

The Apostles' Creed

Part 12

The Holy Catholic Church – The Communion of Saints,

Acts 20:25-31

With Study Questions

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This morning we will discuss the portion in the Apostles' Creed addressing "**The Holy Catholic Church – The Communion of Saints.**"

And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more. ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I *am* innocent of the blood of all *men*. ²⁷ For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. ²⁸ Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. ²⁹ For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. ³⁰ Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. ³¹ Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears (Acts 20:25-31).

Introduction

Years ago I was invited to a breakfast put on by an organization which targeted Christian businessmen. Those of us who were invited were encouraged to bring our non-Christian friends to hear the gospel. The speaker was a retired baseball player who gave, if I recall correctly, a fairly orthodox presentation of the gospel. But there was one thing he said that I found disturbing. It was something I recollect having said myself in the past – when I was a retired athlete presenting the gospel.

In an effort to present faith in Christ as the sole prerequisite for peace with God, this speaker began to give a list of all those things which are not necessary for salvation. You don't have to wear a cross around your neck, carry your Bible around, go to Africa as a missionary, etc. Included on the list was church – you don't have to join a church.

He wanted to make it clear that you didn't have to go to church to be saved. And even though this may technically be accurate, I thought that presenting church as something dispensable to the Christian faith may not be the healthiest way to approach the subject. Inclusion in a family is not a prerequisite to the birth of a baby. But all would agree that it is so highly advisable (if that's put strongly enough) that to neglect it would be almost sure disaster for the child.

The writers of the Westminster Confession made a statement that might make many of us, swayed by current influences, very uncomfortable.

The visible church is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ and the house and family of God, outside of which people cannot ordinarily be saved (XXV, 2).

This, of course, was written at a time (1640s) when there weren't bookstores on every corner with Bibles and commentaries. There was no Christian radio or television. There was no internet or tapes, cds or dvds containing sermons and lectures on Christianity. In short, attendance at a church was the only means by which a person would have any access to the gospel at all. We live in a time when you can access more information about the Christian faith sitting at your desk at home than anyone could possible sift through in an entire lifetime.

The unintended consequence of this unprecedented age of information is the general disposition that the church, though perhaps a good idea, is only that. We live in a very anti-institutional era. One of the most common, yet worn out sentiments wafting through the culture is the disdain for organized religion.

People will view themselves as spiritual (even in a Christian sort of way) without acknowledging any need whatsoever of association with the church. I'm not insensitive to this. I've been this way myself. But I must say that Christianity apart from affiliation with a local church is a concept totally at odds with the New Testament – which mentions the church (and by church I mean a local, visible body or gathering) well over a hundred times.

The church plays such a significant role that even the Apostles' Creed, which gives a very succinct view of the central articles of the Christian faith, includes the church in its affirmations. It teaches that Christians are to believe, if I can put it this way, in Christ, who through the Holy Ghost is working in and through "**The Holy Catholic Church – The Communion of Saints.**" The Revelation presents Christ in the midst of the seven lampstands (Revelation 1:13) which represent the seven churches (Revelation 1:20).

There is a very unique and consecrated presence of Christ in the midst of His church in worship – it is not just a meeting. The call to worship is not just a convenient way to begin. Regarding preaching and the preacher it's been said:

...his message is the word of God; around him are immortal souls; the Savior, unseen, is beside him; the Holy Spirit broods over the congregation; angels gaze upon the scene, and heaven and hell await the issue. What associations, and what vast responsibility!" -

There is also a unique and consecrated association between Christ and His church as society of believers; a society called by God to participate in the blessings of God's covenant of grace. Herman Witsius describes it:

It is truly impossible to mention or to conceive a conjunction, more beautiful, more close and intimate, or more endeared by mutual love, than that which subsists between God and his people, between Christ and the church.¹

What is meant by *holy*? What is meant by *catholic*? What is the *church*? What is the *communion* and who are the *saints*? What are the implications of all these things in our lives? What are the blessings and responsibilities? It was through the observing of the holy catholic church that "the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved"

¹ Herman Witsius, *The Apostles' Creed* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing), Vol. II, p. 346.

(Acts 2:47). This portion of the Creed is undervalued and grossly misunderstood in our current culture. The church and its surrounding culture has suffered greatly as a result of it.

Church – Visible and Invisible

Strictly speaking the church *ekklesia* (out of – to call) are the called out ones. The church is that society of people who have been called out of the ways of the world in terms of conduct, ownership, belief. It consists of those people who, by the grace of God, have come to recognize the “**narrow gate**” (Matthew 7:13, 14) as the way which “**leads to life**” (Matthew 7:14); that narrow gate being Christ Himself. But even in stating this you might perceive a difficulty, for how can a society, being plural, believe? By its very definition “**the body is not one member but many**” (1 Corinthians 12:14). Here we see a distinction in the Creed – credo – meaning “I believe” (being a personal profession of belief) versus the Lord’s Prayer which begins “**Our Father...**” (Matthew 6:8) which is first person plural.

How can a multitude of people believe something? The heavenly judgment is not by group but by individual, as Paul writes “**each one**” of us must appear before the “**judgment seat of Christ**” (2 Corinthians 5:10). The problem seems elevated when we come to realize that virtually every time the church is mentioned in the New Testament (except perhaps once in Hebrews 12:23) it is speaking of a local gathering of professing believers and not of (what Augustine called) the invisible church made up only of truly saved – known but to God (2 Timothy 2:19).

It would appear from this that the true church is primarily defined by what it proclaims to be true – by that “**form of doctrine**” (Romans 6:17) through which deliverance comes. This is not to say that personal belief in that form of doctrine is of no consequence – quite the opposite – heaven and hang in the balance. For this reason the church can be compared to a “**threshing floor**” where wheat is gathered and chaff is burned (Matthew 3:12); to a “**field**” where tares are sown among the wheat (Matthew 13:24, 25); to a dragnet where “**every kind**” of fish is gathered but only the good are brought into the vessels and the bad thrown away (Matthew 13:47, 48).

The church is that society where Jesus Christ is heralded as Savior and Lord. It is made up of people who make a profession of faith in those proclamations and live in a manner consistent with it – but whether or not that profession is genuine is known but to the individual and to God.

Holy – Visible and Invisible

When the Creed teaches that the church is holy, we err if we think by holy is meant sinless in every respect. Holy is not synonymous with righteous. One need but spend more than five minutes in any church to see how true this is. It is often the unrighteous character of the church's membership that seduces certain professing believers to stay out of church altogether. A person's disdain for organized religion is often accompanied by their excusing themselves from church due to the hypocrisy of those in attendance. I can't help but quote Witsius again – for apparently this is not merely a contemporary problem:

In vain do we expect to see on the earth a Church without spot, a thrashing-floor without chaff, a field without tares, or a house in which are none but vessels unto honour. Nor let us imagine that we are to please God by any presumptuous conceit of our own sanctity, joined with the contempt of others. – Which say, "Stand by thyself, come not near to me, for I am holier than thou. These are a smoke in my nose, a fire that burneth all the day."²

Ironic that those who estrange themselves from church due to the self-righteous disposition of those in attendance, unwittingly display their own lofty and exalted critique of their own souls.

So what is meant by holy? The word *hagiozo* means to be set apart. Similar to the visible and invisible church, there is a visible and invisible holiness. The church as a society which is called out of the world in terms of conduct and belief is by that very definition holy. For this reason,

² Herman Witsius, *The Apostles' Creed* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing), Vol. II, p. 365.

members of churches are often called by the adjective *hagiois* or “**holy ones**” (Ephesians 1:1).

The visible or outward manifestation of this holiness is, both in the Old and New Covenants found in the inclusion among the covenant people of God (the Old being Israel, the New being the church). For this reason Paul can identify the husband of a believing wife, or vice-versa as sanctified (or holy *hegiastai*). The same is said of the child of the believing parent – that the child is holy *hagia*.

The physical rite of circumcision was, among other things, the external sign of inclusion among the external people of God. Water baptism, similarly is an external sign of inclusion among the external people of God, i.e. the church – which is the beginning of a discussion regarding the baptism of infants. But it cannot be overstated that these external signs in the external church have an *internal* and *eternal* design and purpose. To be part of that external holy community with that external sign and miss the internal and eternal truth and Person to which those external things point is disastrous beyond explanation.

Jesus used extraordinarily harsh language to address this issue. He was addressing the covenant people of God (today it would be the church) when He taught that because of their access to His mighty works that their judgment would be more severe than the judgment of Tyre, Sidon and Sodom (Matthew 11:20-24).

Jesus makes this external and internal distinction in the fifteenth chapter of John with the metaphor of the vine and the branches. He teaches that true branches are will “**bear fruit.**” The true bearing of fruit comes from an internal abiding in Christ and Christ abiding in that person – abiding I take to mean a genuine saving faith in Christ as Savior and Lord. Jesus speaks of a branch which does not abide in Him being thrown “**into the fire and they are burned**”.

Now it would be too much of a stretch for the branches in this metaphor to mean the entire world. The branches would be the external covenant people of God – some cast into the fire and some not – depending upon whether or not those internal and eternal things which are pointed to by the external things are personally embraced. It is this internal/external distinction that helps makes sense of the similar metaphor used by Paul in Romans 11:16-24.

Catholic – Visible and Invisible

Catholic has two distinctions as well – the word simply meaning universal and not to be associated with Roman Catholic.

The first catholic distinction is one made earlier by Augustine, consisting of “**all the elect who have been, are, or ever will be gathered into one under Christ, the head**” (WCF, XXV, 1). The author of Hebrews speaks of it this way:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels,²³ to the general assembly and church of the firstborn *who are* registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect,²⁴ to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than *that of* Abel (Hebrews 12:22-24).

The second distinction in terms of the church being catholic is defined in the Westminster Confession (XXV, 2.)

The visible church is also catholic or universal under the gospel, that is, it is not confined to one nation as previously under the Mosaic law. It consists of everyone in the world who professes true religion together with their children.

There is an internal and external church, there is an internal and external holiness and there is an internal and external catholicity. And though we might all agree that it is the internal and eternal which is primary, the neglect of the external becomes the destruction of the internal. The proper structure of the external becomes the arena where the Holy Spirit works.

The outward and proper construction of sentences conveying the gospel – that Jesus died to rescue sinners-is the construction used by the Spirit to save souls. One cannot say they love their children or spouse internally if they neglect them externally. I can't say I love my children, in

an genuine internal sense if I don't make every effort to shelter and feed them in an external sense.

Communion of Saints

Finally, by the communion of saints, the Creed is not likely addressing communion per se, although it may include that. It is more a recognition that the church, though consisting of offices (elders and deacons) and sound doctrine is more than that. It is a union we have with Christ and with each other.

It is the prayer of Christ that all who would believe **"may be one"** as He and the Father **"are one"** (John 17:20-23). Another modern tendency that would be a foreign thought to the New Testament would be the idea of coming to church, listening to a lecture then going home for a week, merely to come the following week to hear another lecture. We are a body and, whether we perceive it or not, stand in need of one another, **"...the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'"** (1 Corinthians 12:21) in any genuine sense.

We are called to **"care for one another"** (1 Corinthians 12:25); **"have peace with one another"** (Mark 9:50); **"love one another"** (John 15:12); **"be kindly affectionate to one another...giving preference to one another"** (Romans 12:10); **"admonish one another"** (Romans 15:14); **"care for one another"** (1 Corinthians 12:25); **"serve one another"** (Galatians 5:13); **"bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2);** **"be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another"** (Ephesians 4:32); **"comfort one another"** (1 Thessalonians 4:18); **"edify one another"** (1 Thessalonians 5:11); **"pray for one another"** (James 5:16); **"have compassion for one another (1 Peter 3:8);** **"hospitable to one another"** (1 Peter 4:9)...and all of this flowing from fellowship.

Consider the powerful words of John, concerning the actions of those who truly walk in the light:

But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7).

Questions for Study

1. Is the church necessary for salvation? Should the church be viewed as expendable (pages 2, 3)?
2. What is an unintended consequence of today's age of information (page 3)?
3. How would Christians during the New Testament era view the need for association with the local church (pages 3, 4)?
4. How is Christ present at a church worship service? How is He present with believers (page 4)?
5. What does the word *church* mean (page 5)?
6. Discuss the distinctions between the visible and invisible church (pages 5, 6).
7. What makes the church holy? What are the distinctions between visible and invisible holiness (pages 6, 7)?
8. What does the word catholic mean (page 8)?
9. What are the distinctions between the visible and invisible catholic church (pages 8, 9)?
10. Discuss the communion of the saints and its implications (page 9).