

THE NICENE CREED —

What We Believe

4. We Believe in One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church

I Corinthians 12:12-26; Matthew 28:16-20

PENTECOST 12

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What is this one, holy, catholic, and apostolic thing we call and confess as the Church?

Those, who still happen to think seriously about the Church today, have come to regard it in a variety of ways.

Four images come to mind as both contrasting and competing snapshots of what the Church is.

Some see the Church as a country club.

It must be kept in pristine, working order when its dues-paying members decide to come.

It has a loyal band of officers, who oversee its operations.

On occasion, it does laudable charitable work.

It provides a network for meeting important people in the community, and it has beautiful facilities one can rent for dinners and parties.

And, if you're serious about golf, you can look up the golf pro and patronize the pro shop.

Others see the Church as a kind of Noah's Ark.

The world outside is topsy-turvy, and the Church is a haven where we can escape for shelter.

It provides a free and protected space to shield us from the harsh realities of the world.

When the Church, itself, happens to become riddled with strife and division, we remind ourselves of the aphorism:

“We can endure the smells of the Church, because we know the floods outside are worse.”

So, we grin and bear it.

Yet others see the Church as a waterbed, a warm, fuzzy therapeutic community that provides comfort and acts as a support group.

It is not a place of service or challenge.

It is a place to relax, unwind, lie down and receive an inspirational or spiritual massage.

Still others see the Church as a coalition.

The task of leadership is to foster tolerance, so that we can have the most diverse and inclusive a community as possible.

While this Church holds to as much tradition and Biblical theology as is apt and feasible, its main goal is to work for social justice.

Now, to be sure, these images are overblown, extreme, and negative in tone. However, there is a kernel of truth in each.

The images used here are intended to correct what is endemic to much thinking about the Church, namely the tendency to idealize and to personalize.

We find it difficult to think theologically, historically, Biblically, and realistically, because most Church members don't care to take the time to do so.

Many simply feel and accept the Church as a collection of political identity groups, driven more by postmodern ideologies, or a vast, impersonal and corrupt bureaucracy, ruled by an out-of-touch clerical hierarchy, or as a Mega-church, with its own CEO, food court, bookstore, and product line.

This morning, we take up the final section of the Nicene Creed, that speaks of the Church as ***“ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC, AND APOSTOLIC”***, and demands a belief as great as the previous articles on God as ***“FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT.”***

We contemporary Christians, along with our spiritual ancestors, confess that this Church — the word used in the New Testament to mean “assembly”--- this gathering of frail and fickle human beings, is the Triune God’s chosen instrument for carrying out Christ’s ongoing ministry and mission in this world.

In other words, the Church, as the writers of the New Testament understood it, is the embodied presence of the crucified and risen Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, who encounters us by means of Word and Sacrament, extending to us in grace the gifts of love, forgiveness, and life.

When the Apostle Paul spoke of the “body of Christ,” he meant that the gathering of the faithful in the Spirit is the place where the crucified and risen Messiah finds the means of expression in the world.

The Church is ideally God’s laboratory for communal life before God, the model that the world can see and imitate as the basis for its own rebirth as God’s creation.

Only within this body of Christ can the pattern of “life for others,” that Paul understood as the enactment of “the mind of Christ,” the “bearing of one another’s burdens,” that Paul called “the law of Christ,” can find full expression.

The Church has never been a pure or perfect instrument, yet, we confess nevertheless, it has been a chosen instrument.

In declaring the Church “*one, holy, catholic, and apostolic,*” the Creed states four classic “marks of the Church,” which express the ideal character of God’s people.

Since the marks are ideals, the Church always falls short of all of them.

In the remaining part of this message, I will touch upon the meaning of these four marks.

The Church as “*one*” was expressed classically by Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians by:

“making every effort 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 of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and

Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (4:3-6).

Within this unity, Paul then adds, there is also diversity.

“But to each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift . . . that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (4:7, 11-12).

Here Paul allows for diversity in the practice of ministry, but not in beliefs and behaviors, which would be utterly incompatible with the life of the Spirit.

Paul regards unity as NOT the same thing as uniformity.

The unity of the Spirit allows, and even requires, diversity in terms of the spiritual gifts of its people and their use of them, to build up and be the body of Christ, the Church.

The diversity within the community of faith is analogous to the Trinity of persons within the One God.

Paul says that to have the *“fellowship of the Spirit,”* we are not required to see things in exactly the same way, but rather that each should have the same *“way of thinking”* that was in Christ Jesus.

Paul spells this out in his Letter to the Philippians, that each member look not to one’s own interest, but even more to the interests of others (2:1-2).

The second classic mark of the Church is that it is *“Holy.”*

God’s command, as recorded in the Book of Leviticus, *“Be holy, for I am holy”* (11:44), is addressed to the people of Israel as a whole.

As God’s holiness denotes God’s *“otherness”* from all created things, so is Israel to witness to the Lord by remaining *“set apart”* within creation.

Israel’s holiness, defined by its ritual purity laws and organization, set it apart from other nations, also defining a total commitment to its one, true God.

This ideal of holiness is carried into the New Testament.

Paul tells the Thessalonians (I Thess. 4:3-7) that God wills their sanctification, or holiness, which means not simply the behavior of individuals, but also the character of the Church as a whole.

As Luther preached, we members of Christ’s body, the Church, are both saints

and sinners.

Like Israel, the Church is called to be different in the world, to stand in witness to the world of the truth about God through the way in which it is “**other**” than the world.

We must remember that we are IN, but not OF the world.

The third classic mark of the Church is that it is called “**catholic**” with a small “c.”

The Creed does not say the Church is “Roman Catholic.”

The term in Greek means “*throughout the whole.*”

As applied in the Creed to the ideal Church, it means both a universality of extent and an inclusiveness that reaches out to all people and that embraces differences within a larger unity.

The Church is “**catholic**” in that it exists everywhere, rather than simply in one place.

But the ideal Church should be one that embraces differences in style, not in substance.

The ideal of inclusion was voiced by Jesus’ call to the outcast, and in His offer of table fellowship to sinners.

The Church of the first generation extended it by the decision to include pagan Gentiles, without requiring that they be circumcised and observe the Mosaic Law.

As Paul succinctly stated to the Galatians:

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ, there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”
(3:27-28).

The fourth classic mark of the ideal Church is “**Apostolic.**”

The ideal Church is identifiable with the Church of the apostles.

This claim can be made in two ways— in a conservative historical sense, as well as in a more radical, prophetic sense.

The historical, traditional sense has served the Church as a bulwark against the rise of false prophets and their teachings.

In opposition, subsequent generations of Christians upheld the teachings and examples of the apostles as the essential mark of the authentic Church.

By the same token, the radical, prophetic sense of “*Apostolic*” is equally needed and important.

The Church in every age must be measured by the standard of the apostolic age, and a direct appeal to the writings of the canonical New Testament.

This is how Martin Luther and the reformers made their prophetic witness to the excesses of medieval Catholicism, by appealing to the teaching and practice of the New Testament, especially Paul’s letters.

They asked: “Where in the New Testament do we find indulgences and purgatory?”

The mark of an “*Apostolic*” Church is a Church that is always renewing and reforming.

Beloved people of God,
the four marks of the Church as set forth in the creeds describe an ideal that the Church has never, and will never fully realize.

The Church of Christ is necessarily, and not only accidentally, a place of tension and conflict, as well as a place of reconciliation.

The tension created by differences within the Church challenges it and its members to grow to greater maturity, and find ways of becoming more “*catholic, holy and apostolic*” as *one* community of faith in Christ.

AMEN