

Christ Reformation Church

Tillamook, Oregon

You Must be Born Again!

“The habit of preachers today is to address their people as though they were all Christians and just need instruction...men and women are being treated as saved who never knew they were lost.”

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*I Believe in the holy catholic
church,
the communion of saints –*

The Apostles’ Creed, Part 10

December 10, 2023

Sermon Text: Hebrews 12:18-25

Scripture Reading: Exodus 19:16
– 20:21

Heb 11:6 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.

Apostles’ Creed
by URC Learning Admin

I believe in God, the Father
Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ,
His only begotten Son, our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy
Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was
buried.
He descended into hell.
On the third day he rose from the
dead;
He ascended into heaven,
and sits at the right hand of God
the Father Almighty;
from there he shall come again 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.

This morning I would like to focus our attention on that short phrase in the creed which says that we confess belief in *the holy catholic (ie, universal) church, the communion of saints*. What are we saying when we recite these words? *I believe in a universal church, the communion of saints*? I do not exaggerate when I say that a real understanding of these truths about Christ's church will open our eyes more to just what is happening when we gather together as a local church.

Listen to these words from Hebrews 12:

Heb 12:18-24 For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, (19) and to the blast of

a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. (20) For they could not bear the command, "IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED." (21) And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, "I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling."

(22) But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, (23) to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, (24) and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.

When the Israelites first came out of Egypt, after crossing the Red Sea and when 3 months had passed, the Lord brought them to Mt. Sinai where He told Moses:

Exo 19:9 The LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe in you forever." Then Moses told the words of the people to the LORD.

As you have already heard this morning from our reading of Exodus 19 and 20, this was where the Lord established the Old (Mosaic) covenant with Israel. In stating the terms of that covenant, for blessing or for cursing, He gave them the Law.

Anyone today who believes they are “good enough” to “make it to heaven” when they die is embracing a fantasy. Apart from the Lord Jesus Christ, this is what the sinner’s supposed “good works” are going to meet when they stand before the Lord – no mercy. Pure justice from the God who is a consuming fire.

Why did the Lord, you might say, *terrorize* the Israelites there? This is not the “god” that even so many professing Christians have created

in their minds. The Lord struck the Israelites there at Sinai so that they were *terrified of Him*. Listen again:

....a mountain that can be touched and to blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, (19) and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. (20) For they could not bear the command, "IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED." (21) And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, "I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling."

It was *terrible*. It was *terrifying*. Even Moses was terrified. That trumpet which blew and the words spoken from the mountain – the voice of the Lord – were the ultimate hellfire and brimstone message ever proclaimed. Why? Why did the Lord do this?

Exo 20:18-21 Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound

of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off (19) and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.” (20) Moses said to the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, **that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.**” (21) The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

The Lord did this *to put the fear of him in them*. Why? *So that they would not sin. So they would not break the Law*. But of course they did and they did so very, very soon – recall the golden calf idol.

This – that fearful, smoking, terrible mountain - is the only thing a person who is relying on their own merits, their own supposed good works, in the Law in other words, can expect to come to when they meet the Lord. Why? Because:

Gal 3:10-11 For all who rely on

works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” (11) Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.”

Deu 29:18-19 Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the LORD our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, (19) one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, ‘I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.’ This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike.

There is no mercy in the holy justice of God for the man or woman who insists on relying upon their own merit to be acceptable to God. This is the reason for the cross. If there were some way apart from the cross to access God’s

mercy, surely the Father would never have sent the Son to die.

Now, beware. I recently was reading John Calvin's sermon on this point and it struck me when he stated the obvious: *There is no mercy to be found apart from the Lord Jesus Christ. God's judgment of the wicked, of all who refuse to come to Christ in repentance and faith, is merciless.*

Today you sometimes hear of a convicted criminal just before being sentenced saying, "I throw myself upon the mercy of the court." And such a criminal may find some mercy – often today it seems like too much mercy.

But what does this smoking, fiery, hurricane tempest of Mt. Sinai tell us is going to happen to the person who stands before God, having rejected Christ, and saying "Lord, I throw myself upon your mercy"? Sinai tells us that there is no mercy to be found there. If you even disobey by touching the mountain with the tip of your finger, you will be consumed.

Now, don't be deceived. Martyn Lloyd Jones often warned his congregation of this. *You hear these things – you hear that justification is not by the Law but only by faith in Christ – and you think that you get it. You think that you understand. You can repeat the words. But then, you go right back out into your weekly life and you live and think and function in a manner that betrays that you don't get it. That you are still bound by the mentality that you are going to be accepted by God because of your own merit and works. After all, the people around you praise you for these things. Surely the Lord will do the same.*

But you are wrong, just like these people were wrong:

Mat 7:22-23 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' (23) And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

This is the only thing to be found at Mt. Sinai. In the Old Covenant. In the works of the Law. Condemnation. Eternal death. Why? Because the Law is evil? No, because the sinner is evil and lawless and hostile to the Law. The Law only condemns.

But....

Heb 12:22-24 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, (23) and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, (24) and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

The Law is, as Paul says, *holy and righteous and good*. The problem is sin. Sin in the sinner. Lawlessness. One chief thing that the Law does is *to lead us to Christ and a radically different mountain*.

1. The moral Law, the 10 commandments, shows us our need for Christ,
2. The ceremonial laws (sacrifices, washings, etc) point us to Christ and His atoning work for us.

Mt. Sinai and the Law given there should have shown the Israelites their need for a Redeemer. But their response, like that of so many people today, was:

Exo 24:3 Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do."

There must be another way to be put right with God. Another way which brings us to a very different mountain. And of course, Christ is that Way. In Christ we find mercy. We are welcomed into the city of the living God and into fellowship with all the angels and saints who have gone before us.

Now, we come to this matter of the church universal and the communion of the saints. These doctrines about the church were obviously regarded as fundamental truths which are really part of the gospel. [You could say that the Apostles' Creed is a statement of the gospel and of which no part can be denied].

Consider:

Heb 12:22-23 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, (23) and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,

We all need to get our thinking about the church tuned up more accurately. First of all, let's face up to this:

The local church is not a social club.

It is very, very easy for us to go wrong in our thinking if we look at things the way they appear on the surface. Each week we gather together here, meet one another, and practice some things which you might find in a community club of some sort. Potlucks. Conversing with one another. And so on. A social club is a society formed by people for various purposes — perhaps some community service or perhaps just so people can socialize together.

But the church is not a social club. The church is this:

Eph 2:19-22 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, (20) built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, (21) in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. (22) In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

When Christ's people meet together on, for example, the Lord's Day, there is much more going on than meets the eye. These verses in Hebrews tells us. Listen to them again carefully –

Heb 12:22-23 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, (23) and to the **assembly** of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,

When a local church, a real church consisting of true Christians, gathers together on the Lord's Day for example, *the attendance is much, much larger than it looks* (I owe this observation to R.C. Sproul in a sermon he preached on worship). In attendance are *innumerable angels in festal gathering. And not only are countless angels gathered with us, but others whom the Apostle calls "the assembly of the firstborn."*

Do you see that word "assembly"? It is *ecclesia*. The same word we translate "church." And that word "firstborn"? It is plural which is easier to see in Greek than in English. Listen to this comment by Dr. John Brown (1784-1858) who was a pastor in Edinburgh and highly regarded by, for example, C.H. Spurgeon: [John Brown, Hebrews, Geneva Series of Commentaries, Banner of Truth Publishing] -

"The general idea is that you are brought into intimate relation with the whole host of holy spirits. By the mediation of Jesus Christ, the Apostle informs us that it is the purpose of God, in the gospel era of the fullness of times, to bring together into one holy society things on earth and things in heaven.

Christians come to angels, not by sensible (visible) fellowship, but by spiritual relations. Upon our being reconciled to God, we are reconciled to all His holy creatures. They love us, and we love them.

We engage in substantially the same religious services; we have the same joys. Even in the present state, they, though unperceived by us, minister to our welfare.

In due time the barriers in the way of immediate fellowship will be removed, and, equal to the angels of God, we shall mingle with them in an unreserved interchange of thought and feeling.

But angels are not the only citizens of the New Jerusalem. We come to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. The word rendered church....is here, as I understand, referring to the whole body of truly good men on earth, viewed as one great assembly. Many commentators consider this to refer to the sacred assembly in heaven; but those are afterwards described as ‘the spirits of just men made perfect.” In other places in Scripture where persons are described as having their names written in heave or in the book of life, they are always spoken of as being on earth.

The people of God are termed the

firstborn, as Israel was called ‘My son, My firstborn.’

Firstborn marks them as dedicated to the service of God and the heirs of the inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fades not away. And because their names are enrolled in the heavenly album, we understand that they are genuine Christians – people who have not only been admitted to external communion in a visible church, but who have been admitted to fellowship by the Great Head of the Church.

The idea is this,

In becoming Christians, you become connected with the whole body of the faithful, an innumerable company called out from mankind, a kindred, people, and tongue.

Understand? The kingdom of God is here. The King’s throne is in heaven where Christ is seated, but the kingdom is not only there, it extends into this world in the form of His church. *And therefore, for*

instance, when the Lord's Day comes and we gather together here as a tiny church, we are in reality and actuality part of the most mega church of all, joined in worship with angels so numerous they cannot be counted. This is what we must see by faith.

But there is more...

Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob and all the prophets, and Apostles, and martyrs, and true confessors in the kingdom of their father.

One family, we dwell in Him;
One Church, above, beneath;
Though now divided by the
stream;
The narrow stream of death.

“But what is greater and more glorious still, we come to God, the judge of all. Christians approach, they draw near, the Judge. The Israelites stood afar off, but the Christian draws near with boldness, to the Judge. The God of all, the God of all the citizens of Zion, He of whom all the family in heaven and in earth are named. And he acknowledges them with favor and approval.

And they come to **the spirits of just men made perfect**, that is, to the spirits of departed holy men and women who having finished their course, have obtained their reward. They who by the faith of the truth become the subjects of the new economy, sit down with

Remember that stream/river that Christian crossed in Pilgrim's Progress?

Here is one more comment from John Brown, and we close with it. I hope we all will think carefully now about the church universal and the communion of the saints, and understand by faith that this tiny church here gathered to worship is gathered as part of an assembly that dwarfs any church in this world –

“We are bound together by the tie which binds us to one God and one Savior. We think along with them; we feel along with them. They love us; we love them. It is very probable that the fellowship on their side with us even here is more

intimate than we are aware of; and yet in a little while, the whole family will be assembled in their Father's house, never more to go out forever.

We do not come to the Aaronical priesthood, the mediator of the Old Covenant, to that shaking Mt. Sinai, but to Jesus the Mediator of the New Covenant...who is the brightness of the Father's glory, who has by Himself purged our sins, and is set down on the right hand of the Majesty on high."

has a choir that joins with us when we sing a hymn, countless saints join us when we hear God's Word preached, and the angels themselves gather with us. If you see these things by faith, the world's beckoning to you to disregard the assembling together of Christ's people, will lose its hold on you and you will long more and more to see the day when all of this becomes visible to your eyes.

Let me leave you with this thought. Do you ever look, perhaps on the internet or maybe even in some visit in person, at a huge local church in a great sanctuary, a full orchestra and choir, hundreds or even thousands of people...and envy it? That is a mistake. It is walking by sight and not by faith.

We do not need to "make something happen here," we need to see what is happening.

You are a member of a church that cannot be numbered. Your church