

We Believe: The Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed

The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, 6/1/14

Part Five: We Believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church

We Believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church:

- Though we are visibly divided, it is God's desire that we be united. Paul writes of how we are one because Christ makes us one, and we are called to live accordingly, united together in Christ (see Ephesians).
- Because of this, Christians should seek unity with each other, including the unity of our divided churches.

We Believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church:

- We are holy (sacred, set apart) not because of our actions (!) but because Jesus Christ has set us apart and made us holy as the Christian Community. We are set apart to love God and proclaim the love of God in Christ to the world, being empowered by the Holy Spirit.

We Believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church:

- We are apostolic because we hand down the faith handed to us from the apostles. This also serves to connect us to the writings of the apostles in the New Testament.
- Catholic means "of the whole." Catholicity was one measure of reliability in the early church—is this the teaching of the whole church, or is this some new, novel innovation not handed down from the apostles? This was important in dealing with the Gnostic heresies.
- Lutherans, Anglicans and others profess belief in the catholic church and thereby claim catholicity despite our divisions with the *Roman Catholic Church*.

We Believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church:

- The English word "church" can mean a building, but the New Testament word meant "assembly." The church is the people—the body of Christ, the Christian Community.

The communion of saints:

- This phrase is late in coming to the Apostles' Creed (it does not appear in the Nicene Creed, though the East certainly believes in this doctrine).
- Note that the saints are not only the people who have been given a particular title of "Saint" by the church, but rather saints are all Christian believers. This is how the phrase "the saints" is used in the New Testament.
- This phrase in the Creed is not well defined, but it speaks to the mystical union between Christ and his church, and therefore the mystical union that we have with one another.
- We experience this chiefly at the Eucharist, where we share "communion" in the sacraments. We share communion with those around the table, and with Christians all around the world who share the sacrament with us.
- We also share this union with the saints who have gone before us—with those who have died. How we might describe this connection with the dead is very nebulous. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox practice asking for the souls in heaven to pray for us, just as you might ask a living friend to pray for us. At the time of the reformation, this practice was greatly corrupted to create a sort of bank of heavenly credit that the church could dispense. The Roman Catholic Church has greatly reformed its theology since then. But Protestants observe how asking for the intercession of the saints often becomes idolatry—praying to the saints rather than praying to God.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins:

- Baptism for the forgiveness of sins is central to our identity as Christians, and the creed points to this as essential to our unity. The language of “one baptism” comes from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, stressing the unity of the church: “*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all...*” Ephesians 4:4-6
- We can apply this to “rebaptizing” efforts in some traditions (though they would deny that infant baptism is really baptism at all).
- We can also apply this to the teaching in some Pentecostal churches that say there are two baptisms: one of water and one of the Holy Spirit. They point to sections in Acts where people have water, but not the Spirit, or the Spirit but not water. However, the response of the apostles is always to remedy this deficiency. The intent of the church is that our practice of the sacrament of Baptism is Jesus’ baptism of water *and* the Holy Spirit.

We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come / the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting:

- The phrase “the resurrection of the flesh” appears in early creeds (as it does in the Apostles’ Creed—the modern translation uses “body” instead). We believe not in the immortal soul, or in a purely spiritual afterlife, but rather in a real, physical resurrection of the dead to share in the kingdom of God. Thus we are renewed as whole people—both soul and body.
- Some have scoffed at the idea of decomposed bodies gaining life, but God can surely reconstitute new bodies for us from the same elements that recycle through the biological system all the time.
- What happens in between our death and the resurrection is less well defined. There are a few approaches, but the most common is that our souls go to be with God and await the resurrection, where we are made whole—soul and body. Another view is that we simply wait the resurrection, “sleeping” until that day (from the viewpoint of the one who has died, this would pass as an instant). In both cases, a bodily resurrection is the Christian hope. Purgatory is an idea developed in the Roman Catholic Church as a mid-state before going to heaven, where we are purged of our sins. It is not found in scripture, and therefore not taught by Protestants.

Amen:

- As The Rev. Joe Laird put it “instead of saying ‘he’ we should say ‘you’ when we say the creed. How can we dare to speak about God—we can only *address* God.” God is a mystery beyond human language. Our belief—our faith and trust in God—is first of all a prayer to God before it is a profession to the world around us.

So What?

These phrases on the Church appear in the third clause of the creeds—the clause about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit makes us the church, and it is in that mystical communion that we live our lives as Christians, in relationship with God and with each other in Christ. In other words, God changes lives *now* in this world, and even more in the very real world to come.