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## ONE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

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*T*here is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that the apostles intended that separate Christian assemblies should be drawn into a larger ecclesiastical organization under a central government. The church at Jerusalem had no control over the church at Antioch; nor were Jerusalem and Antioch under the government of any supreme ecclesiastical authority. The churches which Paul and Barnabas founded in Lycaonia, Pisidia, and Pamphilia on their first missionary journey were independent of the church at Antioch and of each other. In every city there was a church, and in every church there were elders (Acts 14:21-23), but the narrative of Luke gives the impression that every church stood apart. No attempt was made to bring them into any ecclesiastical confederation or to place them under a common government. In the account of Paul's second visit to this part of Asia Minor we are told that the "churches" not the "church" "were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily" (Acts 16:5). They were standing apart still, and Paul did nothing to draw them together.

—R. W. DALE

### INTRODUCTION

*D*uring the last century, the Church has suffered from the neglect and abuse of its creeds and confessions. Mainline churches have decided they scarcely believe them; independent and evangelical churches have concluded that the historic creeds have little or nothing to offer to the Church's witness in this modern age. Often they are mistakenly viewed as Roman relics of the past or as a competitive challenge to the authority of the Scriptures. Yet historically, the creeds and confessions have been highly valued by all serious Christians.

A creed is a statement of faith; it comes from the Latin word, *credo*, "I believe." Several statements in the Scriptures are regarded as early creeds: the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4 in Judaism, with Christianity quickly continuing this pattern with its "Jesus is Lord" (Rom. 10:9), and "Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37) used as early baptismal confessions. Paul rephrased the Shema in 1 Corinthians 8:6, referring to Jesus as the "one Lord." The doctrine of Christ is sung in poetic form in Philippians 2:5-11, apparently for regular use by the Christian Church. As heresies arose and doctrinal questions were asked, the Church saw a need to continue in this tradition of stating their faith through more developed confessions. These creeds were never intended to supplant or dominate the

Scriptures; rather, they were an attempted summary and response to them.

Virtually all of the content of the Apostles' Creed can be traced to within fifty years following the death of the apostles, and is arranged around the doctrine of the Trinity. It was used as a baptismal confession as well as a teaching device. The Nicene, Athanasian and Chalcedonian creeds were all forged through debates concerning the Trinity and the nature and person of Jesus Christ. The Church used them as a means for discriminating whether or not one was confessing the biblical faith; but even more importantly, she used them to express what she believed was the testimony of the Holy Scriptures. While this essay is written from within the context of independent Baptists, where confessional Christianity tends to be disparaged, the truths explored are evangelically ecumenical and universally applicable.

It is a wonderful privilege in the world of unbelief to be able to confess with God's people: "I believe. . . ." And the creeds are a wonderful, biblical, and positive way to express our faith verbally with other believers in response to the proclamation of the gospel. As pastors and members alike, we rejoice further to be able to confess our faith in the holy catholic and apostolic Church. It is my contention that this statement from the Nicene Creed (325 A.D.) conveys rich, biblical, and highly relevant doctrines for the modern Christian Church. The Church today suffers from an identity crisis: she no longer knows who she is. Reminding ourselves of who we are rejuvenates not only our "first love" but also clarifies our witness to the world around us.

**I BELIEVE: CONFESSION OF THE HOLY APOSTOLIC  
AND CATHOLIC CHURCH IS AN ARTICLE OF FAITH.**

The doctrine of the Trinity has never been adequately explained, nor shall it ever be. Likewise, the virgin birth of

our Lord, the nature of God's sovereignty, and the specifics of the resurrection all continue to be debated. Although admittedly incomplete, we accept them as true statements of biblical faith and continue to define them as we are biblically enabled; we "believe in order to understand." We often forget, however, that the doctrine of the Church is also a statement of faith. Here one must also say *credo*.

Visibly, the divided existence of the Christian Church on earth is sad enough to shake the faith of the most ardent believer! Samuel Stone certainly understates the issue when he writes in his famous hymn that the church is "By schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed." The Christian who has never been part of a church split is a rare person indeed!

Organizationally, the Christian Church is disintegrating exponentially; unbelievers unwittingly draw attention to this when they ask us to which religion we belong, referring of course to denomination. The strange teachings proclaimed from pulpits, broadcasted over the airwaves, and lining the bookstore shelves further testify to the desperate condition of what is known as the Christian Church.

The lives of most Christians are either so appallingly apathetic or inconsistent with biblical standards that most of the outside world uses this as their justification for avoiding local churches. Then, there are so many "true" churches out there, each despising the other "false" ones, that the discouraged onlooker concludes his search with a sad shake of the head. The church member, as well, quite often gives up in despair because his early expectations of the glories of God's work on earth have come to such a disappointing end.

Many young pastors, confident of the power of God's Word, have stridently entered into the ministry to "finally do it right." Through faithful ministry, they expect their congregation will soon be the "alabaster city on a hill,"

an example to all those who have compromised the truth. Perhaps their ambitions were less grandiose. The congregation is, after all, God's Church. God Himself will take care of it and do wondrous things! Then the sin breaks out and in the ensuing tragedy the pastor's carefully constructed foundation of gold, silver and precious stones appears to burn up as wood, hay and stubble. Discouragements become accusations, and eventually the pastor in question becomes the "despairing accuser of himself."<sup>1</sup>

If, in those dark times, we may confess, "I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church," we are blessed indeed and understand that this, too, is a statement of faith. If we, however, can no longer confess this article of faith in the face of sin, heresy, disunity, and disintegration, then it never was a statement of faith. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). In a world of war, pain and death, I believe in God the Father Almighty. Standing in the field next to Lessing's ditch, I confess Jesus Christ His Son. While reading church history, living with my congregation and watching religious TV, I continue in my faith concerning one holy catholic and apostolic Church! Yet we must never suppose that belief in the Church is a mere hope or an optimistic ideal. This faith asserts an entity as real as the person of Jesus Christ. The Church is here and now, "God's field, God's building, Christ's bride" (1 Cor. 3:9; Eph. 5:25).

#### **HOLY SPIRIT: THIS ARTICLE OF FAITH STEMS FROM OUR CONFESSION OF FAITH IN THE HOLY SPIRIT.**

It is not without reason that the article concerning the Church should be confessed within the third section of both the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. Both creeds are trinitarian in their organization, with the Christian faith being confessed as faith in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit respectively. The doctrines of the Holy Spirit and the Church are

intimately and intricately woven together.

God as Holy Spirit is brooding over the waters during the Creation, nurturing this fledgling universe as it is spoken into being (Gen. 1:2). He is quietly at work giving skills to the craftsmen of the tabernacle (Ex. 31:3), preserving God's community through the judges (Judg. 3:10), assuring the psalmists of God's favor (Ps. 51:11) and breathing out the sacred writings for the covenant people that they might receive the wisdom that leads to salvation (2 Tim. 3:16).

Even as we see the Holy Spirit at work in the Old Testament, creating and preserving the people of God (called the *ekklesia* in Acts 7:38), so in the times of the New Testament we recognize the Holy Spirit as the agent of God in the work of regeneration. In other words, the community of God is created and maintained through the work of the Holy Spirit. Were it not for the work of the Holy Spirit, there would be no holy catholic and apostolic Church, no Christianity, indeed, not even a single Christian. A.H. Strong aptly reminds us that "The doctrine of the church . . . is a necessary outgrowth of the doctrine of regeneration."<sup>2</sup> And regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost is the official birthday of the Christian Church on the redemptive/historical timeline. The advent of the Holy Spirit marks the beginning of "these last days" (Acts 2:17; Heb. 1:2) when the Church was formed to witness, as God's people, to the "remotest parts of the world." God Himself was bringing people to faith in His Son and incorporating them into His holy Church. The Holy Spirit "came upon the apostles" (Acts 1:8) and formed the Church.

God can be truly and savingly known only by the individual who has been made alive by the Holy Spirit of God. According to Paul, those who are baptized into Christ Jesus are the children of Abraham, the people of God (Gal.

3:29). Paul explains that Christians were baptized into this one body of Christ by means of the Holy Spirit of God (1 Cor. 12:12ff). Again, the Holy Spirit is vitally connected to the creation and continuation of the Church. It is crucial that Christian church members, pastors and theologians constantly remind themselves of this truth. Forgetting this, even for a moment, allows us to think of the Christian Church as a product of human work and organization.

As G. C. Berkouwer, in his work on the Church, so wonderfully protests, *credo ecclesiam* confesses "not a strange, distant, and untouchable matter, but rather the Church's reality. He goes on to quote Herman Bavinck, who reminds us that we are not discussing a "platonic state which exists only in the imagination and which never becomes reality."<sup>3</sup> It will not do for us to leave to the Holy Spirit the work of creating some "universal and invisible" Church, while leaving to man the work of establishing a faltering human organization. Such a Nestorian dichotomy would be rather surprising and certainly foreign to St. Paul as he deals with real people and churches of God in the New Testament.

Yet many of the problems in this debate arise precisely from pressing this distinction. The presence of sin and false confession requires some sort of distinction to be made, of course; but in my opinion the debate is clarified and nudged into a far more biblical direction if we distinguish between *true and false believers* rather than between a *visible and invisible church*. The latter distinction evokes images far more akin to neo-platonic metaphysics than to Pauline doctrine.

#### CHURCH: THE ONE TRUE GOD LIVES IN COVENANT WITH HIS COMMUNITY.

Before we can go any further, we must come to grips with a biblical and theological understanding of "church."

From the perspective of redemptive history, the Christian Church began on the day of Pentecost. Before this time, there was no Christian Church. But God did have a people for Himself before this time. And this group of people is often described in the Scriptures as "church." An important example is the repeated usage in Deuteronomy of the phrase "the day of assembly" where the assembly is the *ekklesia* (Deut. 4:10; 9:10; 18:16 [LXX]). *Ekklesia* most frequently translates *qahal*, an assembly or convocation.<sup>4</sup> While either word could denote any assembly, this particular assembly belongs to the Lord; it is the *qahal Yahweh*, and exists only because of the Lord's presence. Without the presence of the Lord, the assembly quickly disintegrates into idolatrous, factious, and warring tribes.

In Deuteronomy 23 we have a list of certain people who are excluded from the "assembly of the Lord." Again, the assembly is a group of people who receive their identity by virtue of the presence of the Lord among them. Indeed, He initiates and crafts their existence. This group has existence and identity only because God has revealed His presence and summoned them into an assembly around His presence. The voice of God creates a community; He calls it into being.

This theme of the presence of the Lord is key to an understanding of the Old Testament. The special beauty of the Garden of Eden was that God and man lived in open friendship and communication until sin disrupted and destroyed this friendship with God. But God did not leave mankind without His presence; instead, we hear that Cain, having committed the sin of murder, "went out from the presence of the Lord" (Ex. 4:16). Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were all made aware of the Lord's presence, and accordingly built altars to Him and recognized themselves and their families as belonging to the Lord. The Lord became their God, not by human choice or ancestry, but

through His revealed presence. Only because of this fact are the "children of Israel" ultimately known as "the people of the Lord."

The redemptive presence of the Lord at the time of the Exodus makes this even more obvious. God was among this tribe He had named as His own through the covenant with Abraham. After the Exodus event and the resulting Sinai experience, the twelve tribes of Israel become known as the "assembly of the Lord" and the "people of God." God's presence in the pillar of cloud is the sign of His presence that Israel sees every morning. After Israel worships the golden calf, the Lord threatens to remove His presence from the people and let them be Moses' people (Ex. 33). Moses pleads with God, who then agrees to keep His presence among Israel, "distinguishing them from all the other people who are on the face of the earth" (Ex. 33:16).

Solomon's temple was only an expensive building until God came and filled it with His presence. In the vision of Ezekiel, Israel has a future only when the cloud of the Lord's presence returns to the temple. The reason the "city of God" in Psalm 46 may rest secure is because "God is in the midst of her" (Psalm 46). Again and again, the presence of God is everything to those who profess to be His people. Without His presence they are "not my people," but Jesus assures His disciples that "where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I also" (Matt. 18:20). Thus Jesus becomes the new source of identity for the "people of God."

While many differences surface between the old and the new covenants and their resulting assemblies, what remains the same is that the presence of God forms, sustains, and gives identity to His *ekklesia*. Granted, under the old covenant, the assembly included regenerate and unregenerate alike, while the new covenant is made with "those who know the Lord" (Jer. 31). Yet, with this type of biblical

background, how can we reduce Paul's Christian churches to "merely human organizations," while reserving the divine presence for the breast of the individual who belongs to a "universal, invisible Church"?

We have not yet compared Paul's usage of "church" and "churches." Ephesians is written to the "saints who are at Ephesus." He writes to them, not as individual Christians, but as a congregation—a *plurality* of believers. If they are to understand the letter as written to them, then they must also understand themselves as "church" (cf. 1:22; 3:10, 21). In this church/congregation, Jewish as well as Gentile believers now find themselves fellow citizens of God's household by virtue of the presence of Christ (Eph. 2:13). They, as a congregation created and held together by Jesus Christ, are a part "of God's household," a "holy temple in the Lord," and a "dwelling of God in the Spirit." They are not only "a church" (one of many), they are to understand themselves also as the "Church" (singular) which Paul repeatedly mentions in this letter. Both words pertain to a particular congregation in this one letter. Such usage pervades the entire New Testament and denies us the privilege of a simple distinction between "universal" and "local" as we speak of God's Church. The Apostles' Creed attempts to convey this truth when it says that the Church is the "communion of the saints." This communion takes place as a congregation gathers in the presence of God.

The covenant is different and more wonderful, but the *ekklesia*, the assembly of the Lord, continues to be a congregation of people brought into existence by God, which receives its sustenance, faith and identity from His presence. The church/congregation debate must be carried on with this as its foundation and background. The New Testament congregation is the glorious covenant community with God Himself in her midst. Though fraught with sinful imperfections, and light years away from her destined per-

fection, the Ephesian church, and every other Christian congregation with Christ in her midst, is the reality of covenant: the presence of the Lord. In the early creeds we make the happy confession that God yet dwells among His people. Despite our sins, heresies and schisms, it is our confident affirmation of faith that the Lord's presence is in the Church, for He has made it His temple.

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*This Church we confess (credo ecclesiam, not credo in ecclesiam) has four essential characteristics according to this statement: it is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. This is the Church which God has created and He describes her to be thus in His Word.*




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The Reformers recommended that we identify the true Church by three outward characteristics: (1) the true preaching of God's Word, (2) the proper administration of the sacraments, and (3) the exercise of biblical discipline. But the four creedal characteristics are not the outward marks by which we recognize or identify the true Church. Rather, they are her essential characteristics. In other words, the creed promotes the idea that these characteristics are not those which man performs or creates—even by God's grace—but attributes or properties which are part and parcel of her existence.<sup>5</sup> This Church we confess (*credo ecclesiam, not credo in ecclesiam*) has four essential characteristics

according to this statement: it is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. This is the Church which God has created and He describes her to be thus in His Word. We will examine them individually.

**ONE: THE COMMUNITY OF THIS  
ONE TRUE GOD IS UNITED AS ONE.**

If any affirmation of the creed is commonly understood as a platonic ideal rather than a Pauline reality, it is this one! While we pray and trust that oneness will one day become reality, we resign ourselves to its current impossibility. In our minds we relegate it to an ideal world, not to a concrete reality. And yet we confess this oneness to be true of God's Church! By the time of the Nicene Creed, the Church had already experienced several serious divisions and heresies through the work of Arius, Marcion, Donatus, the Gnostics, and others. The history and manifestation of the Church in those days were no less of a challenge to faith than the fractures of our modern times. This, however, did not cause Christians to abandon their statements of biblical faith; rather, they affirmed them in no uncertain terms. The Church is one.

The fact that all the churches were not connected into one network did not concern Paul, nor did it defy his faith that God's Church was one. It does not even appear to be an agenda of his. What does concern Paul is that congregations are dividing themselves into factions. Nor does he reserve his teaching on unity for some "universal" church, disconnected and distinct from the congregations of his letters. Oneness and unity are a reality which Paul commands the congregations to reflect in their lives. It is neither futuristic nor organizational; it is a reality to be practiced.

As of the date of Paul's writing, Christ is not divided, and neither is the Church. The Corinthian congregation is God's building, God's field (1 Cor. 3:9), and their divisions

are inconsistent with this fact that is currently true about them! The congregation is never *only* congregation; it is Church. Despite their difficulties, the Corinthians must never think of themselves as a human organization of people. They are the temple of the Holy Spirit, the dwelling place of God and the subject of tremendous divine jealousy (1 Cor. 3:16). Their divisions are not only wrong, but they violate the entire nature of the Church as God's one temple.

The Epistle to the Ephesians assumes this unity, not only for a local congregation, but for all congregations, and it speaks of an entity called the Church. Paul reminds the Ephesian congregation that Christ loved the Church (not the churches), and gave Himself for her. This Church will be presented to the Lord in all her glory (Eph. 5:27). Christ has one bride, not many. One Church will be presented, not many. Yet Paul addresses the Ephesian congregation as a *microcosm* of the Church, not as a *portion* of the Church. In this sense the Church is one. It will not do to relegate this truth to an invisible, mystical, universal Church, disconnected from any tangible reality. If that were the case, Paul would not have brought this truth to bear so heavily upon these local congregations.

We must maintain that the unity, or oneness, of God's Church is an essential reality. Here again we must distinguish between the observable marks (*notae*) of the Church and the essential characteristics of the Church. Whatever we see must be described within the parameters of what she is. The creed confesses the Church as her Lord and Creator views her.

**HOLY: THE COMMUNITY OF THIS  
ONE TRUE GOD HAS A PRECISE IDENTITY.**

God's Church is not just another organization or institution. That is because she is holy. Holiness is also an essential characteristic of the Church. It is not what the

Church produces, but what she is. Holiness refers more to an identity than to a trait. And it is one of the four essential qualities that the Nicene Creed uses to describe the Church we confess.

Ethical purity is certainly an idea contained within holiness, but it is a derivative idea. Utensils destined for exclusive use in the cultic worship of *Yahweh* are holy utensils; they exist for one use only and are identified as such. The Scriptures are holy Scriptures because they are a class of their own, unlike any other scriptures. Israel is a holy people because they are "to the Lord" their God (Deut. 7:6). Out of all the various peoples of the earth, they have been chosen to be God's own people. God's choice changed their identity from "one of the many," to "the Lord's." By virtue of this new and specific identity, certain behavior was incumbent upon them, not *vice versa*. The Law (Ex. 20) is given to them because they are holy, i.e., the Lord's. Behavior inconsistent with their identity is unholy, a direct attack upon their very identity as God's people who name *Yahweh* as their God and Lord.

God is holy; He is separated unto Himself. This holy God is absolutely pure, ethical and moral. Hence, sin, impurity or unethical matters are considered unholy. But we must remember that holiness at its core is a matter of identity.

Despite any differences between the old and new covenants and between the nation of Israel and the Christian Church, Peter is quite happy to take the old designations of Israel and use them to describe the Church. God's Church is a "chosen race," "a royal priesthood," a "holy nation" and "the people of God's possession" (1 Peter 2:9). While this verse alludes to several Old Testament passages, Deuteronomy 7:6 and Exodus 19:5f. are the two in the forefront. Both of these are passages in which Israel is being identified as God's people at their inception as a

nation. The whole earth belongs to the Lord, but Israel will be His own special possession from among all the peoples of the earth: a holy nation.

This is also true of the Church. The Church belongs to God in a special way. While every human being is a fallen son or daughter of God; no person, nation or organization exists outside the control of the Sovereign of all the earth. But the Church is His *special* possession. She belongs to Him. The Church does not merely exist underneath His sovereignty; she has been created by Himself especially for Himself. The Church must never understand herself in any way which does not recognize this matter of identity as central to her being and existence.

Because of this identity, the Church should be characterized by certain traits. Since God identifies her as holy and different from the other peoples of the earth, members live as "strangers and aliens, abstaining from fleshly lusts." The Church's behavior is to be "excellent among the Gentiles" so that the difference of identity is recognizable by the others (1 Peter 2:11ff.).

Although Christians regularly sin and the Church repeatedly misconstrues her identity and profanes the name of her Lord, she yet confesses in full faith about herself that she is holy, for this is the testimony of Scripture. This confession about ourselves is a reminder of the responsibility placed upon all believers to live in an ethical and moral manner—worthy and evocative of our identity as God's people, His Church.

This also addresses the tremendous identity crisis facing the Church since she has discarded her confessions. *The Church no longer knows what to do because she has forgotten who she is.* Is she a political organization, a praise and worship organization, a charitable institution, a delegation for world peace, the deliverer from sickness and poverty, a gathering of believers? She is a community, the Lord's com-

munity, an apostolic community, a complete community, a unified community, a Church: one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

#### **CATHOLIC: THE COMMUNITY OF THIS ONE TRUE GOD HAS A SPECIFIC NATURE.**

Most of the controversy in evangelical circles about these creeds revolves around the meaning of the word "catholic." Tremendous fear is entertained that this is somehow Roman Catholic, even though this is historically impossible.<sup>6</sup> Some have translated it as "universal," which does express a vital meaning, but is not a complete translation of the word. It is noteworthy that when the Nicene Creed was translated from Greek into Latin, the translators left the word "catholic" untranslated, despite the availability of the word *universalis*. "Universal" is apparently *incapable* of conveying the full meaning of "catholic!"<sup>7</sup> The word "catholic" literally means: "according to the whole, or complete." This fuller meaning yields a workable position which deserves attention today, for I believe that accepting "universal" as a full translation has led to many of our difficulties.

The specific nature of the Christian Church is that it is catholic. This word, although greatly abused in Roman ecclesiology, is a necessary and extremely helpful word. At the heart of this point and that of the unity of the Church is the relationship of the words "church" and "churches" in the New Testament. We have two choices. (1) They are two separate word groups: "church" is best understood as "universal Church," and "churches" best understood as the local congregations of professing Christians. (2) A single idea of God's people is understood. It is capable of being used in the singular or plural, each of which emphasizes different characteristics of God's Church. It is my opinion that the New Testament evidence leads us to embrace the latter.

Popular theology has virtually no doctrine of the Church, other than an understanding of "gathering." Being "one of the people of God" is understood purely on the level of individual membership in a "universal Church" and is not dealt with under any heading of congregational ecclesiology. The "communion of the saints" has been separated from belief in the catholic Church, but the creeds testify that our Scriptures do not allow us to accept this disjunction. The catholic Church is the communion of the saints; the Christian cannot be understood, nor may he understand himself as a private member of an invisible Church that has no relationship to the visible, organized church here on earth.

A monumental theologian from last century, J. L. Dagg, argues cogently from a number of Scriptures that Christ's Church cannot be understood as a congregation of mere professors. He points out from Ephesians 5 that "Christ loves the Church," not the churches. Likewise, in Matthew 16 the "gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church," not the churches. Ephesians 1:22 portrays Christ as "Head over all things to the Church." In these passages, he argues convincingly that "church" is used consistently as a collective noun. Its reference is to something far greater and farther reaching than a local congregation. Indeed, Dagg concludes that the interpretation of "church" as always denoting a "body of Christians assembling in one place is . . . inadmissible."<sup>8</sup>

He steers us in the direction of understanding these singular uses of "church" as a "universal church." This church includes all true believers in Jesus Christ who have been baptized into Him. It is restricted neither to any point in history nor to any geographical location. "Church" is not a generic noun, consisting of an idea of church, but neither is it the collective of local congregations. It is, rather, the collective of true believers. Arguing from 1 Corinthians 12, he

affirms that Christians, not congregations, make up the body of Christ.<sup>9</sup>

But neither does he wish for us to understand this universal church as an invisible church, for the work of grace is always visible in its effects. There can be no such thing as an invisible church on earth. In fact, "a universal Church which consists of all who profess the true religion, is a body which Christ does not own."<sup>10</sup> God's universal Church is recognized by the true religion of its members, not in the mere profession of an institution's adherents.

Dagg understands "catholic" to mean "universal." The body of Christ consists of all who exercise true faith. Because true faith produces works, this Church cannot be invisible. By the same token, however, it cannot refer to an organized body. "The Church universal has no external organization."<sup>11</sup> For Dagg, there can be no organization called the visible Church catholic. Ideally, "church" and "churches" would be close to one another lexically. But because of sin they are not.

Dagg separates the two from one another in their meaning. For him, there must be organizational purity and visible unity for the two terms to become equivalent. He also distinguishes between visibility and organization. Christians (members of the universal Church) are visible in this world but their organizations (called "churches") are not part of the universal Church. Because of sin and because "the Holy Scriptures contain no proof that the followers of Christ, after the dispersion of the Church at Jerusalem, ever acted together as one externally organized society,"<sup>12</sup> Dagg is forced to separate quite radically the reference of "church" from "churches." A local church may exist but is not to be equated with the "invisible Church." While I concur wholeheartedly with his work concerning the existence of God's universal church, I believe that the original meaning of the word "catholic" would go a long

way to settle his dilemma, reconciling visible faith with invisible universality. The local congregation is God's Church—both visible and catholic. Unbelieving members are false members of a true, visible and catholic Church.

A. H. Strong, a noted Baptist theologian of the last century, continues in the same vein:

The church of Christ, in its largest signification, is the whole company of regenerate persons in all times and ages, in heaven and on earth. In this sense, the church is identical with the spiritual kingdom of God; both signify that redeemed humanity in which God in Christ exercises actual spiritual dominion.<sup>13</sup>

Again, I agree with this understanding of the use of "church" in the New Testament. It is God's gathering of His own people. Ultimately, He alone knows those who are His. Membership in this Church requires union with Christ. Naturally, because of sin and false profession, the local church cannot fit Strong's above definition of "church." He continues: "The Scriptures, however, distinguish between this invisible or universal church, and the individual church, in which the universal church takes local and temporary form, and in which the idea of the church as a whole is concretely exhibited."<sup>14</sup>

Strong, too, makes this necessary distinction between "church" and "churches." And the New Testament does support an obvious difference in usage and meaning between these two words. The difference, however, need not be so radical as actually to separate the words from one another in their lexical and functional meaning. The reason this occurs regularly is that "catholic" is translated as "universal," exclusively. While "catholic" certainly does *contain* this meaning, it is definitely not limited or *restricted* to this meaning. Employing this restriction has produced a

great deal of the resulting necessary separation of the essential identity of the Church from the churches.

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*"Catholic" is a Greek word and is rendered literally, "according to the whole" (kata holou).<sup>15</sup>*



"Catholic" is a Greek word and is rendered literally, "according to the whole" (*kata holou*).<sup>15</sup> Ignatius, John's disciple, gives the early usage of the word which is employed in the creeds. In writing to the church at Smyrna about their local celebration of the Lord's Supper, he says, "Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church."<sup>16</sup> Likewise, for the Ephesian readers to suppose that Paul's repeated use of "church" in the letter addressed to their congregation referred to some body essentially different from their congregation, is a stretching of the text, at the very least! That the "glory of Jesus in the church," the "love of Christ for his bride," and the "proclamation of God's wisdom to the world through the church" should be understood as separate dynamics, distinct from the Ephesian congregation, is rather disturbing.

What I am suggesting is that while "universal" properly translates a thrust of "catholic," its central idea is that of completeness and wholeness.<sup>17</sup> This completeness comes from the presence of Christ wherever two or three are gathered in his name. "Universal" is a valid *derivative* meaning and conveys an important truth, but it is not the *primary* or

*exclusive* meaning. Catholicity is not merely a numeric completion of all true believers, but is also an essential characteristic of each congregation because of the person and presence of Jesus Christ in its midst. With appreciation to the Orthodox tradition, it is precisely here that we confess the Church as catholic, for this is a word describing each local congregation of Christ. "Catholic" is neither a mathematical nor a geographical description of the Church; it is a matter of being, of essence. These early confessions of catholicity stem from Paul's usage in Ephesians 1:10 where "all things are summed up in Christ," and in Colossians 3:11 where "Christ is all and in all." Reclaiming this self-understanding is crucial for the western Church. Orthodox pastor, Jordan Bajis, applies this salient point to the local church:

Christ's presence in the Church, however, does not automatically manifest the Church's catholic nature among us. Catholicity has been given to the Church; [but] its *achievement* is the Church's task. We have a necessary part to play. Although the Church's inherent catholicity is founded in Christ and is not dependent upon our behavior, our *experience and participation* in His catholicity does demand our active co-operation<sup>18</sup> (*italics his*).

Thus the absurdity of an institution, tradition or denomination's claim for exclusive catholicity becomes evident. The catholic Church can no more be Roman than it can be American, Reformed, Eastern, Russian, Independent, or any national, geographic or denominational organization. What such exclusive entities have done is to transfer a characteristic which is essential and utilize it as one of the exterior "noticeables."

This also questions whether or not it is proper to allow "church" and "churches" to refer to distinctly different entities: one from God, the other from man; one never ending,

the other temporal; one pure, the other mixed. Local congregations will always be mixtures, but this definition allows us to use the word "Church" as both Paul and Ignatius do, in reference to local congregations. Just because a local congregation may contain false professors and will not continue as such beyond the day of judgment, does not mean that it is not "Church," the bride being prepared for the day, and it certainly does not mean that it is not a "catholic Church!" It merely means that this local catholic Church has false professors in its midst. With the English translation of "catholic" as "universal" this statement would be unacceptable.

Because of their understanding of the words "universal" and "catholic," Dagg, Strong and others had to distinguish as they did. But these distinctions so easily lead to the conclusions which both of them had to fight and warn against, namely, that a Church "out there" and unidentifiable by humanity, sounds far more like Plato than Paul and is unbiblical! The results they feared are obviously rampant in the behavior and theology of the churches they so loved and helped to organize. Commitment and attachment to a local congregation are today considered unimportant (in extreme cases unspiritual), irrelevant, or nonessential. What is important is that "I believe in Jesus and belong to His Church." "Church" has become disassociated from "churches." And the churches suffer, for they are not perceived as God's holy catholic Church, whole and complete because of His presence in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. This distinction is wholly unacceptable.

A. H. Strong actually comes very close to the opinion I am advocating. He mentions that the "church of God" (in the singular sense) is used of Corinth in 1 Corinthians 1:2. Here the local church is an institution of divine appointment, and the local church is the "concrete embodiment" of the church universal. He quotes, with approval, various

statements that the local churches are faces, not parts, of the universal church. Each Christian church is a "manifestation" and a "microcosm" of (rather than a portion of) the universal Church.

Using the same quotations, he also asserts that Jesus' and Paul's reference in speaking of the Church is not the Greek idea of locality contained in *ekklesia*, but rather the Hebrew idea of *qahal*, the congregation of the Lord, caused, identified and maintained by His presence.<sup>19</sup> This conclusion by Strong is most helpful; evangelical ecclesiology would do well to take note. Dagg, too, comes close, but with other words: "Saints . . . have an external organization which brings them into special relation to each other, and constitutes them one church."<sup>20</sup> This is, however, exclusively anthropocentric in its understanding of the local church. I believe that a genuinely sympathetic reading of, and attitude towards, other traditions of Christianity would go a long way towards a natural correction of this problem. At the same time, congregations in each and every tradition would be very much revived should they seriously consider themselves God's catholic Church by virtue of the presence of Christ!

#### **APOSTOLIC: THE COMMUNITY OF THIS ONE TRUE GOD IS OF DETAILED ORIGIN AND CHARACTER.**

The Church we confess in this creed is not one made by man, ruled by man, or even defined by man. This Church is apostolic in its character. And being apostolic in its character means that it is sent out by another—Jesus Christ. He is the origin and cornerstone of the Church (cf. Eph. 2:20). The apostolic Church is God's Church.

Paul distinguishes himself and the fruit of his work from other "ministers" or "superapostles" or "peddlers of the Word of God." His message is "from God," "in Christ," and "in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 2:17). He continues immediately in 2 Corinthians 4 to affirm that this in no

way commends his person or abilities. Despite very ungodly behavior and apparently false members, Paul is confident that the Corinthian Church is a true Church because it is God's Church. Although they are "cared for by Paul" and are "his letter," they are ultimately "a letter of Christ . . . written with the Spirit of the living God." Paul, then, is completely "inadequate" in himself but finds complete "adequacy from God."

The apostolic Church, therefore, is apostolic, not because of the creative, formative or educational powers of the apostles themselves; rather, it is apostolic in that its Founder created it by means of messengers. The messengers bring a message from someone else; they preach "not themselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord." They are "bond servants for Jesus' sake," not energetic entrepreneurs. In chapter five, Paul continues to say that they (the apostles) are "controlled by the love of Christ" and were commissioned with the "ministry of reconciliation." The apostles are not ambitious creators, but ambassadors appointed by God himself to bring His message to the world.

Through this preached message, God is "saving some" and is forming a community which "becomes the righteousness of God in Christ." It is this message of the apostles and prophets<sup>21</sup> which is the foundation of the Christian Church. This usage is a close parallel to the Matthew 16:18 passage where Peter, upon confessing Jesus as Messiah, is told that the "Church will be built upon this rock." The man Peter certainly was involved in the historical formation of the Church; but it is the man only as he brings this message. The one taken without the other leads to the difficulties. In this way the apostles and prophets are the foundation of the Church. On the one hand, they are personally irrelevant; on the other, they are not, for they are used by God to bring His own message to humanity. As such (messengers from God with God's message), they

become the foundation upon which God builds His Church.

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*In her affirmation of herself as the "apostolic" Church, the Church acknowledges her lack of independence, confessing Jesus Christ to be her sovereign. This phrase, so bothersome to many, is actually a desperately needed reminder for the Church today. The Church is not free to create her own doctrine, she has no liberty to modify her entrusted message, nor does she have jurisprudence to deviate from the dictates of her foundation.*



Despite the apostolic shortcomings, the Church does not have a haphazard foundation. The obvious reference in the creed to Ephesians 2:20 immediately restricts the Church from being its own institution, for itself, ruling itself, deciding upon its own doctrine. Rather, this foundation is defined, supported, and controlled by its cornerstone, Jesus Christ. In her affirmation of herself as the "apostolic" Church, the Church acknowledges her lack of independence, confessing Jesus Christ to be her sovereign. This phrase, so bothersome to many, is actually a desper-

ately needed reminder for the Church today. The Church is *not* free to create her own doctrine, she has no liberty to modify her entrusted message, nor does she have jurisprudence to deviate from the dictates of her foundation.

#### SOME RAMIFICATIONS OF THIS STATEMENT OF FAITH.

1) The congregation's view of itself. Frequently, churches tend to view themselves as autonomous congregations of people who hold meetings, have fellowship, study the Bible and bring worship to God. The problem with this view is that it is virtually a completely anthropocentric orientation. God is the sovereign Lord who forms a community for Himself. This community belongs to Him and has its life from Him. It gathers together first of all in response to Him,—not because the faithful decide to gather with one another. The congregation is the effect, not the cause, of the Word of truth.

Congregations would do well to distinguish more between the noticeable characteristics of the Church and her essential characteristics. Vincent Van Gogh said of his own style of painting that he sought to "emphasize the essential and leave the obvious vague." The obvious characteristics of God's sinful Church are sufficiently evident. As the Church views itself, however, it does not need to emphasize these marks; it should seek to emphasize these four essentials which are true of her being, regardless of her appearance. Is the essence of the Church somehow less real than what is obvious? Reverent but confident confession of the Scripture's truth paints a beautiful picture of vivid color and form.

Van Gogh's paintings never were intended to be photographic reproductions of what the eye beholds; they conveyed the essence of what existed. The Church is privileged to confess herself, not as she sees herself, but through the eyes of her Lord. This view is not a future ideal, but a pres-

ent reality; a reality consisting of the believers of our congregations.

2) The congregation's interaction with other congregations. Each congregation may be autonomous in its organization; and it, not another organization, settles its own affairs. But it must never view itself as independent. It is not autonomous from its Lord, who is Lord over the Church. Each true congregation of the Lord is Church; and hence, while each congregation is subject to its Lord, the congregations can never truly be independent from one another. This is not only true of denominations, "sister churches," or of those who are "like minded," but of all who confess the true God according to the Scriptures. While this does not need to lead us directly to the World Council of Churches, at the very least it should influence the way we talk about one another, the way we read and review one another's books, and the way we minister to the needs of our communities.

Also, when Christians from other congregations or denominations come into our congregations, we should not accept them without inquiring from their previous leaders. They do not come to us from a void, nor from an enemy. They come to us from a catholic Church, under the same sovereignty. Here too, "all things must be done decently and in order." Not inquiring (or sending papers to the new congregations of our members) promotes false doctrine and bad behavior on the part of the members, directly attacks this creedal statement, and is an affront to the other congregations.

Dagg notes in his conclusions that

He who, in his official labors, limits his view to the local organization with which he is connected, and which is temporary in its duration, degrades his office; and so far yields to the anti-christian spirit which substitutes external organi-

zation for spiritual religion, and a visible for an invisible head.<sup>22</sup>

3) The church's attitude toward the Scriptures. The Holy Scriptures are the foundational documents of the Church. The foundation of the prophets and the apostles is not a mere historical reference. The writings of these people are the Scriptures given to the Church by the Holy Spirit. The Church is not free to dismiss, or to engage in an uninformed interpretation of these documents; she hears the voice of God in them and obeys. She must be very careful to discover the meaning and intent of the Scriptures and be careful not to twist and distort them to support issues that she thinks to be essential. She must have a submissive attitude toward them as the very Word of God.

4) The Church's use of the Scriptures. It follows then, that the Scriptures must be prominent in the life of the Church. It is a sad fact that while evangelicals call themselves the "people of the Book," the Scriptures are scarcely read in the average worship service. Perhaps it would be helpful to return to the use of the Puritan's lectionaries in the public reading of the Scriptures to ensure a complete and systematic reading in the church's worship.

But it is not enough for the Scriptures to be used; they must be used properly. The Church is the recipient, not the owner of her Scriptures. Paul is greatly concerned in his pastoral epistles that doctrine be true and pure. And many misuse the Scriptures to teach the things they or their hearers want to hear. Timothy must combat this and avoid erroneous and foolish doctrine. He must do this by studying the Scriptures, rightly dividing them in a craftsmanlike manner, and by preaching them.

To promote this, the Church should encourage the proper training of its future ministers of the Word both financially and practically in every way possible. It should promote

the writing and reading of good books, and foster discussion among students of the Word. While congregations do not need to be turned into seminaries, the membership of the congregation should also be taught how to read their Bibles that they may hear the message which was intended to be heard and not be captivated by the "fables, myths, philosophies and useless arguments" which come their way.

5) The manner and content of the Church's worship. I believe in great freedom in this area, but not freedom to do as we please. Whatever else the church does to promote contact with unbelievers, its worship service must not be designed primarily so that "they will come back again" or "feel at home." Neither should it automatically incorporate the desires of its believing membership. We certainly do not need to go out of our way to offend or confuse, but the Church has gathered because God has summoned her into His presence. God speaks; we gather and respond. The entire worship service, therefore, should be an obvious dialogue between God and His Church. God speaks through the reading and preaching of the Word as well as through the sacraments. The Church responds in her hymns and anthems, her prayers, her confessions of faith, and her reception of the sacraments, her ethics and her manifestations of brotherly love. While the ancient or reformed liturgies certainly do not need to be used, they provide fine examples of this and could be used or amended very profitably in our modern setting. The supposed "freedom" and "spontaneity" practiced by many evangelical churches, has become wooden, predictable, and very much devoid of biblical content.

6) The manner and content of the Church's evangelism. Evangelism has become very individualistic. It is true that faith is incredibly personal, but "personal" and "communal" are not mutually exclusive words. The unbeliever is not called merely to enter into private relationship with God, but to submit personally to Him and become one of

His people, part of His community. The content of the message must be the content of the Bible. If the response is to a message different than that of the apostles, the individual is not incorporated into the building built upon the foundation which has Jesus-Christ as its cornerstone.

### CONCLUSION

The ironic beauty of loving and using these creeds is that in this statement we may confess something about ourselves. While this gives tremendous joy and identity to those clutched in the death grasp of despair, it also calls them, and us, to our responsibility as confessors of the true and living God.

The current evangelical milieu is markedly reminiscent of early adolescence. We can do all things, we have no need of those who have gone before, and catholicity is for the pope! As Dodge advertises, *The rules have changed – again!* One wonders whether this has been adopted as our unofficial motto! We are to be contemporary, but are we cut free from our foundations? We are to be modern, but does this free us from the text? We are built on a foundation; we kneel to a Lord; we receive an identity; if ever, now is the time that we again confess with full and believing hearts: I believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic Church, the communion of saints.

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### Notes

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (reprint; New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1976), 28.

2. A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (reprint; Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1976), 893.
3. G. C. Berkouwer points out in his *Dogmatische Studien: De Kerk, Endheid en Katholiceit* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1970), I:7, that we see here the real, not the ideal, and quotes H. Bavinck from his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* that we must not conclude a platonic state which exists in the imagination but never becomes reality; translation mine.
4. Brown, Driver and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) "qahal"; an assembly specially convoked.
5. Cf. Berkouwer, I:25.
6. Both the Apostles' and Nicene creeds predate Roman priority by several hundred years.
7. Cf. Note 13 for sources.
8. J. L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology and Church Order* (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Gano Books, 1982), II: 100.
9. *Ibid.*, II: 110.
10. *Ibid.*, II: 122f.
11. *Ibid.*, II: 128.
12. *Ibid.*, II: 130.
13. Strong, 887.
14. *Ibid.*, 889.
15. Or from the adverb: *katholon*: on the whole. See Baur, Arndt, and Gingrich, *Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Second Ed., Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979), *katholikos* and *katholou*. Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), *katholikos* and *katholou* for examples ranging from universal, to general, to integral and complete.
16. Ignatius, *Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans*, Ch. 8. Found in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1 (Ed: A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishing, 1994), 90.
17. Cf. Jordan Bajis, *Common Ground: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity for the American Christian* (Second Ed., Minneapolis, Minnesota: Light and Life Publishing Company, 1989), Chapter 10.
18. *Ibid.*, 135.
19. Strong, 892.
20. Dagg, II: 129.
21. Because of Ephesians 3:5 and 4:11, I take the prophets referred to here to be the New Testament prophets of the early church.
22. Dagg, II: 135.