

We believe in the holy catholic Church

Introduction

When these words ‘the holy catholic Church’ were first spoken as part of a declaration of faith and written down as a section of The Apostles’ Creed in the second century AD there were no other mainstream denominations. There were religious groups that were falsely claiming to be genuine churches such as the followers of Marcion of Sinope in northern Turkey, (c85-160AD), a sect that followed the unusual views of this wealthy shipbuilder who was excluded for his heterodox beliefs from the largest Christian congregation in Rome in 144AD. However, the churches that proclaimed orthodox mainstream views of the Triune God Father Son and Holy Spirit were in fellowship with one another, even though for practical purposes, the distance between churches and very limited means of communication restricted the level of contact between them. However, by the fourth century AD ties were not as strong in some cases, as language and cultural barriers hindered effective communication which led to some lengthy debates in the formal church councils that began after the cessation of state persecution of Christians after Constantine the Great, (a Serbian Christian born in Nis, Serbia,) became Emperor of Rome in 306AD. He ruled the Western Roman Empire to 337AD. Constantine was concerned that the mainstream churches remained united both in the faith and in their fellowship with one another at the council he convened in 325AD in Nicaea (now called Iznik in northern Turkey). Later in that century, another church council in Constantinople (now called Istanbul) lightly revised the wording of this creed. The Nicene Creed of 381 states on this clause: ‘I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church’. Each of these four words to describe the Christian Church are important. They are a fulfilment of the words of the apostle Paul in Ephesians 2:11-22 that paints a picture of God’s vision for the new communities of faith that we call Christian churches. In the twenty-first century AD, it is most encouraging that more than 2.5 billion people claim to be Christians, but the downside to which we must sadly acknowledge is that the proliferation of new denominations in country after country around the world can hardly be seen as consistent with Jesus’ prayer for His followers in John 17:20-23: *My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message,*²¹ ***that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me.***²² *I have given them the glory that You gave Me, **that they may be one as we are one** –*²³ *I in them and You in Me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me.* There are many good things that have been done through the work and witness of Christian churches, but there plenty of other issues where significant further work is needed as we seek to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

1. What was the problem outside of Christ? (Ephesians 2:11-12)

¹¹ *Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—*¹² *that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.* Alienation is a huge issue in our world today, although, it has probably always been the case that sections of any given society have felt marginalised or their concerns neglected. It is deeply uncomfortable listening to voices from the Jewish and Palestinian communities at the present time whose understandable anguish has been voiced over what is going on in the Holy Land as a result of the war taking place there. The most prominent high profile campaigners in recent years have represented various environment causes seeking to address issues related to climate change. Yet in a broader sense, how many

of us have struggled to keep up with the constant pace of change in our country and in the wider world in recent years. But what kind of alienation does Paul address in these verses? He has used shocking language in Ephesians 2:1-10 describing humanity as: *dead in trespasses and sins* and that we are *by nature objects of wrath*. In Ephesians 4:18 the Greek verb for alienation is found translated in the NIV as *separated from the life of God*. The NKJV translates this part of v18 as: *alienated from the life of God. They wander far from the life God gives* (NLV rendering). Here the issue more specifically is the barrier that separated Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews). William Barclay former N.T. lecturer at Glasgow University put it like this: ‘The Jew had an immense contempt for the Gentile. The Gentiles, said the Jews, were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell. God, they said, loves only Israel of all the nations that He had made...It was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile mother in her hour of sorest need, for that would simply be to bring another Gentile into the world. Until Christ came, the Gentiles were an object of contempt to the Jews. The barrier between them was absolute. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, or if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, the funeral of that Jewish boy or girl was carried out. Such contact with a Gentile was the equivalent of death.’ (*Letters to Galatians, Ephesians* p.125) Paul makes clear reference to this in v12: *remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded (lit. alienated) from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.* (NIV) The temple in Jerusalem had warning notices telling gentiles to keep away. However not “trespassers will be prosecuted”, but “trespassers will be executed”! A white limestone slab from the temple now in Istanbul Museum has the following inscription: ‘No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure round the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.’ From what were we as Gentiles alienated, according to this passage? (a) **From Christ** (v12 *remember that at that time you were without [separate from NIV] Christ* This is in total contrast with what God has done for us as described in the earlier part of this chapter. Ephesians 2:5 states: [*But God...v4... even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),⁶ and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus* (Ephesians 2:5-6); verse 7 states: *that in the ages to come He [God] might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.* Or as the NIV puts it: *God expressed His kindness to us in Christ Jesus* and v10 refers to us being *in Christ Jesus to do good works*. Why does it matter? Peter’s words before the Jewish ruling council in Acts 4:12 answer this question. *Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.* (b) **From Israel** (v12) *being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel* (NKJV) or *excluded from citizenship in Israel* (NIV) Yet the way back is given in Genesis 12:3 where God declared to Abraham: *all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.* The Jews were God’s chosen people, but the blessings of God were not exclusive to Israel. The Messiah of Israel (Isaiah 42:6) was to be *a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles.* (c) **From the Covenant** (v12) *... and strangers from the covenants of promise* (NKJV); *foreigners to the covenants of the promise* (NIV); The sign of the covenant was circumcision –all Jewish male children were circumcised on the eighth day after birth, without it excluded from the covenant God made with Israel and its promises. (d) **From Hope** (v12) *without hope* the word *hope* is not the wishful thinking of contemporary usage of that word; in the Bible that term refers to the guarantee of inclusion concerning the promises of God and their benefits. The list culminates and concludes with exclusion and alienation (e) **From God** (v12) *and without God in the world.* William Hendricksen memorably wrote in his commentary on this verse that the people described in this passage were: ‘Christless, stateless, friendless, hopeless and Godless’ and all this because of our sinfulness. This is a comprehensive picture of calamity. However there is a solution to this awful problem described in Ephesians 2:13-18. It is a

vision of what God intended for us as His people and which through Christ can become a reality.

2. What has Jesus done for us? (Ephesians 2:13-18)

There is a parallel structure in the two halves of this chapter. After the bad news of 2:1-3, in v4 Paul states *but God who is rich in mercy* (NKJV /NLV); here after the bad news of verses 11-12 Paul writes: *But now in Christ Jesus...* He explains what Jesus has done to abolish the problems described above. Some barriers like the Berlin wall seemed immovable, but what a day when it was broken down. I remember seeing those pictures on television in 1989. 9 November 1989 is a date when freedom was gained in Berlin and a street was named 'Strasse des 9 Nov'. Jews normally did not mix with Samaritans their near neighbours (John 4:9) nor Gentiles, but God brought Jews and Gentiles into fellowship with each other. How did that happen? How could that happen? Ephesians 2:13 tells us: *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ*. His substitutionary death on the cross in the place of sinners *a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles* (I Corinthians 1:23). How does Paul describe the implications of Jesus' death? What did He do? (a) **He demolished the barrier** (Ephesians 2:14) *For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility*. A huge curtain separated the holy place and the holy of holies from the people –only the priests could go behind this curtain. Matthew 27:51 notes that immediately after Jesus gave up His spirit and died: *At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom*. Direct access to God was now possible for all His people through Jesus. No longer do we need to confess sin to an earthly priest and ask for absolution, instead in private ask God directly –the shock this brought to a people accustomed to a priest centred religion is hard for us to grasp. The wall (barrier) at the temple literally was demolished by the Romans in AD70, but spiritually the barrier was removed thirty years earlier at Calvary. (b) **He abolished the ceremonial law** (Ephesians 2:15a) *by abolishing in His flesh the law with its commandments and regulations*. No more animal sacrifices required in worship services –Jesus the once for all time perfect sacrifice paid the penalty in full. Hebrews 10:14 *By one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified*. Our worship although still collective as a community of God's people also became personal and of the heart not just external ritual forms. Colossians 2:14 *Christ having cancelled the written code with its regulations that was against us and that stood opposed to us; He took it away, nailing it to the cross*. Jesus also abolished the requirements of the Jewish civil law as the church is a called-out people separate from the state not relying on state enforcement of any religious beliefs but requesting equal freedom under the law for people of all faiths and none (first called for by Baptist leader Thomas Helwys in his book *The Mystery of Iniquity* written in 1611 but published in 1612). The battle today for civil liberties so seriously eroded since the anti-terrorism legislation following the events of September 2001 is one that we will fight not only for ourselves but for every other citizen –not least because if we do not stand for the rights of others we risk losing our own cherish rights as well. (c) **He created a new humanity** (Ephesians 2:15b) *His purpose was to create in Himself one new people from the two groups* (NLV). In Christ all the factors that differentiate between people: race, gender, social class and status, wealth and talents no longer retain their previous significance in the community of faith. We are one people before God, on the same level and position in Christ with equal access to our heavenly father through the Holy Spirit. Yet we are never to be clones of each other rather enabled and empowered to be the person he created us to be. What a message we have to proclaim to the divided world in which we live –but as a church community we have to practice that level of love for each other that God desires and modelled for us in Jesus. The

culmination of this amazing work of Jesus is that (d) **He restored our relationship with God** (vs16-18) *thus making peace,*¹⁶ *and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.*¹⁷ *He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.*¹⁸ *For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.* Peace –Shalom (wholeness) restoration of the whole person –we are not disembodied souls but whole creatures called to glorify God in every aspect of our lives. Romans 5:1-2 declares something of what this means: ¹ *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,* ² *through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.* We are children of the King of Kings, We have direct access to the throne room of the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe. Do you ever stop to reflect on how honoured you are to be a son or daughter of the King? This should give us a confidence that strengthens our witness in the many places where we are in a minority, but our security is in our father who is Lord of all! Mission Praise book song CMP 297 puts it so well: I stand before the presence of the Lord God of hosts, a child of my Father, an heir of His grace. For Jesus paid the debt for me, the veil was torn in two and the Holy of Holies has become my dwelling place. So what is the vision of the Christian Church that these early Christians proclaimed? What is it that they stated they were longing to see?

3. **What should the Christian Church be today?** (Ephesians 2:19-22)

*Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of His household,*²⁰ *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone.*²¹ *In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.*²² *And in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.* There are four characteristics these early Christians pledged their allegiance to as the pillars on which it stood.

(a)**One** This is implied and assumed in the Apostles Creed and made explicit in the later creeds. The Church not churches. It is a belief in one head and one foundation in Jesus Christ. *And He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy.* (Colossians 1:18) In Ephesians 4:4-6 Paul stresses this point to this local congregation in western Turkey. *There is **one** body and **one** Spirit, just as you were called to **one** hope when you were called;*⁵ ***one** Lord, **one** faith, **one** baptism;*⁶ ***one** God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.* Notice how many 'one's' there are in these verses! It is not difficult to imagine Paul preaching this message and placing the emphasis on this oneness in the Christian Church. It is a challenge today in our culture where individualism and 'my preferences' is so dominant that it is deeply counter-cultural to articulate any other viewpoint. However, Christ's vision for His Church is one of the unity of His people. Ephesians 2:19-20 states: *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of His household,*²⁰ *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone.* In the first instance and so shocking to people of his day was the ability of followers of Jesus from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds sharing table fellowship as well as belonging to the same local congregations. Paul declares: 'we are family!' This term is understood quite differently in particular cultural contexts in terms of privileges and responsibilities for one another, but it is a declaration of something new of a transformation of relationships between people who outside of Christ might have little in common. Peter expressed it this way in I Peter 2:9: *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.* What does this mean in practice? I am very happy to be a member of this particular congregation in fellowship with the Baptist Union of Scotland and its

associated international bodies, the European Baptist Federation and the Baptist World Alliance. However, although it is good and right to choose to join a local church, we must never forget we are part of something much bigger. In fact, we make that declaration every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper. Our salvation is personal through faith in Jesus, but it is also collective as we are one with that greater number of believers who are united with Christ and who belong to other networks of churches or denominations. This aspect of truth has been important to our local church. It has chosen to worship and work with other local churches in our community to make Christ known. The newly published history of our individual and collective witness in this community is testament to the fact that this conviction is important as we seek to be effective representatives of the Lord Jesus Christ. I rejoice in the ethnic diversity of our world Baptist family when I have the privilege of meeting with other representatives in our annual gatherings as a representative of our Scottish churches. In 2010, I had the unexpected privilege of being one of the small number of Scottish Churches representatives at the Edinburgh World Mission Conference. It was the most diverse and inclusive gathering of representatives of different branches of the Christian churches across the world. At its best our oneness in this life will sadly fall short of what Jesus desired for His people, but we will attain it in His eternal kingdom. The challenge in the here and now is to see how we live out this claim to our oneness in Christ.

(b) **Holy** *In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.* (Ephesians 2:21) What does this word mean? In our cultural context it is seen by some people as a negative identifying mark of Christians. 'Holy Willies' is a Scots phrase based on a poem of Robert Burns, allegedly with reference to an elder of Maunchline Parish Church, Willie Fisher, who it was claimed was quick to report to 'the minister' the sins of others in the parish but who was considerably less enthusiastic to account for his own shortcomings. The poem is a parody of this man's alleged self-righteousness. The opening two verses set a clear tone for his hypocrisy:

O Thou, that in the heavens does dwell, As it pleases best Thyself, Sends ane to Heaven an' ten to Hell, For Thy glory, And no for onie guid or ill They've done afore Thee!

I bless and praise Thy matchless might, When thousands Thou hast left in night,
That I am here afore Thy sight, For gifts an' grace A burning and a shining light To a' this place.

The poem after listing Fisher's failings and those of others in the parish concludes with these lines:

But, Lord, remember me an' mine Wi' mercies temporal and divine, That I for grace an' gear may shine, Excell'd by nane, And a' the glory shall be Thine, Amen, Amen!

This is a mistaken view of holiness. It is a challenging term that has a twofold emphasis. Separation from sin but seeking to stay close to the Lord. In both the Old and New Testament there is a calling to a distinctive way of life in the footsteps of Jesus. Peter expressed it this way in I Peter 1:13-16: *Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at His coming.*¹⁴ *As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.*¹⁵ ***But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'*** In this passage Peter is echoing words written in Leviticus 11:44a-45: *I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy...*⁴⁵ *I am the Lord, who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy.* What does this mean in practice? It is a call to seek in our prayers to want what God wants and to reject what He rejects concerning the choices we make in our daily lives. It is kept at the level of principle, because each one of us is personally responsible for seeking to discern how that applies in our particular circumstances. But it also applies to congregations and networks of churches as

they formulate statements of doctrine and practices members are expected to follow. What has God revealed in the Bible that we need to follow must be the key principle to discern. Not what are the preferences of the surrounding culture at this time in history. The pressures will be strong to fit in with the wider world, at the current time particularly over matters of human sexuality and identity. However, we need to stand firm to what God has revealed in His Word for us to follow. In what particular issue or context am I or you struggling to live a holy life pleasing to God? We may need to ask ourselves this question in private for reflection and possible action.

(c) **Catholic** This is the most misunderstood word in this creed. Up to the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation it was understood as 'the whole' or the 'universal' church. Representative Protestant and Roman Catholic authors who make this point are: Alister McGrath, *Affirming Your Faith: Exploring the Apostles' Creed* (p.110) and Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (Introduction, p.1). In current English language usage today, someone might be described as having 'a catholic taste', that is they have wide ranging interests. It is really important to emphasise that the exclusive appropriation of the word 'Catholic' in the name of largest section of the Western Church was not appropriate as it was not the universal church, nor even the universal church in the western region of the church, even apart from the Orthodox Churches being predominant in the so-called Eastern Church area of the former Roman Empire. When a person repeats the word 'catholic' in this creed it is a declaration that the Christian message we proclaim is valid and relevant to every age; and in every social and cultural context. It is a statement of the universal validity and importance of the good news entrusted to us by Jesus Christ.

(d) **Apostolic** This last term is a commitment to remain steadfast in the faith committed to the Church by the first apostles of Jesus. Acts 2:42 states: *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.* It is a solemn pledge not to depart from those convictions practised by the Early Church, the first century followers of Jesus. Or in the letter of Jude, where he wrote in verse 3, these words to first generation followers of Jesus: *I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people.* In fundamental matters of doctrine and practice it is a promise to remain faithful to that sacred pledge. In each generation, Christians must take a stand for themselves on their loyalty to the Lord Jesus and the message He passed on to His first followers, two thousand years ago. I hope and pray each one of us will be committed active members of the Church of Jesus Christ, Amen

Questions for Reflection:

Q1 Am I committed to playing my part as a member of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church?

Q2. Are we as a congregation collectively also committed to playing our part in working with other churches in the work of His Church today?

Song for Reflection: 'The Church's One Foundation'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCdASxyPIKE>

