

I Believe in...the Holy Catholic Church (Lord's Day 21 Q&A 54)

Readings: Exodus 19:1-11; 16-25; Ephesians 4:1-16

As we work our way through the Heidelberg Catechism, and this section dealing with the Apostle's Creed we come to a very misunderstood phrase... "I believe in the holy catholic church.

I remember when I first learned the creed.

When I got to this line I tended to close my mouth and then pick up the creed with the phrase... 'communion of saints'.

I didn't want to be seen to be affirming the Roman Catholic faith.

I know I'm not alone in my concern.

In fact, so many other people think about the line that way, that when they printed the Creed in our Book of forms, they put a little asterisk next to the word "catholic" in order to explain what it really means.

The footnote says, 'the Christian church of all times and places'.

The church universal.

I'm curious – how many of you have had an experience similar to this?

How many of you have tripped over those words?

I'll give the short answer and then move on in some detail to look at the parts of the statement.

The short answer goes like this:

in using the word catholic, we are not referring to the Roman Catholic denomination. Nor in saying the word Church do we mean any particular Christian denomination or congregation.

What the framers of this creedal statement wanted to convey was a truth about the Christian Church on earth beyond what is obvious to the eye.

What is obvious is, at best, great diversity.

At worst, we see factions, disagreements, splits and denominations.

The word catholic is a reminder that, in spite of the diversity and splintering we see, there is an invisible unity of all who confess Jesus Christ as Lord.

When we say, "I believe in the holy catholic church":

We are saying that we believe all Christians everywhere are really one, universal church.
We are saying that we are all connected...we are all one church...one holy catholic church.

We believe in only one church...the church of Jesus Christ.

The church is not founded on a set of principles or doctrines.

We are founded on a person...Jesus Christ.

At the core of our faith is not a “what,” but a “who.”

Now we have looked at the statement as a whole we need to consider it in its parts.

I Believe in...

What do we mean when we say “I Believe in...”

I really had to wrestle with that this week.

And I came across a problem here accidentally.

Our confession, as it stands in the BoF says...

‘I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church’.

Going back to our old blue Psalter Hymnal I found...

‘I believe in the Holy Spirit;

I believe a holy catholic church, the communion of saints.’

This subtle shift in emphasis is not unique to us...

The Anglican Prayer book of 1978 has it the way we do; as does the CRCNA.

Why the difference? What difference does it make?

But, when we say “I believe in the holy, catholic church” it is not the same thing as believing in God.

We don’t have to place our absolute trust in the church in the same way,
but rather we are locating ourselves within the church.

The church is not to be the object of our faith.

You see...we believe IN the Father; IN the Son; and IN the Holy Spirit.

It is in the Father, Son and Spirit that we put our faith and hope in.

But we don’t put our faith IN the church.

We believe, then, in A HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH.

But we believe in it so far as it is the work of the triune God.

The believer confesses this church is gathered
‘out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end’.
A church world-wide and history deep.

And it is more than a joining together of people from all times and backgrounds...
It is a ‘community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith’.

And in confidence we can confess ‘of this community I am and always will be a living member.’

So we say I believe in...the holy catholic church.

Why do we call it holy?

If we are honest that the church is far from perfect so why does the Creed refer to it as “holy”?

The church is not “holy” because it is morally perfect.

In Scripture something holy or sacred is separated from the world and consecrated to the service and glory of God.

Whatever belongs to God is called holy.

The furnishings and vessels of the Temple, for instance, were holy;
they were not to be used for ordinary or profane uses
they were set apart for the service of the Lord.

Jesus Christ makes the church holy –

He calls her out of the world and into the service of God.

This is reflected in the Greek word for church, "ekklesia," which means "called out."

The church is holy because of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Ultimately, it is not the church’s moral purity, or its martyrs, or even the devoutness of its believers that make it holy, it is the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The church is holy because God's plan is to present her to Himself as "a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish" (Eph 5:25-27).

So why bother with a sinful flawed church?

When it comes down to it, there are two ways of looking at the church.

The **first** way is to look at the church with the eyes of the world.

Those who look at the church this way only see sinners like ourselves;

they see only the adultery, the suicide, the divorce, the homosexuality, and so on.

They then say the church is full of hypocrites, and either want nothing to do with it or go from church to church vainly looking for the perfect church.

There is also a **second** way to look at the church, and that is with the eyes of faith.

Those who look at the church with these eyes are the only ones who see it right.

Yes, they see sin and evil; but that's not all that they see, nor is it the first thing they see.

What do they see?

They first of all see the Son of God;

they see Him 'gathering, protecting, and preserving for Himself,

through His Spirit and Word, a community chosen for eternal life'.

The church is not holy in and of herself.

We are to see the hand of the Lord Jesus in the church's holiness.

Holiness has nothing to do with our goodness of character or moral integrity.

Rather, the church is holy in Christ.

So we believe in a holy church...

But that is further defined when we call it a holy catholic church.

What do we mean when we say 'catholic'?

I have already touched on this, but here it is again...

'Catholic' means "world-wide, universal." "I believe ... the holy catholic church," we say..."I believe a world-wide, universal church."

Every true believer ,

whatever their skin colour or nationality

and every true congregation of believers,

is a member of this world-wide, catholic church.

The church is composed of many nations, many peoples, many languages, many tribes.

This fulfils the promise of God to Abraham in Genesis 12 that "All the peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:3).

Here too we are to see the work of Jesus.

With His own blood, says Scripture, Jesus purchased men for God "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev 5:9).

And this church gathering work of our Lord Jesus Christ begins with the work of our God.

From the entirety of the whole human race, the Lord God has chosen certain persons to life eternal.

These persons the Father has given to the Son, and for the salvation of these people the Son laid down His life on the cross.

Christ did His required work on the cross.

He paid for the sins of those whom the Father had given Him, died, was buried, arose, and ascended into heaven.

But what now of those elect people the Father had given Him?

Christ had obtained forgiveness for their sins, but the vast majority of these elect people for whom Christ died *knew yet nothing of the Lord*; most were not yet born.

This then becomes the gathering work of Jesus, through his Spirit and Word.

Peoples of any tribe and race and language are on the list of those whom the Father had given to the Son, people who would live in any century of history, and in any corner of the globe.

We say, "I believe ... the holy catholic church."

Not churches.

We believe there is one church.

That little word "a" also expresses the church's oneness.

Jesus gathers, protects, and preserves for Himself "a" community.

Not numerous communities of believers.

So unity as Christians is clearly what the Bible teaches.

In Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane on the night of his arrest, he prays that all of his followers would be united, that both those alive then and those who would come later would be one...finding their unity not in doctrines but in a common love of Jesus.

Paul says the same thing in Ephesians and in other places when he talks about the Body of Christ.

We are all one body...like it or not.

The hand may not really understand why the gall bladder exists, and the mouth may be completely baffled at why the stomach keeps yelling about what the mouth keeps sending in.

But they are all part of one body that has one common purpose.

That is the image of the holy catholic church...a body...an organic unit.

What we learn from Paul's image of the Body of Christ is that church unity is not some utopian ideal that we strive for but never attain.

It is not something we can ignore and say we don't want any part of.

It is our reality.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazi's said it well.

He said Christian community is not "an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate."

For me, that means learning to get along with other Christians is not an option.

There might be a rift in the family, but you are still family...like it or not.

We are all bound together in one body, and if those body parts don't work together, the whole body falls to the ground in a heap.

Conclusion

What is the church?

Is it the cathedral that the woman walks into during her lunch break to kneel and pray to the God alone who keeps her sane in a mad world?

Is it the building the Gujarat people seek refuge and protection in as crowds run riot outside?

Is it the place from which a man and woman step out of into the sunshine after they have made promises to love and cherish each other till death separates them?

Is it the place where thousands of people stream into and out on any regular Sunday?

What is the church, and why does it matter?

The word 'church' can simply mean a particular building that is used for worship, wedding and refuge.

When someone says, 'Our church burned down last week.'

They are speaking of the structure...the bricks and mortar.

But if that same group was to meet in a local school after the fire...

They would still say that they are going 'to church'.

Church can refer to the building...

but it can also refer to what God's people do when they gather.

But the word church has a much wider, more important meaning:

When we use the Apostle's creed we confess we believe in 'the holy catholic church'.

When we use the word church in that sense we are referring to a certain group of people.

This group, or community, is the most important meaning of 'church'.

It is the community of all those who truly believe in Jesus Christ;
it is believers as well as their children.

The church is the group of people who are justified and sanctified.

These are people with faith and repentance.

Among them you find reverence and awe of God and his law.

We often think of the church is too small a way.

We think of it as the group we worship with on Sundays,
or the denomination we are part of.

I used to live at Cronulla and would spend time in at the beach there.

When I stand on the beach and look east to the horizon,
all that I can see I call the Pacific Ocean.

And that is what it is.

But there is also so much more than that small expanse that I can see.

So it is with the church.

The church of Jesus Christ is incredibly vast.

It includes Chinese Christians meeting in homes;

tribal groups in the African bush;

power brokers in boardrooms of industry;

factory workers in the western suburbs of Melbourne.

It contains ripe old Christians who have believed the gospel for over 70 years
and infants so young they do not yet believe anything at all.

The church not only stretches across the continents and occupations and races of
people...

But also back across time.

Martin Luther belonged to the same community as you and I do.

So did CS Lewis and John Calvin and Johan Sebastian Bach and Augustine.

And it crosses back to the people of the Bible.

Paul and Peter and John are part of the same community of believers we belong to.

So were Abraham and Sarah and the people of Israel who gathered at Mount Sinai in
Exodus 19.

All these people belong to the same church as we belong to because all of us belong to the same Lord.

Abraham was called out of his country to serve the Lord in a new country.
The people of Israel were called out of slavery in Egypt to serve the Lord in the promised land.

Paul was called out of blindness to serve the Lord he had so savagely persecuted.

We too are called out of a fallen world and into the warmth of the Christian community.
In fact the word church in the New Testament really means 'those who are called out'.

The key question for each of us is whether we will answer this call.
On this our life and growth depends.