

**One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church:
“All Things Believed By All Christians Everywhere”**

The church can be likened to both a river and a tree. On the surface they appear to be quite different, but in many ways they are the same.

A river is formed because lots of different little streams converge together to become a river. We can even take that analogy further and talk about how lots of different rivers all converge to spill into a giant ocean of water.

The point here is that the different streams all flow into one place; they connect together.

A tree does the same thing but it in an opposite manner. Instead of its starting point being the “many” it begins with the “one.”

There is the one little seed that falls into the ground to germinate. It then comes to life and a trunk bursts forth from the ground and from it many different branches begin to grow out, yet they all remain connected to the one trunk for its life and sustenance.¹

The church of Jesus Christ is like that. It is both “the one” and “the many” all at the same time. We need to never forget that.

Our service today certainly signifies this truth. The *Kirin' o the Tartans* celebrates our Scottish Presbyterian heritage by remembering that we are one of the streams or the branches of the church of Jesus Christ.

Paul in his letter to Corinthians wrote about the church being like a human body comprised of many parts and in doing so he emphasized that all parts of the body are needed in order for it to function properly. The hands, feet, eyes, nose and ears are all important. Without the individual body parts the whole body suffers. Remembering our heritage as Presbyterians gives credence to the fact that this one little body part of Christ's church is important.

Yet today is also World Communion Sunday and we Presbyterians are partaking in Holy Communion with other Christians of many different stripes from all around the world- Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Protestant- as a sign that there is something a whole lot more important than just us Presbyterians. Though there are many different parts there is only one church of Jesus Christ and as Christians we are all sharing in and working toward something that is greater than our selves, namely the gospel of Jesus Christ and his call to the entire world to follow him as Lord and Savior.

Today all of this converges together with my sermon series on the Nicene Creed. This is not an accident. When I got the urge from God to deliver this series of sermons and myself, Brad, and

Sarah got together to do some worship planning a few months ago we made all this come together on this one Sunday because it all ties in so well.

So today, on *Kirkin' o the Tartans* Sunday, we talk about the faith of “the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church” because we Presbyterians need to remember that this is who we are first and foremost. We are a “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” This is what is most foundational to our faith, not our Presbyterian distinctives.

We also talk about the faith of “the one, holy catholic and apostolic church” on World Communion Sunday because we need to be reminded that all Christians, regardless of their Christian denomination, do share in some basic, core essential and non-negotiable convictions that cannot be departed from without cutting ourselves off from the one river or breaking ourselves off from the one trunk.

So what I want to do here right now is define these four terms for you and then talk briefly about what the faith of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church is.

Defining the Terms

First the terms.

What is meant by the faith of the “one” church. To a great degree I’ve already let you in on what is meant by “one,” by what I have already said. To bring further clarification let me say what the one church of Jesus Christ is not.

The one church does not and cannot mean that we are all a part of the same Christian denomination. When Jesus prayed his prayer that all Christians would be one he did not mean that they had to all belong to the same local church, a logistic impossibility, nor did he mean that they had to all belong to the same denomination (denominations as we know it did not exist back then).

Some people bemoan all the Christian denominations that we have today and I can understand that because sometimes the church splits over stupid things and there is a greater need for unity. But there is also still need for many different denominations because people are different. The one body of Christ does not deny that there are individual parts within that one body. There is need for the many parts.

So what does it mean to confess the faith of the one church?

First, it means that there are other ways of being Christian besides your own and that there are other churches besides your own that are Christian. Second it means that all orthodox Christians share in common some basic core truths and beliefs about God, Jesus Christ, the nature of man, salvation, and the things to come.

Next is the word holy.

The church is certainly not holy in terms of moral perfection, we are sinners, but she is holy. The world holy used in this sense means to be set apart for a special purpose. The church is holy because God has set her apart for the special purpose of being the salt and light of Jesus Christ in the world and for taking his gospel to all the nations of the earth. This is our special mission. We have been set apart for this special task.

As it concerns moral purity this word does remind us of the necessity to strive to live the Christian life and to repent of our sin, but our ultimate holiness comes not from within ourselves but from the fact that Jesus Christ has declared us holy on the grounds of his righteousness. We are righteous because he is righteous. The Father accepts the moral perfection of Jesus the Son as substitute for our moral imperfection and God declares us righteous on the grounds of Christ.

Catholic. This word is often misunderstood by those Christian traditions that are not anchored in the use of the ancient creeds of the Christian church as a way to teach and express the faith.

When we say that we believe in the faith of the catholic church, we are not saying that we are Roman Catholic Christians, though the Roman Catholic Church is one part of the catholic church.

When we say we believe in the catholic church we are acknowledging that there is a wider body of Christians than ourselves. That there are people who have gone before us and will come after us, who are not like us and our way of being Christian, but who are Christian themselves because of their shared faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. So the world catholic as it is used here in the creed means universal. It is referring to what all Christians everywhere, throughout all time, have held to and affirmed in terms of their faith, whether they be Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Pentecostal, or Episcopal.

Finally, apostolic. What does it mean when we say apostolic? I'm going to give you the Protestant take on this. My Roman Catholic brothers in Christ would have a different take on what this word means.

The faith of the apostolic church is the faith that is built on foundational teaching of the apostles and prophets, just as it said in our Scripture text in Ephesians. The word apostle has a twofold meaning, but you only need to know shade of its meaning in order to understand what the creed is talking about when it talks about the faith of the apostolic church.

The word apostle means "one who has been with Jesus." So the faith of the "apostolic church" is referring to a church whose beliefs, teachings, and values are based upon those of the original disciples who were with our Lord face to face. It is their teaching that gives us access to what it was that Jesus taught. The teaching of the apostles is the transmitter and conduit that connects us back to the original source, Jesus Christ.

This is why Paul in the book of Ephesians speaks of Christ being “the cornerstone” and the apostles being “the foundation.” This means that our foundation as a church has to be based on what the original apostles taught and the moment a church divorces herself from “apostolic teaching” she divorces herself from Christ the cornerstone. Thus she becomes something else other than a Christian church.

What the Faith of the One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church Is

Now that we defined the terms of these words let us know consider what the faith of the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church is.

I will be very brief on this. The faith of the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church is simply the faith that is contained in the Nicene Creed. What is expressed in the creed is the core essence of what the Bible teaches.

The Bible teaches that the one triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, created the world and pronounced it good. Man sinned and defaced the image of God in man and set into motion a pattern of death and destruction in creation. The Father sent his Son Jesus into the world to pay the penalty owed for man’s sin so as to bring redemption to the whole of creation by his death on the cross. God defeated death by raising Jesus Christ from the dead and he will one day come again to complete God’s plan of redemption. Because of this truth we have hope that death will not get the final word in our lives either. The Holy Spirit will convict our hearts of sin, bring us to faith in Christ, and God will raise us from the dead (*both body and soul*), and we will one day reign with him in the new heavens and new earth if we have entrusted our lives to him and in him for the forgiveness of our sins.

This is what the Bible in a nutshell teaches and it is what has been passed down to us from the apostles. Paul said something to the effect of this in our text from I Corinthians.

³For what I **received** I **passed** on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

In that same letter to the Corinthians Paul also wrote these words as it concerned the Lord’s Supper.

For I **received** from the Lord what I **passed** on to you: the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he gave thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this remembrance of me. In the same way, after supper he took the cup saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this in remembrance of me.”

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

If this is what you believe then you believe the faith of the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church and you are welcome at this table regardless of your denomination so long as you profess this faith sincerely and come to the table with a contrite heart.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ NT Wright, *Simply Christian*, Harper Collins, 2006, pp. 200-1