

I Believe in the Holy Universal Church, the Communion of Saints: What is the Church?

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[0 : 00] about everything that the writer, and if it's Paul, says there in that section will probably be found somewhere in my, I hesitate to say, sermon.

I apologize to you if it's going to sound a bit more like a lecture, but it certainly will be in my message this evening. I'm saying absolutely everything that Paul says there when he's referring to the church.

As you know, we've been looking at the Apostles' Creed in the evening services, and the bit of the Apostles' Creed that I have been tasked with is the bit that says the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints.

I believe, says this part of the Apostles' Creed, I believe in the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints.

And my message this evening is very simply built around the three things that are said in the confession about the church.

[1 : 27] One, that it's holy. Two, that it's Catholic. And three, that it's the communion of saints.

Just a quick introductory word about the structure of the Apostles' Creed and the lines of the different truths that are there.

Because the bit that I'm doing tonight is found in Article 3. There are three main articles. One about God, two about Jesus, and one about the Holy Spirit and the church and the resurrection and so on. So we're in the third article. But when you have only read the first two articles, like we believe in God the Father Almighty, the creator of heaven and earth, we might say, so.

And when we read the second article, and it says, and I believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Lord, and so on and so on and so on, we might say, so. And where is all this going?

[2 : 46] And where it's going is to Article 3. It's going there because the church is going to be the place where God will be worshipped, the gospel is proclaimed, and everything about the ministry of the church will be taking place.

And also, the other thing that I want to just alert you to is at the beginning of Article 3, the first line is that we believe, or I believe, in the Holy Spirit.

That is critical and crucial for the church. It's no accident that that is there. In fact, Calvin devotes a...

He divides the creed into four parts, and he includes the Holy Spirit exclusively as part three, and then the rest as part four.

But we'll not bother about that. But he says more or less the same thing. The other thing I should say is that some of my message is drawing on Calvin's comments, as you will hear.

[4 : 09] I said that it's crucial, the mention of the Holy Spirit, because Jesus had said, hadn't he, if I go away, the Spirit will come and guide you into all truth.

The Spirit did come at Pentecost. The Spirit is needed for the new birth, said Jesus to Nicodemus. Except a person is born of the Spirit, they will never enter into the kingdom of heaven. Paul says in one of his letters, if any person does not have the Spirit of Christ in him, he doesn't belong to Christ. The Spirit is utterly critical to the church. Especially when we realize, and we'll have more of that later, that the church is the body of Christ.

And when we say the church is the body of Christ, we're talking about a fact.

[5 : 23] It may well be a spiritual entity, a mysterious entity even, but it's a fact. And then, notice, in the Apostles' Creed, in each of the three articles, they begin with, I believe in.

I believe in. Notice that little preposition, in. Because it's, in Greek anyway, it's intensive. It has the idea of relationship, depth, and closeness.

But what I want to say is, I just want you to realize, that the truths that are stated in the Creed, are not only to be recited, and not only to be possessed as intellectual knowledge, but are to be believed in.

Because, without that, they won't do us any good. How does the Creed answer this question, what is the church?

Which, it might seem, I would agree with you, it might seem like an unnecessary question. Surely we all know what the church is. Here we are in the church. This is the church. You're correct.

[7 : 01] This is the church. I don't mean the building, as Colin keeps reminding us. You are the church. We are the church.

We are the members of the church. We are the parts of the church, and yet we're one. Some people have, spoken of the church, as visible, and invisible.

The basic question, we're exploring tonight, is what is the church? Some people have, spoken of the church, as invisible, and visible.

which is fine, as long, as we're not thinking, there are two entities. I cannot emphasize this enough.

The church is one. The body of Christ is one. It's not two. It's not three. It's not millions. It's one.

One.
[8 : 14] When people talk about the visible church, they mean the church as you and I see it, with our eyes, and with our minds, and with our experience. When people talk about the invisible church, they're talking about how God sees it.

The invisible church is every single believer, every single elect believer, that is united to Jesus Christ.

God knows every single one of them. That's his perspective, and his vantage point. We can only see the visible church, if you like.

What is the church? Let me just say what it isn't. It's not a club. A golf club, a bridge club, a tennis club, a bowling club, a cricket club, a knitting club, a sewing club, or any other club.

Because all of these clubs, their raison d'etre, is simply for the pleasure that the club is created around.

[9 : 38] It's not a business. The nomenclature, the buzzwords for business, are profit, performance, product analysis, customer satisfaction, targets, markets.

The church does not exist for profit, or customer satisfaction. It exists for the glory of God, only. This is not to say that the church cannot learn from clubs, or businesses, but, that at its peril, it gets sucked into a business mentality.

The church is not the leaders, the minister and elders, nor the Kirk Session, nor anyone else, the trustees. I've said already, and I'll say it again, the church is the body of Christ, the body of believers.

Paul frequently refers to the church as the church of God. You'll see that in 1 Corinthians, and in 2 Corinthians, and in several places in his letters.

And by the way, any quotes that I'm making, they are dozens of them. So, any ideas that come across as a, if you like, a doctrine, they're not based on a single, a single verse.

[11 : 07] They are based on the global teaching of the New Testament, and indeed, the entire Bible. So, the church is not a club, and it's not a business, it doesn't belong to the ministers and elders, and it's not the kingdom of God.

It is, of course, closely connected with the kingdom of God. The church is the community of those who have accepted the message of the kingdom of God, and who proclaim it.

But if you can think of concentric circles, the larger concentric circle is the kingdom of God, and the smaller concentric circle is the church, and Jesus Christ is at the center of both those circles.

The kingdom of God is the overarching, redemptive activity of God in this world and in history, which will culminate in the return of Jesus Christ and the fullness of that kingdom.

three things are said about the church in this part of the Apostles' Creed.

[12 : 31] And the first thing is that the church is holy. Now, if we read about some of the things that sections of the church have been found guilty of, we would not be blamed for being aghast to hear that the first descriptor of the church in this creed is that it's holy.

And if we know anything about, especially if we've been Christians for a while and we're in about the conflicts and the double speak and double dealing and all this sort of stuff and courts, whisperings and corridors and so on, then we know immediately that the last thing that we would want to put on the church as this word holy, yet the creed says the church is holy. In what sense is the church holy? I'm just thinking there was something there that I missed that I did want to say and that is that Calvin, take this quote away with you, this is a well-known quote of Calvin.

Calvin says that anyone who has God for their father has the church for their mother and I'm trying to find yeah, I just want to read this fuller quote for you from Calvin.

Because my present intention has gone away is to speak of the visible church church, he's not wanting to talk tonight Calvin, I don't think.

[15:03] I'll try this once more and if I can't get it I'll just have to leave it. I took a picture of it on the phone here.

because my present intention is to speak of the visible church, let us learn if only from her title of mother how much the knowledge of this is youthful and indeed necessary seeing there is no entering into the life everlasting unless we are conceived in the womb of that mother, the church that is, and she gives birth to us, feeds us at her breasts and finally holds and guards us under her guidance and government until being stripped of this mortal flesh we become like the angels. They that have God for the father have the church for the mother. There's no such thing as a Christian who doesn't belong to the church.

Because by definition a Christian is a person that is united to Christ and his body. But back to this holiness.

What is this holiness? It is being set apart because that's what the word means.

[16:38] The word holy means to separate means to separate or set apart. That happened a lot in the Old Testament where the priests and all that were always setting this and that apart for the sacrifices in the altar.

Well, God has set apart the church, the people of God, the redeemed of the Lord. God has separated us not from the world but in the world to be, if you like, an alternative society, a place where the gospel is offered, where the gospel is proclaimed, where healing and hope is offered to our needy world.

God. And so, in this sense, when it's said that the church is holy, that's in an objective sense.

But the church is also holy because of the salvation won by Christ. Take, for example, in the book of Hebrews in chapter 10 and verse 10 and verse 14.

This is a wonderful statement. And by that will, says the writer, we who have believed in Jesus have been made holy through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

[18:15] So, this again is a kind of objective holiness, I think, that the writer is speaking about. And also in verse 14, verse 14, for by a single offering, he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

That's an interesting one because on the one hand it says, this is another paradox, the Christianity is riddled with them. this is saying that on the one hand God has made us holy and perfect forever. By the way, the English words that you're reading, it's the same word all the time in the Greek, which is hagios, the word to separate. it. So, here we have the idea that by a single offering, he has made holy for all time.

He has set apart those who are being made holy. in other words, that holiness has both an objective dimension and a subjective dimension.

For after all, God said, did he not, you'll remember this statement yourself, I'm sure, be ye holy, for I am holy. So, we've to be set apart in a way that is different from the trajectory and the ethos and the flow of the world around us.

[20:00] But I want to ask this question before we leave the first descriptor of the church as holy. What is holiness? What is the content of subjective holiness that the church is to have?

I answer, Christ-likeness. holiness. Jesus Christ is the embodiment of holiness and therefore its model.

Even the evil spirits knew about the holiness of Jesus. Right at the beginning of Mark's gospel in chapter one, one of those evil spirits on encountering Jesus said, what have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?

Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the holy one of God. Sometimes we can have wrong ideas of what holiness is, Christian holiness.

holiness. We can think of it as some kind of pious, exclusive religious life having nothing to do with the world and hiving off into some holy huddle away from the world.

[21 : 24] That would be a denial not only of biblical holiness but of the incarnation. I remember being present at one of the late Professor Donald MacLeod's lectures.

It was on the incarnation and I remember Donald saying that Jesus Christ came to the rubbish heap of humanity.

The holiest church, the more we retreat into our safe ghettos, the less we will be able to fulfill our calling of being salt of the earth and light of the world.

The holiest church on the planet is the church that follows Christ most closely and the holiest Christian on the planet is the Christian that follows Christ most closely.

How did Christ live? What was the trajectory and thrust of his life? You get biographical statements. Watch for them in the Gospels.

[22 : 38] For example, one of them is Jesus went about doing good. Say it again. Jesus went about doing good.

Healing all the sick, casting out demons and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. kingdom. He was the holiest man ever to walk the planet.

Are you and me holy Christians?

Christians. The second descriptor that he gives of the church is the word Catholic. Now, every Apostles' Creed that I have come across and ever seen has the word Catholic in it.

And I have decided to keep that word Catholic there. Maybe that's a wee bit pedantic. Catholic, but of course, it doesn't refer to the Roman Catholic Church.

[23 : 54] The word probably originated, it's a medieval word, or it was used a lot in medieval times, but it probably originated much earlier.

And the word means universal, whole, that has these other connotations, and one. I'm really worried about this.

I seem to have a tendency to want to spill that to Thessalon. what this really is saying is the church is universal, and because it's universal, it's one.

And what does it mean for the church to be one? Paul says in Ephesians, I think it's in the, yeah, it's verse 4 of chapter 4, he says there is one body.

Okay, have you got that one now? There is one body, and he says one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, but the church is one body, not two.

[25 : 37] In what sense is the church one? In the sense of time. That's the first sense. In other words, past, present, and future.

If we like, the Bible says that Abraham is the father of those that have faith in the Messiah. Paul says that in his letters. From Abraham to the second coming of Christ, Christ, including the unborn, and those born but who die in infancy, are the one people of God.

Secondly, I've already said this, but we'll repeat it again. they are one because every single believer, the moment they truly believe, they are instantly united to Jesus Christ and part of his body.

Calvin puts it this way rather provocatively, they are inserted into Christ's body. This oneness of the church is born out, in fact, by all the metaphors that are used for the church.

For example, notice the singular building, body, bride, plant, vine, temple.

[27 : 34] But, the church is not only one in terms of time, it's one in terms of space now, space with inverted commas.

Locus might be a better word. The body of Christ is one body of Christ, not two. And that is where we are members of that one body.

So, one in terms of time, one in terms of space or locus, and one because Jesus Christ is the head of that single body.

One body. The church, you see, is Christ's body. There isn't Christ's body, if you like, in terms of the church, and the church, but there is this Ephesians that we read.

This is a great mystery, the mystical union of Christ and his people. Every believer, as Calvin said, is inserted into his body, spiritually, but also factually.

[29 : 06] It's not just a kind abstract concept. Before we leave this point, and I'm just quoting Calvin here, Calvin asks the question, but how do we know whether any gathering calling themselves Christians are a true church?

What measure have we of judging and establishing whether that is a true church or not? And Calvin has these two signs or marks that constitute an authentic part of the church of God.

That the word of God, he says, is truly preached. preached. That's interesting, isn't it? It's truly preached.

And it adds something else that is fascinating that you often don't hear when you hear about that quote from Calvin. and listened to, he said.

Jesus once said, they that have ears to hear. Bonhoeffer said that they that do not listen to God don't listen to their brethren.

[30 : 47] how about the second sign?

That the sacraments, he said, are administered according to Christ's institution. What about discipline?

Calvin does not see it as an essential mark of a true church, though he believes it's important. I can see that I've run out of time, which is a shame.

but I'll very quickly go through this part because in actual fact it's the most important part of the creed.

I've spoken to you about what this holy means, I've spoken to you about what Catholic means, but the peak statement is the communion of saints.

[32 : 04] tell me, what do you think this means? Does it mean, or refer to when we have communion?

I've just announced that we're having communion next Sunday. does it mean what we call fellowship and Bible studies, district Bible studies, and does it mean prayer?

Yes, it means all of those things, but much more. First of all, let's ask who are the subjects of this communion.

Notice what's said, communion of saints. Do you feel like a saint tonight? I don't. By the way, remember we were talking about holy and the word hagios?

Welcome to hagios again. communion of saints takes place because of the body of Christ, because the saints are united to Christ, because he is the head, because that body is one.

[33 : 45] communion. And although it's stating, if you like, communion of saints, I hate to use this hackneyed phrase, that communion is vertical as well as horizontal.

In other words, that communion is with Christ and with the Son and with the Father, as well as together within and among the saints, the people of God.

This is what we're set apart for. This is what we're called to be saints for. Communion with Christ, with the Father, and the Son.

Communion with and among the one community of believers, both local and universal. In one sense, the visible church is like a sacrament.

This is not Calvin, so this might not be right, so don't worry about it. In one sense, the visible church, this is me saying this, is like a sacrament pointing beyond itself as a sign to the communion of saints and fellowship with the Father and the Son.

[35 : 20] The connotations of that word communion, by the way, those of you that know the Greek, koinonia. Koinonia. What does that word mean, koinonia?

Sharing, sharing. We share in the life of Christ as believers. We draw from that zoe, that life.

That life. That life. That life. That life. That life. That life. That life. That life. That life. That life. That life. That life. life. Another word as we close that Calvin loves is participate.

Calvin asks, how does anybody participate in all the benefits that Jesus Christ has won for us through his death and resurrection?

Well, he said that by being inserted into the body of Christ. And another place is he Christ must become ours and dwell in us if we're to receive and appropriate his salvation.

[36 : 34] How does that happen? By believing in Jesus Christ. By calling upon his name. By confessing him as your Lord.

And when that happens, immediately we inherit every one of the blessings of Christ's wonderful victory on the cross.

In this sense, you see, communion with Christ is the indispensable condition for receiving grace, the grace that Christ's redemption has gained for us.

Because we participate in Jesus Christ, we're forgiven. because we participate in Jesus Christ, we'll be resurrected. Because I live, you shall live.

To know this communion, even in a small degree, is it not the greatest privilege of any human being? May it be so for each and every one of us.

[37 : 45] Amen. Amen.