

I Believe In the Church

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[0 : 0 0] So we have two readings this morning, a passage from 1 Corinthians and then a portion of God's Word from Revelation. We begin with 1 Corinthians and we're reading from 1 Corinthians chapter 12.

We'll be reading chapter 12 verse 12 to the end of the chapter. Once I've got this, say that it won't flip over.

So 1 Corinthians chapter 12 from verse 12. Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.

For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body. Whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free. And we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

And so the body is not made up of one part, but of many. Now if the foot should say, because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body.

[1 : 1 3] It would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be?

If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact, God has placed the parts of the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.

If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, I don't need you.

And the hand cannot say to the feet, I don't need you. On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.

And the parts that we think are less honorable, we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment.

[2 : 2 5] But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are part of the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

And God has placed in the church, first of all, apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues.

Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing?

Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? Now, eagerly desire the greater gifts. And turning to the book of Revelation, and reading from chapter 7 of Revelation, and we're going to be reading from verse 9 to the end of that chapter.

[3 : 5 0] So verses 9 to 17. Revelation chapter 7, verse 9. After this, I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice, Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

All the angels were standing round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying, Amen.

Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen. Then one of the elders asked me, Those in white robes, Who are they and where did they come from?

I answered, Sir, you know. And he said, These are they who have come out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

[5 : 15] Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple. And he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

Never again will they hunger. Never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them. Nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd.

He will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Amen. Lord God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen. So, folks, this morning, we continue our journey through the Apostles' Creed. I think just two more sermons to go after this one. We are finally nearing the end of this somewhat spread out series.

You remember, the Apostles' Creed provides us with this summary of key doctrines of the Christian faith. different aspects of what we believe. Aspects that are common to all true Christians since ancient times.

[6 : 37] We've considered our faith in God, the Father and Creator. And then we have that summary of various aspects of Jesus' life, death, and future.

In January, we consider the line, I believe, in the Holy Spirit. And now, in the next section, we consider what you can view both as an aspect of the Spirit's work and also as the first line of the Creed that directly concerns humanity.

Of course, we've been there throughout the Creed, part of creation, Mary, Jesus' mother, Pilate, and we who will be judged when Christ returns. But now, as we confess our belief in the Holy Catholic Church and the communion of saints, we are now directly speaking of humanity and of our relationships with one another as well as with God.

So, let's remind ourselves how the whole Creed goes. I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only 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 to the dead. On the third day, He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father, and He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

[7 : 59] 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. So, we're concerned now with God's people, with the church, with the saints. And perhaps, before we go any further, it's helpful to speak just briefly about terminology.

Let's deal first with the last word of this section, saints. Saints is not a reference to some special class of Christian, not somebody unusually holy or praiseworthy.

No, saints is used here in the creed in the same sense as it would be used in many Bibles, especially in older translations, used to refer to all Christians in a context where it's their holiness that's being noted.

So, you see it in the address at the start of most of the letters. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus, says the English Standard Version.

[8 : 59] The NIV says, to God's holy people in Ephesus. And it means the same thing here in the creed, the communion of the holy people of God.

Now, holiness isn't something special, additional, or supplementary for some particular Christians, rather for all who believe the good news of the gospel, all who repent of their sins, and all who find God's forgiveness, all who are united to Christ.

All such people are holy. So, if you're a Christian, you are one of the saints. Second term to consider, which I have certainly known to cause considerable confusion, is the word Catholic in the first of our two lines this morning.

Find ourselves wondering, know we, how the Catholic here in the creed relates to the Catholic in Roman Catholic Church. And for many of us, we wonder that precisely because we know that we definitely are not part of the Roman Catholic Church.

So, what does it mean to say that we're part of the Catholic Church? Well, the short answer is that essentially, Catholic here is synonymous with universal. Which brings us to our first point, which is to say that there is only one church.

[10 : 14] There is only one church in the whole world. On what basis do we say that? Well, because we're forced to. See, on many levels, it looks like there's a whole bunch of churches, doesn't it?

But ultimately, we're forced to argue from God's Word there is only one church. This is rooted in the first couple of verses of what we read from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.

For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body, whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free, and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Paul's adamant, as he writes to the Corinthians, he's adamant Christ has one body, not two.

There were all kinds of dichotomies once upon a time, Jew or Gentile, as he mentions here, slave or free, or for that matter, male and female, as he adds in Galatians 3. All of these different dichotomies, these are no longer divisions within Christ's body, and there should not be any other divisions either.

Calvin puts it very succinctly. He points to 1 Corinthians 1.13, which says, is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?

[11 : 32] Were you baptized in the name of Paul? And Calvin asks, he says, the church is called Catholic or universal because there could not be two or three churches unless Christ be torn asunder, which cannot happen.

There are not two churches. Christ cannot be divided. One body doesn't have two heads. There's only one church.

Sorry, one head doesn't have two bodies is what I mean. Not one body doesn't have two heads. There's only one church. Now, of course, there have been a whole variety of Christian communities spread through different times, places, and cultures.

But in as much as those different communities are indwelt by the one spirit, then they are ultimately one. And the local body of believers should express something of that Catholic spirit, something of that universality.

It should be the case that we don't all look exactly alike, that we don't all come from the same background. The doors of the church should in principle at least be exactly as wide as the doors of the kingdom.

[12 : 45] And those doors stand open to any who will repent and believe. The message that the church proclaims, the good news of the gospel, that message is the same to all people of all places at all times.

There might be different emphases in different circumstances, maybe different particular sins that need to be addressed, different reasons why people think they don't need the good news of the kingdom. But as we were seeing in our connect groups this week, there's one fundamental human need, the forgiveness of our sins by God's grace through faith in Christ alone.

There's nobody for whom the message of the gospel is irrelevant. There's nobody who needs a different gospel because the gospel addresses the universal human need for forgiveness.

So whoever you are listening to me this morning, whether you're here in the room or listening to me online, whoever you are, the good news of the gospel is for you.

You need your sins to be forgiven. All humanity alike is alienated from God by our rebellion against his rule and all of us alike need forgiveness and reconciliation.

[13 : 54] And therefore, we as a church proclaim a universal message that encompasses the needs of all people. And furthermore, the message that we proclaim is also universal, Catholic, because it speaks to the whole of life.

The message of the gospel doesn't only address our morality. It doesn't only address some kind of compartmentalized spiritual life. No, the gospel addresses the whole person, body and soul, with the message of grace and truth.

The gospel speaks to the whole of the human condition. There is one church and that one church is for absolutely everyone. Now, that has implications, doesn't it, for our evangelistic approach.

That tells us we can't be restrictive or parochial in our approach. That applies to us individually and that applies to us as a church.

We must be universal in our message and in where and to whom we are reaching out. But what about other implications of the oneness of the church?

[15 : 06] If there is only one church, what does that mean for relationships between believers? Goekal Myers commenting on the creed, he's really provocative in his phrasing but accurate, I think.

He says, every division between believers is a denial of the gospel. Every division between believers is a denial of the gospel.

And he means that between one individual and another and between one church and another, between one denomination and another. Every division between believers is a denial of the gospel.

If there is ultimately only one church, then it's always a grievous thing when that theoretical unity isn't practically expressed.

When we allow secondary matters to divide us from one another. One of the saddest things about coming north of the border and learning Scottish church history, and in this, I think the history of the church in Scotland is worse than the history of the church in England and probably, I think, worse than the global average, to be honest.

[16 : 09] One of the saddest things was coming and learning about all of the different divisions. The timeline on the wall at ETS with all of those different divisions and splits and reintegrations and, of course, half the time when two groups supposedly come together and reintegrate, what actually happens is you end up with three groups because both have remnants as well as the united group.

All of that is a denial of the gospel. There's one church. Now, of course, those divisions are not the only things that deny the gospel and, therefore, I'm not saying that it's never right to separate.

If I were saying it was never right to separate, then you would need to haul me before a court for failure to uphold my ordination vows. I do, for instance, as I said when I was ordained, believe in the spiritual independence of the church and, therefore, that the men in 1843 who formed the free church were right to say, no, the state can't decree who will be ministers and, thereby, decree what will be proclaimed in pulpits.

The church is spiritually independent from the state and the necessity of that may well be tested again in our lifetimes. So, it may be right to separate and it may be right to separate even from others who you hold to be true believers in Christ but what I also say is it's always a source of sadness when that happens.

It's always a grievous thing. It's not a cause for rejoicing. It's painful and, yes, it is on some level a denial of the gospel and, therefore, it's right and proper that we, as individuals, we as a local church, we as a denomination, it's right and proper that we're always keen to avoid division and that we're always open to even actively seeking potential reconciliation or closer working together.

[18 : 08] There is only one church and the more it looks like that on the ground the better it is. One more dimension to consider thinking about the oneness of the church.

You could reasonably argue that there's actually an even bigger potential division within humanity than all of the divisions of culture, language, class, structure, a greater even than the divide between Jew and Gentile that was so fundamental in the days when the apostles wrote.

From at least one perspective, the greatest barrier is death. There are, you could say, two different groups of human beings, the living and the dead.

And other human divisions, it might be within our power to overcome. You can learn a new language. People can come together across class divides, but you can't be both living and dead. And yet, as Myers puts it in the resurrection, Jesus has stepped across the barrier and has restored communion between the living and the dead.

Jesus has formed one family that stretches out not only across space, but also across time. The body of Christ is the most inclusive community imaginable, because it includes not only those who are now living, but also all believers who have ever lived.

[19 : 31] Remember that reading from Revelation? I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands, and they cried out in a loud voice, Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. John has this vision into heaven.

He sees the present reality. A great multitude gathered praising the Lamb. The church is far, far bigger than it so often looks.

One job of the Presbytery Strategy Committee, of which I'm part, is to get involved with churches that are really struggling, with churches that are obviously unhealthy. And therefore, I have been and I have preached to congregations that are smaller than our midweek connect groups.

groups. And it's very easy when there's eight of you gathered in what's little more than a shed, or worse, eight of you spread out across a big barn of a church that seats hundreds.

[20 : 37] It's very, very easy to feel like the church is small and insignificant and irrelevant and powerless. That's how it feels when you look at those eight people.

It's very easy to dismiss that, isn't it? And on one level, that particular group might be insignificant. It might be right to say, well, wouldn't it be better for those people to join together with others and so on and so on.

But what's also vital in that situation is to hold on to that truth that this tiny group of people is part of something far bigger. There's more to the church than meets the eye.

There's certainly far more of us here than in some of those congregations that I'm thinking of, but don't we still sometimes feel some of that sense of discouragement, that same feeling of insignificance, that same feeling of why aren't we having more of an impact?

Why aren't there more of us here? We look at the churches in the States with thousands of people in attendance or even the hundreds elsewhere in our own denomination and maybe what we feel is small and weak.

[21 : 42] But the reality is the church isn't just you and me. Now, the real picture of the church, what should be in our minds when we think of what the church is, is that vision of an uncountable multitude.

So many people, John can't even come up with an estimate of their numbers, let alone an accurate count. They've come from every possible background as we've seen already and they're lost in worship of the living God.

That's what the church really is and we get to join in. We get to be part of that church. We believe in the universal church, the Catholic church and that is far bigger than it looks.

And therefore, the individual group of believers may not be able to do all that much alone, but as part of something bigger, as part of something bigger, the church is indestructible.

The gates of hell itself will not prevail. Calvin says, even though the devil moves every stone to destroy Christ's grace and even though God's enemies rage with the same savage fury, it cannot be extinguished, nor can Christ's blood be made barren, nay even some good may come of it.

[22 : 59] The church is indestructible. So there's only one church and that church is for everyone, which means there's hope for all. There's only one church which means division between believers is a grievous thing.

There's only one church and that church is far bigger than it looks, which encourages us when we feel powerless and insignificant. Finally, I think perhaps we should ask ourselves, what is the source or nature of that oneness, the unity of the church?

See, Christians by and large don't disagree that there's fundamentally only one church. But what there is is a significant disconnect as to how that unity is established and expressed.

So here's a question for you. Is the Pope Catholic? Well, yes, but actually no. Let me explain.

Yes, the Pope is part of, indeed, the head of the Roman Catholic Church. So he is, I suppose we must concede, Catholic with a capital C. However, my contention is he is ultimately not Catholic with a lowercase c.

[24 : 09] He's not Catholic in the sense of the creed here. He's not part of the one holy Catholic and apostolic church as the Nicene Creed expresses this same part of the faith.

See, the thing is, according to official Roman Catholic teaching, the Church of Christ is viewed as being one in essentially organizational and structural terms.

It's the organized body of baptized persons in communion with the Pope and acknowledging the teaching of the Episcopal hierarchy of which he's the head.

That's what the Catholic Church says the Church is, that kind of organized body. And they say the Church is holy because it produces holy people. They say the Church is Catholic because across the world she and she alone keeps the full faith in trust for everyone.

apostolic in tracing a line of Episcopal ordination back to the Apostles and in that her faith, including what to Protestants are clearly unbiblical doctrines like the Immaculate Conception of Mary, the Mass Sacrifice, Papal Infallibility, Purgatory, her faith, the Catholic Church would say, is a sound growth from apostolic roots.

[25 : 25] And therefore, the position of the Roman Catholic Church is that anybody outside of the Roman Catholic Church however, church-like they might be are not actually part of the Church at all.

So when I say the Pope is not Catholic, well, he thinks the same thing about me and about you. Sorry. Now, I imagine as I went through that summary of how the Catholic Church views the Church, I imagine you identified several points on which we would disagree.

J.I. Packer gives us a very helpful summary of the Protestant alternative. He says, the Church is the one worldwide fellowship of believing people whose head is Christ.

The Church is holy because it's consecrated to God, though nevertheless capable of grievous sin. The Church is Catholic because it embraces all Christians everywhere, as we've said.

And the Church is apostolic because it seeks to maintain the Apostle's doctrine unmixed. Pope, hierarchy, and extra-biblical doctrines are not merely non-essential but actually deforming.

[26 : 34] See, it's that last part that's the problem, isn't it? The faith that the Catholic Church claims, the doctrines that she expounds, are fundamentally incompatible with those held by Protestant churches, incompatible with what the Bible actually says.

So I would argue our disagreement comes down ultimately to how we view God's Word because infallibility belongs to God speaking in the Bible, not to the Church or to any human being.

Using the Catholic Church perhaps as an example here, but the same applies in other ways, doesn't it? That if the standard of the Church is maintaining the doctrine of the Apostles depending on God's Word, then there are other groups using the term Church of which that cannot be said.

And therefore, other groups that in that far are not ultimately part of the Catholic Church, the universal Church. Churches, churches, people who are of the Church.

See, if you say salvation comes by some other means than what the Bible says salvation comes by, if Christ is not the only head of the Church, if salvation is not by grace through faith alone, then you are not a church.

[28 : 08] Churches, individuals, can and do get things wrong. We're flawed, we're fallible, and thus we must be open to correction by God's Word written. Scott's Confession of 1560 makes exactly that appeal in its preface.

If you can see anything in this document that isn't what the Bible says, then tell us and we'll fix it, said the authors of that confession, and so too must we.

If you can show me from God's Word why I'm mistaken, I must be willing to be corrected. There's only one church and she's beholden to obey her one head, to believe His Word once written and to hope in His future return.

I believe in the Holy Catholic Church and the communion of saints. That church is the one supernatural society of the whole of God's redeemed people, those here on earth, those already in glory, and those yet to be born.

We look back to Christ's first coming with gratitude and we look forward to His second coming with hope because as Paul tells you, you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

[29 : 21] When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank You for the church.

We thank You for what You have established here on earth and the church as she continues in heaven in glory.

We rejoice to know that we are part of something bigger than it may often seem. We rejoice to be part of Your body and we pray that You would help us to rightly express the unity of the church, that we might grieve to see division, but that we might fiercely guard the truth of what You have said, such that there might be here on earth, one Catholic Church.

Amen.