

# **The Apostles' Creed**

**The Holy Catholic Church**

*Selected Texts*

**Rev. Freddy Fritz**

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# The Holy Catholic Church

## Introduction

As we continue our series in *The Apostles' Creed* I would like to examine today what it means to believe in the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints. Please listen as I recite the Apostles' Creed:

*I believe in God the Father Almighty,  
Maker 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 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.  
From there he will come 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. Amen.*

The third section of the *Apostles' Creed* begins with the article: *I believe in the Holy Spirit.*

From the creating work of the Father (in the first section of the *Apostles' Creed*), and the rescuing work of the Son (in the second section of the *Apostles' Creed*), it turns to the re-creating work

of the Spirit (in the third section of the *Apostles' Creed*), whereby the elect are actually made new in and through Christ.

In the third section we affirm our belief in the *church* (which is a new community), *forgiveness* (a new relationship), *resurrection* (a new existence), and *everlasting life* (a new fulfillment).

Today we want to look at the *church*, the new community of God's people which is brought into existence by the work of the Holy Spirit.

## Lesson

Today we want to look at the statement in the *Apostles' Creed* in which we affirm belief in “*the holy catholic church, the communion of saints.*”

I want to do so by looking at the following topics:

1. The Different Uses of the Word “Church” in Scripture,
2. The Essence of the Church,
3. The Distinctions Applied to the Church,
4. The Definition of the Church,
5. The Church in Different Periods,
6. The Attributes of the Church, and
7. The Marks of the Church.

### I. The Different Uses of the Word “Church” in Scripture

First, then, let's look at the different uses of the word “Church” in Scripture.

The principal Old Testament word for Church is derived from a root word meaning “to call.” It was especially applied to the assembly of Israel as they met for worship.

The most common word for Church in the New Testament comes from the verb meaning “to call out.” Both words contemplate the Church as an assembly called out by God.

In the New Testament the word Church sometimes referred to a group of churches. Speaking of the churches in the region of

Galatia, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 16:1: “Now about the collection for God’s people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do.”

Sometimes the word Church designates a local assembly of believers. In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul asks the church there to greet Priscilla and Aquila, and “also the church that meets at their house” (Romans 16:5).

In its most comprehensive sense, the word Church is a description of the whole body of believers, whether in heaven or on earth. Paul says in Colossians 1:18: “And he [i.e., Christ] is the head of the body, the church.”

## II. The Essence of the Church

Second, let’s examine the essence of the Church.

Roman Catholics and Protestants differ as to the essential nature of the Church.

The Roman Catholic Church sees the essential nature of the Church as an *external* and *visible* organization. And this organization, strictly speaking, does not consist of the whole body that constitute their Church, but of the *hierarchy*, consisting of the priests together with the higher orders of bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and the Pope. They call this body the “teaching church,” and distinguish it from the common body of believers, which is called the “learning church” or the “hearing church.”

Theoretically, the Roman Catholic Church still holds to the principle that ordinarily there is no salvation outside of the Roman Catholic Church, though the facts often constrain them to modify their view in various ways.

The Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century reacted against this external conception of the Church and sought to establish the essence of the true Church as the *invisible* and *spiritual* communion of the saints. The Church, they said, in its essential nature includes the believers of all ages and no one else, and outside of the Church there is no salvation. It is the spiritual body of Jesus Christ, in which there is no place for unbelievers.

### III. The Distinctions Applied to the Church

Third, notice the distinctions applied to the Church. Several distinctions come into consideration.

#### A. *The Church as Militant and as Triumphant*

One distinction is the Church as militant and the Church as triumphant.

The Church as it now exists on earth is a *militant* Church. That is, the Church is called unto and is actually engaged in a holy war. The Church must carry on an incessant warfare against the spiritual powers of darkness, and against the hostile world in every in which it reveals itself.

The Church in heaven, on the other hand, is the *triumphant* Church. In this Church, the sword (of the Spirit) is exchanged for the palm of victory, the battle cries are turned into songs of triumph, and the cross is replaced by the crown.

#### B. *The Church as Visible and as Invisible*

Another distinction is the Church as visible and the Church as invisible.

The Church of Jesus Christ is on the one hand *visible* and on the other hand *invisible*. This is a distinction of the Church as it exists on earth.

The Church is called *invisible* because it is essentially spiritual and cannot, as far as its essential nature is concerned, be discerned by the physical eye, and also because it is impossible to determine precisely who does and who does not belong to the Church.

However, this same Church becomes *visible* in the profession and conduct of its members, in the ministry of the Word of God

and the sacraments, and in its external organization and government.

*C. The Church as an Organism and as an Institution*

The third distinction is the Church as an organism and the Church as an institution.

This distinction applies only to the visible Church. The Church as an *organism* is visible in the communal life of believers and in their opposition to the world.

The Church as an *institution*, on the other hand, is visible in the offices, the administration of the Word and sacraments, and in the government of the Church.

#### **IV. The Definition of the Church**

Fourth, all of this now brings us to a definition of the Church.

However, in defining the Church it will be necessary to bear in mind the distinction between the visible and the invisible Church.

The *invisible* Church may be defined as *the company of the elect who are called by the Spirit of God*, or simply, as *the communion of saints*.

The *visible* Church is a broader concept, and may be defined as *the community of those who profess the true religion together with their children*.

It is important to notice that these two are not entirely parallel. Some who are members of the *invisible* Church may never become members of the visible organization or may be shut out from it. Some who belong to the *visible* Church may be unbelievers and hypocrites, and as such do not form part of the true body of Christ.

#### **V. The Church in Different Periods**

Fifth, notice the Church in different periods.

The Church existed from the moment that God set enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (cf. Genesis 3), but it did not always assume the same form.

*A. The Church in the Patriarchal Period*

First, the Church existed in the patriarchal period.

In the patriarchal period the Church was best represented in godly households, where the fathers served as priests. There was at first no collective worship, though Genesis 4:26 seems to imply a public calling upon the name of the Lord. Genesis 4:26b says, "At that time men began to call on the name of the Lord."

At the time of the flood, the entire Church was saved in the family of Noah.

And when true religion was again on the point of dying out, God separated unto himself the family of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3).

Up until Moses the fear of God was kept alive in families.

*B. The Church in the Mosaic Period*

Second, the Church also existed in the Mosaic period.

After the Exodus the people of Israel were organized into a nation and also constituted the Church of God. They were enriched with the ceremonial law in which the religion of the nation could find expression. The Church had no independent organization, but had its organized existence in the State. Israel was a Church-State. Foreigners could enter the Church only by joining the State. Religious worship was regulated down to the minutest details, was largely ritual and ceremonial, and eventually found its highest expression in the services at the central sanctuary at Jerusalem.

*C. The Church in the New Testament Period*

And then the Church existed in the New Testament period.

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On the day of Pentecost the Church emerged from the national life of Israel as an independent organization. What had up to this time been a national Church now assumed a universal character. And in order to realize the ideal of a world-wide extension, it had to become a missionary Church, carrying the Gospel of salvation to all the nations of the world.

Moreover, the ritual worship of the past made place for a more spiritual worship in harmony with the greater privileges of the New Testament.

## VI. The Attributes of the Church

Sixth, let me mention the attributes of the Church.

The attributes of the Church belong primarily to the invisible Church.

### A. *The Unity of the Church*

First, notice the unity of the Church.

The unity of the Church is primarily of a spiritual character. It is the unity of a body, the mystical body of Jesus Christ, of which all believers are members. This unity expresses itself to a certain extent in Christian profession and conduct, in public worship, and in the external organization of the Church. Fundamentally, unity is attained in a common adherence to truth, which is found in the Word of God.

### B. *The Holiness of the Church*

Next, notice the holiness of the Church.

Members of the Church are regarded as objectively holy in Christ, as subjectively holy in principle, since they are in possession of the new life, and as destined for perfect holiness. This holiness finds external expression in a life devoted to God.

*C. The Catholicity of the Church*

And third, notice the catholicity of the Church.

The word “catholic” simply means “universal.”

The Church of Rome lays special claim to the attitude of catholicity in view of the fact that the Roman Catholic Church is spread over the whole earth, has existed from the beginning and continues to exist, while sects come and go, and has a greater number of members than all the sects taken together.

Protestants stress the fact that the invisible Church is the real catholic Church, because it includes all believers of all the ages, has its members among all the nations of the world, and exercises a controlling influence on the entire life of man.

**VII. The Marks of the Church**

Finally, be aware of the marks of the Church.

The marks of the Church belong to the visible Church and serve to distinguish the true from the false.

Reformed Churches, such as ours, usually mention three marks, but the three can be reduced to one mark, namely, faithful adherence in teaching and practice to the standard of God’s Word.

*A. The True Preaching of the Word of God*

The first mark of the Church is the true preaching of the Word of God.

This is the most important mark of the Church. When Luke describes the Early Church in Acts 2, he states there that the first mark of the Church is faithful adherence to the Word of God: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching. . .” (v. 42).

This does not mean that a Church’s preaching must be perfect and absolutely pure if it is to be recognized as a true Church. Such an ideal is not attainable on earth.

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It does mean, however, that its preaching must be true to the fundamentals and must have a controlling influence on faith and practice.

Naturally, the stronger a Church is in adhering to the Word of God, the healthier that Church will be.

### *B. The Right Administration of the Sacraments*

The second mark of the Church is the right administration of the sacraments.

The sacraments (baptism and communion) should never be divorced from the Word of God, as they are in some Churches, since they are in fact but a visible preaching of the Word of God. They should be administered by lawful ministers of the Word, in accordance with the divine institution, and only to believers and their children.

The administration of the sacraments stands out prominently as a mark of the Early Church (cf. Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 11:23-30).

### *C. The Faithful Exercise of Discipline*

The third mark of the Church is the faithful exercise of discipline.

The faithful exercise of discipline is quite essential for maintaining purity of doctrine and safeguarding the holiness of the sacraments. Churches that are lax in discipline soon find the light of the truth eclipsed, and that which is holy abused.

The Word of God insists on proper discipline in the Church of Christ. We see that, for example, in Matthew 18:18, where Jesus says: "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (cf. also 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 13; 14:33, 40; Revelation 2:14-15, 20).

## Conclusion

As we conclude today let me ask you, “Are you a member of the Church of Jesus Christ?”

I am not asking if you are a member of a specific local church. No. I am asking if you are a member of the invisible Church of Jesus Christ.

You ask, “How do I know if I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ?”

You become a member of the true Church, the Church of Jesus Christ, simply by asking God. Ask God to change you. Ask God to forgive you all of your sins. Ask God to give you the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Ask God to give you faith in Jesus Christ alone.

When you do that God promises to answer your request. Talking about finding spiritual rest in the mercy of God, Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

I trust that you are a member of the Church of Jesus Christ. A day is coming when you and I will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ, and then the only thing that will count is whether or not you are a member of the Church of Jesus Christ. Amen.



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### **Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)**

19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd.

Tampa, FL 33647

Office: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: [Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org](mailto:Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org)