true people of God. This means that other churches in the region that are faithful to preach the biblical gospel are not competition with our church. We might have different philosophies of ministry and have different views concerning secondary and tertiary issues of doctrine, but if they are faithful to the first order issue of doctrines, we should be thankful for them and pray for them and desire to see them grow as they reach more and more people with the good news of Jesus. Why? Because they are another local expression of the one people of God we belong to.

And by the way, the catholicity of Church is why if you’ve ever traveled overseas, maybe it was on a missions trip or maybe it was on vacation and you decided to go to a church while you were there, you gathered together with other men and women in maybe a large building, maybe a small storefront, maybe a hut with dirt floors, and the music was different, the order of service was different, they may have been singing and speaking in Swahili, and even though you had no idea what was being said you knew these are my brothers and sisters. You sensed the oneness with them because of your common faith in Jesus. It was an experience of the catholicity of the Church.

And this leads us to the next line of the creed, belief in the “communion of the saints.”

II. I believe in the communion of the saints

When the creed speaks of “communion” it isn’t speaking of communion as in the Lord’s Supper, when we partake together of the bread and juice to commemorate Christ’s sacrifice for us, but this line is meant to describe this spiritual life we have together in Christ as the people of God. And I think it is really interesting here that belief in the communion of saints is listed in the creed as an indispensable part of Christian belief. It is listed along other doctrines and beliefs, such as the belief in God who is the Creator of all things, and Jesus as the Son of God, and his death and resurrection. I mean, those are understandable tenets of orthodox Christian faith, but we need to grasp, so is the communion of saints.

And we here in the West are in desperate need, to not only recapture the importance of the **doctrine of the church**, to recapture the importance of **life in the church**. Because we are a deeply individualistic society, a society that champions the individual, makes a hero out of the do-it-yourself, I have no need of others man or woman, the mentality that says there is no real authority or identity outside of my own self. And whether we recognize it or not, this mentality bleeds over into the Church. And we need to see that individualism is a threat to our confession as Christians.

Carl Trueman in his latest books³ describes what is called the expressive self individualism of our culture. That our identity is uniquely individualistic and the pathway to living life to the fullest is to express your individual identity without any external boundaries or authorities. He attributes this to, in part, the gradual disintegration of the external identities that have long been common in culture. Identities that were familial, national, and religious. So, as those external identities of the family, nation, and church were lost or overthrown, all our society is left to do is to look internally to find ourselves.

We need to grasp, even as Christians in America, we daily breathe the air of individualism and are tempted to see ourselves not as part of something bigger than ourselves but to see ourselves as individuals separate from anything or anyone else.

And to stoke this reality we have both internal and external instigators for this Christian individualism. Internally we can be driven by pride and think that we are more important others and so my time is too valuable to give them or that we are wiser than everyone else so we don’t need others to speak into our lives. Or we can internally be driven by fear. Fear of getting too close to others, fear of being rejected, fear of being hurt by others. We’ll talk more about this in a minute, but we have natural, sinful internal instigators of individualism.

Externally we are enabled in our individualism by technology. Christians of days past didn’t have the ability to listen to podcast sermons or watch live feeds of church services so they had to physically gather with their local church for those things. And I don’t want to dog technology too much, it is a wonderful tool that we can and should

³ See Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self and Strange New World*.

use for the good of others and the glory of God, but we shouldn't be naive in thinking that it hasn't also fed our individualism in certain ways.

Rather than getting up and getting ready and getting the kids up and ready to physically gather with our brothers and sisters in Christ, it is easier to sleep in and watch the service later.

Rather than having a relationship with our pastors and submitting to the authority of our pastors it is easier to consider some other person our pastor even though they lead a church in a completely different part of the country. In our last ministry, there was a woman who attended our church regularly, I counseled her and her husband through some things, I performed a wedding for one of her nieces, but she would say that her pastor was someone in another country because she listens to his sermons and she gives to his ministry.

Individualism is a problem, even for us as Christians. And it might be easy to think, but I'm here this morning! I must not struggle with an individualistic mentality. Well, attendance isn't the only indicator of Christian individualism. There are other symptoms that we would be good to consider and reflect on. I will give you five:

The first is self-reliance. This is shown when you are proud of your ability to deal with your own problems and challenges without the help of others. You enjoy being asked for help but you rarely ask others for help. It's difficult for you to be vulnerable about what is really going on in your soul because those are "your" issues to deal with. It's hard for you to receive gifts or help from people without wanting to pay them back somehow.

The second is self-sufficiency. You may be thought of as a "good Christian" by others, but few people know who really are. You may be outgoing and extroverted, but your relationships stay on the surface. Very few people have full access to your life. You may disclose things to people, but only what you want them to know. You do not want them to dig deeper. When relationships get hard, you tend to withdraw rather than deal with issues. You tend to measure spiritual growth by how much you know.

The third is self-protection. You tend to keep others at arm's length to guard against being hurt or rejected. You measure spiritual growth or maturity by what others say or think. You fear at times that if people knew "the real you" they would keep their distance. You avoid conflict. If people offend you or hurt your feelings, you prefer to say nothing rather than risk anger or rejection. You might be addicted to approval. Your sense of value rises and falls on what other people say (or do not say) about you.

The fourth is self-importance. You tend to be addicted to busyness; it's the way you fill the void of deep relationships in your life. You have a higher concern for respect from others than you have a sense of responsibility for others. You are more concerned about what others think of your accomplishments than what they think of your

relational influence in their lives. You tend to measure spiritual growth by what you have accomplished.

The fifth is self-will. You regularly choose work or hobbies over people. Your schedule and priorities always take precedence; you don't reshuffle your agenda to help or serve others. You like having people around, but you don't tend to take their advice or welcome their correction. When it comes to church, you tend to ask consumer-oriented questions like, "What do I like/not like? How does this make me feel? What do I get out of this?" Your wants and goals are functionally prioritized over the needs of the community and the mission of the church.

Now, notice the common denominator in all of those symptoms of individualism: self. It's about me rather than we. And what the gospel calls us to is a life that is far greater than just me. That, yes, I personally really do have a relationship with the Creator of the Universe through Jesus, but this relationship has placed me in relationship with others. I have been saved into a people and that is far greater than just me.

You see, there can easily be a gap in what we profess and what we practice here. We might profess the importance of the church and the communion of saints all the while we deny it in practice.

And there are real problems with practicing an individualistic Christian faith. There are reasons why this part of the creed.

First, it is a truncated view of the gospel. In other words, it shrinks the story of what God has done and is doing in redemptive history. Not only has God saved individuals but he has saved a people. And it diminishes the glorious work of God in your salvation. Not only has God reconciled you back to him through your faith in the finished work of Jesus, but he has adopted you into a family in which you have gained brothers and sisters for all eternity.

In Revelation 5, John has glimpse of heaven and he writes for us...

Revelation 5:9-10

9 And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, **10** and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

Consider, the angels of heaven sing praises to God around his throne for not only saving individuals but saving individuals and creating them into a "kingdom." We have to be careful that we don't look at the Church and yawn, when heaven looks at the Church and sings God's praises.

Christian individualism is a truncated view of the gospel.

Christian individualism short circuits our discipleship. You can believe in Jesus on your own, but you can't fully follow Jesus on your own. The New Testament is filled with "one another's": love one another, serve one another, welcome one another, and so on. Well, in order to do that, there must be others. Part of discipleship is growing in your identity in Jesus, but if you aren't grasping the corporate nature of your identity then discipleship will be incomplete.

Christian individualism is spiritually dangerous. Without meaningful involvement with the Church there will be no one to encourage you when you most need it, no one to challenge you when you most need it, and no one to walk alongside you when you most need it.

Catch what the author of Hebrews says about the importance of gathering with your church family...

Heb. 10:24-25

24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, **25** not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

The author of Hebrews tells us that one reason we should be committed to the church community is so that in our gathering together we might encourage one another to love and good deeds.

That means that we are *in need of* encouragement *to* love and *to* do good. There are times, many times, in the week that my flesh does not want to love others. There are times when my flesh does not want to do good deeds. My tendency and your tendency is to focus on self and it is only in the context of a community that our self is revealed and our focus can be realigned to others. Again, you have to have others to do that.

Does that make sense? I mean, have you noticed how patient you are - as long as no one is getting on your nerves? Or how loving you are - as long as you are around people who are easy to love? Or how humble you are - as long as you're respected and admired by others? If we aren't around others those things in our hearts might not be exposed, and if those things are exposed, then we won't have as many opportunities to see those things and then repent of those things asking the Lord, by His Spirit to grow us into those areas.

Again, Christian individualism is spiritual dangerous.

So, along with countless of Christians throughout the centuries, we confess our belief in the holy, catholic Church and the communion of saints and we pray that not only will

we profess a belief in the ***doctrine of the church*** but we will grow in meaningful involvement in the ***life of the church***.

GOSPEL

Now, it is easy to dunk on the Church. Lots of people do it; some have entire platforms built on it. But the creed calls us to remember that the church is holy. We are holy, not because we are perfect, but because of Jesus.

Jesus, as the one true and sinless Son of God, went to the cross for His people.

Paul in Acts 20, in a farewell address to some pastors, charges them..

Acts 20:28

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

Again, the value of the Church is shown in the price Jesus paid for her. Jesus shed his blood on the cross, gave his life, that the Church, you and I as the people of God, might be redeemed, made holy, consecrated to have a relationship with God for all eternity.

The Church is holy not because we are perfect or because we even get it right most of the time, but because of Jesus, the One to whom we are united, the One to whom we look as the head of the body.

And if you've never trusted in Christ, you find yourself outside that people. But the invitation is made, you are welcome. Regardless of your past or present, regardless of your socio-economic status, regardless of your ethnicity, Jesus invites you to come and be a part of his people, not by sitting in a class and listening to a presentation, not by your giving as if membership to the Church was a paid subscription. But simply by your repentant faith, turning from your sin and turning to Jesus who wants to present you holy and blameless before the Father.

If you have done that, don't forget the amazing reality that you and I are a part of something far greater than ourselves and we are a part merely by his grace. Let's see our need for one another. And let's commit to being here for one another.

TIME OF CONFESSION

PRAYER

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

If you've trusted in Christ, the Bible says that you've been adopted into the family of God and the good news is that God has promised to never kick you out. If you've truly repented, if you're truly born again, you have the Holy Spirit dwelling in you as a guarantee that you will live as a part of God's people forever with him.

John 6:39-40

39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. **40** For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

So, let's respond with worship this morning.

VERSES/SLIDES

Creed lines

Matthew 16:13-19

Colossians 3:11

Revelation 5:9-10

Hebrews 10:24-25

Acts 20:28

John 6:39-40