

## The Creed Part 5 The Church and Communion of Saints

Here we are in Part 5 of the sermon series on the Apostles Creed, focusing on “The Church and the Communion of Saints.” In a way, we are still under the umbrella of the Holy Spirit, and as believers, all genuine faith originates from the Spirit, signifying faith in the Holy One who is God. The primary question, for me at least, as we delve into this section of the Creed is: What does the phrase “the holy catholic church” mean? It seemed strange, and frankly, until my studies, I did not fully grasp the terminology. Hopefully, by the end of this sermon, you, too, will achieve a more detailed comprehension. And, just so you are aware, the word “catholic” is spelled with a lowercase 'c,' not a capital 'C,' nor does it refer to the Catholic Church.

Nonetheless, in a way, we have faith in the church; we belong to the church as believers within its folds. Indeed, the church holds a pivotal role in the Creed as it is within it that we cultivate faith, inspiring and guiding us in our spiritual journey. As a guiding light, the church supports us in our spiritual journey, helping us navigate the complexities of faith. However, this is not to be understood in the sense of “We believe in the church,” for if we believe in the church, we would fall into idolatry, placing our faith in what is not divine. The church is not the object of our faith. Let me clarify: in brief, we believe in a Triune God and no other. We believe in God the Father Almighty, in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit. Let’s pray.

God our Creator, the author of life; Christ our Savior, the One who saves; and the Holy Spirit, the inspirer, breath, and wind of God. We feel You move through us, guiding and inspiring us. Draw us closer to you. Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Draw us closer to you. Draw us in, Spirit, Christ, Creator, so that we might journey with You more fully and deeply in this life and beyond. Continue to call us, guide us, and lead us into this world and beyond. Amen.

Looking at the words “holy” and “the holy catholic church,” there are two connected but different meanings of the word “holy.” Primarily and fundamentally, in the biblical sense, “holy” means belonging to God or a sacred closeness to God, or set apart for God. Secondly, holy means pure or morally perfect, and we find God as both sacred and perfect. The church is not a country club for perfect people but instead a hospital for broken and sinful people who are slowly being made well. This understanding of the church as a place of healing and transformation should bring hope and comfort to all of us. But what does it mean when we refer to the church as holy? If we suggest that the church is perfect by any stretch of the imagination as morally spotless, this, of all the clauses in the Creed, is the most difficult to believe!

For example, think about the phrase “Holy Land.” The Holy Land is certainly not a land of moral perfection where everyone loves each other as they should. The Holy Land has certainly not been a land of peace, yet we call it holy. Why? In designating it as sacred, we remind ourselves that it is not only a land of war, terrorism, and hatred but also the land where God has come to be with his people. It is the land to which God called Abraham and Sarah, the land where Jacob and his wives raised their children, from which Joseph went to Egypt and where his descendants eventually returned, where Samuel heard God’s voice, and Isaiah saw the Lord. It is the land where Peter, Mary, James, Mary Magdalene, and Jesus walked, shed tears, and bled.

And so, the church is holy because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in it, and the church is part of our faith in the Spirit. As we recently sang: We are one in the Spirit. We are one in the Lord. And all praise to the Spirit, who makes us one. And they'll know we are Christians by our love.

To say that the church is holy is not a self-proclamation of moral purity. The church as we know it lacks moral purity. Why? It's full of sinners in need of a healer. However, the holiness of the church affirms God's presence in it and calls us, as the church, to be more faithful to what the Spirit demands of us. Now for the part we've all been waiting for: the holy catholic church. The word 'catholic' does not appear in the earlier forms of the Apostles Creed. The word 'catholic' appears in several creeds in the Greek-speaking branch of the church, particularly in the Nicene Creed, and somehow made its way into the Apostles Creed at some point near the end of the fourth century.

If we were to study early Christian literature, we would find that by the beginning of the second century, the significance of the word “holy” referred to the universal church at large, meaning throughout the world. As used in the Creed, the word does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church but instead describes the church from everywhere. This is where the early Christian writers began to refer to the “catholic church” as a whole. The word “catholic” actually means “according to the whole,” so what makes the church catholic is not its presence everywhere but rather the fact that people from everywhere are part of its contribution, embracing a wide variety of believers. To put this into perspective, when in the Creed we refer to “the holy catholic church,” we are not referring to a particular denomination. Instead, we affirm the church's existence even amid our various theologies, traditions, and politics and affirm our membership in that church. This understanding makes us all part of a larger, universal community, embracing a wide variety of believers.

One of the most discussed phrases by scholars and interpreters in the Creed is not “**the holy catholic church**” but rather “the communion of saints.” It is believed that this phrase made its way into the Creed at some point in the late fourth or early fifth century, most likely meaning something like “the fellowship of believers.” I would think of it as “the sharing of faith” or “the sharing of holy things.” It was the apostle Paul’s way of referring to all Christians. Particularly, look at the sacrament of Holy Communion, which, most likely in the original meaning, affirms “the communion of saints” in three ways—**first**, our fellowship with believers of all times and places. **Second**, we must be ready to share with others who are in need. **Third**, our sharing includes “holy things,” in other words, the holy things do not belong to some of us in particular but to all of us as a whole. So, what do we mean when we recite these words in the Creed? The answer lies in our sharing of “holy things” that make us a fellowship in common faith, common baptism, the one bread of Communion that unites us as one body, and perhaps declaring ourselves ready to share with others in that fellowship.

We should not ask questions such as what we want our church to do for us but rather what God wants his church to do for him. Tragically, today, there are many divisions within the worldwide church. Jesus predicted that such would happen one day. However, the church is not just about community. Listen again to the words from Paul in this morning's Scripture reading in 1 Corinthians 12:27:

“You are the body of Christ and parts of each other.” These words are essential; we, through the power of the Holy Spirit, are meant to represent Jesus to the world. Jesus gave his disciples the Holy Spirit to continue his saving work of healing, teaching, proclaiming, and liberating people. Listen to the recorded words of Jesus in Matthew 5:14,16.

“You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can’t be hidden... Let your light shine before people so they can see the good things you do, and praise your Father who is in heaven.”

And so, as I meditated on today’s message, I thought about this song I learned a long time ago. This little light of mine, I’m going to make it shine. I connect with the apostle Paul in that the power of the Holy Spirit is equated with “the body of Christ,” a metaphor for all who are genuinely saved. For by one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body. There is no mystery to salvation, for the Father sent the Son, and the Son sends the Spirit. I could go on, but I will save the baptism of the Holy Spirit for another day, only to say the baptism of the Holy Spirit joins us to the body of Christ and represents our co-crucifixion with Christ. So, what does that mean for us, the body of Christ, and its members individually?

Church membership has never earned anyone a place in heaven; however, it does not mean that being committed to a church is unimportant. I cannot count how often I’ve wrestled with this topic for those who say, “I don’t believe in joining a church, let alone getting involved.” My response is this: true, the Bible does not command believers to “join” a church, but it does instruct Christians to be actively engaged in a local group of believers. This involvement includes identifying with Christ and His people through baptism, the Lord’s Supper, utilizing one’s spiritual gifts, studying God’s Word, fellowshiping, praying together, and being accountable to one another. Active fellowship, I emphasize, is biblical. Jesus disapproves of lukewarm Christians.

When Jesus came, he did not simply call individual disciples; he formed a community, a family, and a people chosen to live and continue his work. This assembly is a foretaste of heaven, a place where people care for one another, encourage one another, and build each other up. But it is also meant to be a community, empowered and led by the Holy Spirit, that serves as the continuing presence of Christ in the world.

As I close, imagine a church where each member compensates for another’s weakness. That is what should happen in every congregation. We all have weaknesses but also strengths. We are all different, yet God has bestowed each of us with at least one gift for the church's good. No service for Christ is insignificant. The church is holy and sacred because it belongs to God. The church is universal because, in God’s eyes, there is only one church, encompassing many tribes, nations, and denominations. God’s church is a communion of saints, both below and above, united as members of God’s family. I affirm my belief in the holy catholic church and the communion of saints! Amen.