

**"I Believe in the Church"**  
***Series on the Apostles' Creed***  
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**First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC**  
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**(Eph. 2:11-22)**

**Introduction.**

The religious landscape of the United States continues to change at a rapid clip. In surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center in the last couple of years, 65% of American adults describe themselves as Christians when asked about their religion. This is down 12 percentage points over the past decade. Meanwhile, those who identify themselves as “nothing in particular,” or the “nones” as they have come to be called, comprise 17 percent of the population. That’s up from 12 percent 10 years ago. And if you add the “nones” to the group of people who identify as being atheist or agnostic, it’s 26 percent of the population. That’s up from 17% in 2009.<sup>1</sup>

For many people today the Church plays only a marginal role, if any at all, in the formation of what they believe about God, the world, and themselves. Sociologist Robert Bellah reports that 81 percent of Americans say that they arrive at their own religious views without regard to a body of believers.<sup>2</sup> Many people are individualistic in developing their convictions, and they don't see the need for any institution to tell them what to believe.

In fact, some have come to be suspicious of institutions like the Church, and they question what value it holds for us. I remember asking one person where he went to church, and he answered, "Why would I go to church? There are so many hypocrites there." Then he pointed to the mountains and said, "That's where I go to church. That's where I worship God."

And yet, here in the Apostles' Creed we read the words, "I believe...in the holy universal church." What exactly are we affirming when we say these words, and what do they mean? And do we really believe them anymore when we say the Creed? This morning there are four matters I want you to consider with me: 1) the nature of the Church; 2) the holiness of the Church; 3) the importance of the Church; and 4) the universality of the Church.

**I. The Nature of the Church.**

The word "church" comes an Old English word which was pronounced more or less the same way but spelled quite differently. That word was related to the Scottish work for church, which is *kirk*, and the German word, which is *kirche*.

All these words have their root in the Greek word *kuriakon*, which means "belonging to the Lord."

The Greek word in the NT which is translated "church" is the word *ekklesia*. It's a combination of two Greek words – *ek* meaning "out of," and *kaleo* which means "to call." So you can see that the Church is a group of people who have been called out by God and belong to Him. It doesn't refer to a building or an institution, but to people who have identified themselves as followers of Jesus Christ and have responded to His call.

Nowadays many people use the word "church" to refer to a building, but there isn't a single instance of that usage of the word in the NT. The only building mentioned in the NT is the *spiritual* building the Church is, and it is a metaphor for the way in which each of us is a living stone God is using to build His Church in the world. That's how the word "building" is used here in Ephesians 2 which we have read together this morning.

In the Gospels, in the book of Acts, and in all the epistles, the word Church always means a group of people pledged and dedicated to Jesus Christ and to one another. It was, in fact, many years before the Church possessed any buildings of its own, because the Church was poor, and what is more, the Church was persecuted. It was illegal to be a Christian in the Roman Empire the first few centuries of the Church's existence, and as a result, Christians met in the catacombs or in homes, often in secrecy for fear of persecution. Buildings aren't the church; they are only tools for the ministry and mission of the Church.

The nature of the Church is that it is an organic collection of people who are united by the Holy Spirit in the Person of Jesus Christ to be God's ambassadors and join Him on a mission of love to a lost and broken world. Archbishop William Temple once said it well, "The Church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit of its non-members."

## **II. The Holiness of the Church.**

The Apostles' Creed says, "I believe in the **holy** universal Church." What do we mean when we say this? The word "holy" is off-putting to many people, because to them it suggests a holier-than-thou kind of attitude. For many people, their experience with the Church has been a great disappointment, because in the Church they have often encountered more sinners than they have saints. C.S. Lewis depicts this attitude well in his book *The Screwtape Letters*, in which a new convert to Christianity goes to church, expecting to find it to be full of what he considered holy people, but instead he discovers that it is full of ordinary sinful people like himself!

There is an anonymous couplet that goes like this:

To dwell in love with the saints above,

Well, that would be glory.  
But to dwell below with the saints I know –  
Why, that's a different story!

History is filled with examples of the Church's failure to be what Christ called it to be, and it doesn't appear to be very holy at times. Someone once said that the Church is like Noah's Ark: the stench inside would be unbearable if it weren't for the storm on the outside!

But to understand this aspect of the Church, we need to recover the true meaning of the word "holy." In the Greek language the word *hagios*, which is translated "holy," simply means "set apart by God." For example, the word was used in Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, to describe the utensils used in the Temple worship, and it speaks of the way in which the candelabra, the altar of incense, and the bowls, etc., weren't supposed to be used for ordinary everyday purposes. Instead, there were only to be used for a special purpose, for use in the Temple worship. They were set apart. In a similar way, the Bible says that you and I as followers of Christ are to be holy in the sense that we are set apart for God's special purposes in the world.

The King James Version of the Bible translates this word *hagios* to mean "peculiar." Although I can think of some very peculiar people I have know in a number of churches I've served, the real essence of this word "holy" is that we are peculiar in the sense that we are "different." What makes us different, what makes us "holy," is that we reject the world's notion that money, power, and prestige are the way that a person can find happiness. Instead we believe that Jesus was right when He said that in order to save your life you must lose it, if you want to be great in the kingdom, you must be a servant. What makes us different, what makes us "holy," is that instead of applauding the path of upward mobility, we celebrate the downward mobility which Jesus took when He chose to come to this earth and die in our place.

To say that I believe the Church is holy is not to say that I think we're a group of perfect people, because we're not. We're not a holy huddle of spiritual giants, and we shouldn't pretend to be. The fact is we're all sinners saved by grace who have simply been set apart by God, called out, as it were, to be His followers – despite our flaws and despite our failures. The Church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.

The only thing that makes us holy is that the shed blood of Jesus Christ has been poured out for us and our sins have been forgiven. As a result of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf, we have been set apart to be different in the way we look at the world and in the way we live our lives. That's what the Apostles' Creed says.

### **III. The Importance of the Church.**

Over the years I have met many people, especially in younger generations, who have rejected the Church even though they still profess faith in Jesus Christ. Either they've been wounded by a church, or they've been disappointed by some experience they had in church, and they no longer identify with a local body of believers. These people aren't unchurched. They are what I call "de-churched." They just don't see the need to be involved with a local congregation.

But to counter this notion, Paul Tournier once said, "There are two things you can't do alone. One is to be married, and the other is to be a Christian." I think he's right. There is no such thing as a Lone Ranger Christian, and Scripture teaches that we can no more separate ourselves from the body of Christ and survive, let alone thrive, than my hand can function on its own apart from the rest of my physical body. It is arrogant to think you can live the Christian life by yourself, and I've never met a person who flourished in their faith apart from a community of believers.

Someone once said, "You can't have God for you Father unless you have the Church for your mother." There is some truth to that. Your birth in Christ was the result of someone in the Church sharing the good news of God's love in Christ with you, or at least you read the truth about God's love in the Bible which other Christians in the Church wrote down for you. And just as you and I are dependent on our earthly mothers for nourishment and nurture when we're born, so believers in Jesus Christ are dependent upon the nourishment and nurture of the Church if we want to grow in grace.

If you take a hot coal from a fire and put it off to the side, it won't take long for that coal to become stone cold. It's only as the coal is connected to other embers in the fire that it can maintain its heat and energy. In a similar way if you isolate yourself from other Christians and try to live the Christian life on your own, it won't take long for your fire for Christ to begin to wane and eventually grow cold. I've seen it happen time and time again.

Do you have a community of believers around you who will love and support you in times of struggle or when you're grieving a great loss? And just as important, do you have a community of believers around you who will give you a swift kick in the pants when you need it? Recovering alcoholics will tell you that the secret to the success of AA isn't just the 12 steps. It's constantly being in community with other alcoholics in AA groups. They'll tell you that's the only way they stay sober.

#### **IV. The Universality of the Church.**

Older versions of the Apostles' Creed say, "I believe in the holy **catholic** Church." This is one of the most confusing phrases in the whole Creed, because people mistakenly think that it is an affirmation of a belief in the Roman Catholic church. But notice that the word "catholic" as it is used in older versions of the Creed is with a small "c."

The word "catholic" simply means universal. It comes from the Greek word *katholikos*, which means "according to the whole." If I were to say that Michael Dodds of our staff has catholic tastes when it comes to music, I wouldn't mean that he prefers a requiem mass over an informal hymn sing! It simply means that he has a wide range of tastes in music. His tastes are universal. And, in fact, when it comes to Michael Dodds his musical tastes are indeed catholic in this sense!

In saying that the Church is catholic, with a small "c," we're affirming that we are a part the universal, world-wide Church of Jesus Christ down through the ages. We're also saying that our congregation here in Winston-Salem is but a small sliver of the larger Church of Jesus Christ, and we are one with believers all over the world and throughout history.

People ask me from time to time that if the Church is universal, if it is really one, then why are there so many different denominations? In America alone I'm told there are over 50,000 denominations. Whenever I am asked that question, I answer by saying that I think that denominations are like the different flavors of the ice cream. Some people like plain vanilla, and other people like rocky road. And to the people who like rocky road, plain vanilla is just boring. And to the people who like vanilla, rocky road is an abomination! But it's all ice cream.

And just as people have different tastes and convictions when it comes to ice cream, so Christians have different spiritual tastes and convictions when it comes to their spiritual palates. Some like the smells and bells of high church worship, as in Roman Catholic, Lutheran, or Episcopalian traditions, and others like the informality of low-church worship, as in Baptist, Pentecostal, and Bible churches. And then there's the middle of the road Presbyterians, where we like a little bit of everything! But it's all the Church. We are all a part of the body of Christ.

There is a tiny church up in the mountains in a town named Tiger, Georgia, and the sign on the front lawn of that church reads, "*Independent Solid Rock Baptist Church Associated with Jesus Christ!*" Now, I've never been to worship there, and I don't know who the pastor is at that church, and I haven't met any of the members of that congregation. But I am connected to the people there, and so are all of you. Whether we worship in great cathedrals, in roadside chapels, or under a large mamri tree with a Massai tribe in Africa, whatever the region of the world and regardless of our theological particulars or the color of our skin, as

Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox, we are bound together in the person of Jesus Christ by the power of His Holy Spirit. We are one in Him.

### **Conclusion.**

There is one more thought I want to leave with you this morning, and it is this. Despite its great flaws and failures, and despite the hypocrisy that exists in each one of us, the Church of Jesus Christ is still an incredible force for good in the world. God is in the business of taking ordinary people in the Church like you and me to accomplish extraordinary things in the world for Him. The local church is still the hope of the world.

As we close this morning, I want to share with you one such story. Timisoara, Romania sits next to the Bega River, and for decades life there had been as drab as its gray waters. After World War II, Romania was taken over by the Soviet Union, and this university town grew more and more dreary and full of fear under the communist regime of Nicolae Ceausescu.

But today in the center of downtown lies a long, rectangular paved mall that is studded with statues, plots of grass, and flowerbeds. In one of the grassy areas stands a wooden cross that is surrounded by candles, flowers, and black-and-white photographs. It's a shrine to the martyrs of Timisoara, the men and women who died there in December 1989.

You see, early in 1987 a man named Laszlo Tokes became the pastor of the Hungarian Reformed Church in Timisoara. Previously the church had been pastored by a man who collaborated with the government and wore the red star of Communism on his clerical vestments. But Laszlo Tokes came preaching the gospel, and he spoke against the secularism of the atheistic regime that had bitten deeply into the hearts of the people. He brought hope, began new initiatives like Bible studies, and announced to his little congregation that a new day was dawning on the work of their church. Within two years, the membership rolls of the congregation had grown to 5,000. But the growth was more than just numbers. Lives were being changed, and people were being disciplined.

Eventually, the government authorities tried to remove Tokes from his pulpit and exile him to a remote village. But on December 15, 1989, a large crowd of believers, some from the Hungarian Reformed Church and others from nearby congregations, blocked the entrance to the church where Laszlo and his wife, Edith, were holed up. The secret police were assembled with their guns, and the stand-off began.

More Christians began to gather on the paved mall in Timisoara to peacefully protest the injustice of the government and its oppressive ways, and during the protest, a student named Daniel Gavra pulled out from his coat a packet filled with dozens of candles. Eventually light from hundreds of candles pierced the night

and proclaimed the light and love of Christ against the hate and oppression of the government.

Before dawn on December 17<sup>th</sup>, the secret police finally made their move and broke through the people. The Communists responded with brute force, and they ordered their troops to open fire on the protesters. Hundreds were shot, several were killed.<sup>3</sup>

But that was the beginning of the end of Communist rule in Timisoara and in all of Romania. It was also the beginning of the end of Ceausescu's reign of terror in that poor country. And it all began with an unknown pastor in a tiny congregation that led the church of Jesus Christ in Romania to stand in solidarity against the evil and sin of the world. From the flickering light of candles held by Christians of the church, resistance and hope went forth, and a whole nation and a culture were turned upside down.

My friends, be the Church this week. Be the called-out ones of Christ in the coming days. Be lights in the darkness. Be different in the way you look at the world and how you live your life. Be the Church. Who knows? We just might turn the world upside down, too. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center, cited by Kyle Westaway, *Westaway Briefing*, October 26, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Charles Colson, *The Body*, pp. 51-61.