

**What We Believe About the Church and Why It Matters:
Exploring the Apostles' Creed
1 Corinthians 12:12-27
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I've noticed that some people can thrive internally in good times, and that some of those same people also can thrive internally, in bad times. What is more, some from among these thrivers seem to get better and better at it, even in extraordinarily difficult circumstances.

I mention this because *it seems to me that The Apostles Creed is a set of belief statements that prescribes how to be and how to behave so as to thrive internally in any circumstances.*

Sounds good? But there's a catch to this prescription. We gotta have the heart – and sometimes the guts- to follow this creed. But that is what faith is about.

The sermon I am about to read is *packed with incites* that -when used with the Spirit- can help us follow the Creed. I know this because I've read it, several times, and because Michelle wrote it. Shortly after learning of her dad's death –moments after talk back ended last week -tears still in her eyes- she said this week's sermon was 80% done and just needed an ending.

So the sermon you are about to hear is Pastor Michelle's. It has an ending now, you'll hear that when we get to it.

One last thing. The Apostles Creed -- reflective of our faith as it is- is *so very relevant* to the loss that our Pastor and we as a church are experiencing right now. I think you will hear that relevance too.

The two phrases we cover today in the Apostles Creed are:
I believe in the Holy Catholic Church and the Communion of Saints

First, the *church*

I believe in the holy, catholic *church*. Right off the bat we need to define three words: *church*, holy and catholic. Although we refer to buildings as churches, the *church* is *not* a building. The building at 6120 N. Kings Highway could be destroyed, but Calvary Presbyterian Church would go on. A church building is the

physical space that the actual church inhabits. We use the building for worship, fellowship, discipleship and mission -- so buildings are important, but *the church is really a people*.

The Greek word for “church”, *ekklesia* is used more than 80 times in the NT. It literally means, “called out”, as in a gathering of people called together. It was not a religious term, but a secular term meaning an assembly. It was used to refer to civic groups, synagogues, and Christian gatherings. But, *ekklesia –church- came to mean more than just an assembly when it was used by Christians*. The first time we see the word in the Gospels is when Jesus speaks to Peter saying, “I tell you, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it”. (Matt 16:18)

Jesus speaks of “*my church*”, making it clear that the church is *his ekklesia*, his assembly. The church is a community or assembly of people who belong to Christ. *Our relationship with Christ makes our church different* from a synagogue, a civic group, or a club.

So, that's *Church*.

The word “*holy*” reinforces the idea of belonging to Christ. When we say we believe in the holy catholic church, we’re not saying the church is filled with righteous people who are nearly perfect. *Holy* in the biblical context means “*belonging to*” God, or “*sacred to*” God or “*set apart for*” God. The church is holy when those of us who are a part of it recognize that our church belongs to God, and not to the members or the pastor. We are holy when the members don’t ask what they want the church to do for them? but instead ask, “What does God want us to do for God?”

One metaphor for the church that appears in several NT passages is that of a bride, specifically *Christ’s bride*. Paul says a husband should love his wife, as Christ loved the church, and gave himself for her. The point: *the church is holy* when we love Christ, and seek to be faithful to him.

We've talked about church and about Holy

So what about the word “*catholic*”? As it’s used in the Creed, “catholic” does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church, at least not exclusively. It means universal, or, everywhere. The word reminds us of the church’s unity: every community of believers, across the Roman Empire -and beyond- was bound together in the gospel. Despite differences in language and ethnic makeup, these communities

were part of one church, *the church everywhere, the church universal*, the holy *catholic* church.

This reminds us –today- that it is not denominational or nondenominational names that matter. All who put their faith in Jesus Christ, and seek to follow him as Savior and Lord, are part of one universal church. That, by the way, is why our communion table is not limited to Presbyterians.

Put this all together and we could say: the church is the gathering of all people called out by Jesus, who belong to Jesus, and therefore seek not only to experience fellowship with him but to do his will and continue his work in the world. I Peter 2:10 puts it: “*Once you weren’t a people, but now you are God’s people*”.

But there are challenges

Among the challenges churches face is the issue of control. *Who is in charge? The pastor? The denomination? The members who have been around the longest, or who give the most money? None of the above!* The church belongs to Jesus Christ which means that the driving mission of every church—including ours—is above all else, *to discern the will of God and do it*. It comes as a shock to people to learn that church governance is not a democracy. We are not an institution in which everybody gets a vote or a say in how things go. *If we’re doing it right, we are listening for the voice of Jesus Christ*. Yes, that often comes to us through the voice of others, but *our concern is not to please people, but to please God*. A lot of church squabbles could be avoided if we would remember that one critical fact.

In addition to the metaphor of a bride, *a second metaphor* used frequently in scripture for the church, *is that of family*. The idea of family conveys that *human beings need community*. We are wired for belonging, for caring for others, and having others care for us. Even God enjoys community: The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are in relationship with one another. From a spiritual vantage point, if we want to grow spiritually into the people God wants us to be, then we must be part of a worshipping community. So many things that are essential to a life of faith are lost when you don’t have a community of others who hold you accountable, help you grow, challenge you to serve or care for others, pray with you and for you, and give structure to your development as followers of Christ.

That’s why the language of brotherhood and sisterhood is so important to the NT church. We are family, and with family comes the responsibility of building relationships, caring for one another, working for the good of one another, supporting and sharing with one another. The church is God’s answer to our

existential need for belonging, community, acceptance, support and love. You don't ever have to be alone, because you are part of a family.

What that means for us is that we as members -or regular participants of this church- are to *take our family responsibilities seriously*. Being a church family means looking around to see who is alone, who might need a friend, or a word of encouragement. It means inviting people to sit by you, or asking if you can sit with them. It means visiting those who are sick, checking on our elderly, and providing support and care for those grieving or hurting. It means that we don't come to church looking primarily for what the church can do for us; but instead we come recognizing that we, the church, need each other. We need to share our gifts, to be encouraging and caring, to be engaged with the family. The church is not a human invention; it is founded by God. It is the temple of the Holy Spirit. It is a community that belongs to Jesus. It's not an optional add-on to our faith, but an essential part of being a Christian -the means Jesus created to fulfill his mission. We are Christ's community.

The third metaphor scripture uses for the church is that of a body, specifically the body of Christ. The church in a very tangible way is meant to incarnate Christ to the world. God became flesh through Jesus, and in the same way, Jesus becomes flesh through the church. We are meant to continue the ministry that Jesus began, to represent and "re-present" Jesus to the world. Jesus couldn't have been clearer. "As the Father sent me, so I am sending you. Receive the Holy Spirit." (John 20:22) It is the Spirit, as we saw last week, that provides the power to fulfill the work Christ left us to do.

To repeat: *We are the continuing presence of Christ. When God sees pain and brokenness, injustice and needs, God doesn't send angels to address it; God sends the church. God sends us.* There are 2.2 billion Christians in the world. Imagine the potential if every one of them was a part of a community of the Lord's people, seeking to do his work on behalf of all peoples. Imagine how the world would be different if every church were seeking to be Christ's body right where they were. We can't do anything about all the other churches. But we are responsible for this one.

We will never prove intellectually that there is a God; any more than others can prove there is no God. If we want to prove God's existence, we have to show it by our actions. We, the church, must remember our calling. We must act as the body of Christ. Together we must incarnate God's love and Christ's presence. It is by our attitudes and actions of mercy, compassion and service—not by winning

theological debates—that we will draw people to Christ and win a hearing for the Gospel.

Now, what about the communion of Saints

The Apostles' Creed continues with, I believe in the “communion of saints” -which is Paul's way of referring to all Christians. Most of Paul's letters are addressed either “to the saints” or to those who are called to be saints. It –*saints*- is a word that is related to the word holy -that we've already discussed- and it refers to both a present reality *and* a future calling. Those who belong to God, who have yielded their lives to God and seek to be God's people, who have accepted the redemptive work of Christ and have the Holy Spirit indwelling them –*those*, are in a sense already holy. But, in another sense they are not yet holy, in that holiness is also a calling and a goal to which they devote their entire lives—a call to be completely surrendered to God and to become the people that God intends them to be. And, as we've said, *this is not a work that we can do in ourselves*, just by trying harder. Ultimately, it is a work of transformation that God does in us by the power of the Spirit—a process called sanctification.

Saints are the most ordinary of people whose lives come to be defined by their love for others. Saints are people who bless others without seeking recognition. They pay attention as they go about their day, watching for moments to reach out to someone who needs a kind word or touch. They think less of themselves and more of others. They practice the things that help them grow in love for God and others.

But, this phrase, *the communion of saints*, does not only address those now living. Also embedded in the words is the idea that those who are becoming saints here on earth, AND, those who have been entirely sanctified in heaven, *commune together*. *We are surrounded*, as the book of Hebrews puts it, by a “*great cloud of witnesses*” who are cheering us on as we run this race of faith. We are less alone than we can even imagine.

So: When Jesus came, he did not simply call individual disciples; he formed a community, a family, a people chosen to love and to continue his mission and ministry after he was gone.

Peter describes it – the church- this way: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness and into his amazing light.” (1 Peter 2:9)

Michelle's father, Gary Akins Brown, is indeed in that great cloud of witnesses fully sanctified by the grace of God. He is among those that the final verse of Amazing Grace speaks of - in these words- that I'll recite- as David plays the hymn...

*"When we've been there- ten thousand years,
bright shining- as the sun,
we've no less days- to sing God's praise
then when- we'd first begun."*

Blessed are those who mourn, for *they shall* be comforted.

The love of God, the sacrifice of Jesus, and the presence of the Spirit, assure us that Gary Akins Brown is indeed in that cloud of witnesses, sanctified by grace and by the prayers of his wife Theresa, his son Michael, his daughter Michelle, his granddaughter Emily and his grandson David.

*What the Lord does endures!
Forever! AMEN!*