

# The Apostles' Creed

LESSON  
FIVE

## THE CHURCH



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# The Apostles' Creed

## Lesson Five

### The Church

#### INTRODUCTION

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In the modern world, when most people hear the word “church,” they think of a building where Christians meet to worship God. Sometimes these buildings are huge and ornate cathedrals, beautifully adorned with art. Sometimes they are small chapels with simple furnishings. Sometimes they are converted warehouses or storefronts. Sometimes they are homes, tiny shacks, or mud huts, or even caves, where worshippers hide from danger. But in the *Apostles' Creed*, just like in the Bible, the word “church” refers first and foremost to the people of God, the holy community formed by those who profess faith in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

This is the fifth lesson in our series on *The Apostles' Creed*. And we have entitled it “The Church.” In this lesson, we’ll look at the statements in the *Apostles' Creed* that confess belief in this sacred institution.

The *Apostles' Creed* explicitly speaks of the church with these words:

**I believe in ...  
The holy catholic church,  
The communion of saints.**

These lines in the creed appear in the larger section dedicated to the Holy Spirit and his ministries. This is because the Spirit is the person of the Trinity most directly involved with the church on a daily basis. So, we could have discussed the church in our lesson on the Holy Spirit. But we have chosen to spend a full lesson on the church because it is so fundamental to Christianity and to our experience of life as followers of Christ.

As we mentioned in an earlier lesson, many Protestants find it odd to confess belief in the church, as if our faith in the church were somehow similar to our faith in God. When the creed says that we believe *in* the church, it does not mean that we trust the church for salvation. Saving faith is in Christ and Christ alone. But we do believe *in* the church in the sense that we believe the Bible when it teaches us about the church, and when it tells us that the church is important to Christians. And the same thing is true about believing *in* the communion of saints. We don’t trust other believers for our salvation. But we do believe the biblical teaching that God uses other believers to evangelize us, to minister to us, and to strengthen our faith.

Our lesson on the church will be divided into four central teachings that are reflected in the creed. First, we’ll look at the divine sanction of the church. Second, we’ll discuss the fact that the church is holy. Third, we’ll speak of it as catholic or universal. And fourth, we’ll explore the idea that the church is a communion. Each of these sections will help us understand the identity and nature of the church as it’s affirmed in the *Apostles' Creed*. Let’s begin by looking at the church’s divine sanction.

## SANCTION

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In the modern world, there are many Christians who believe that the church is unnecessary — or at least they act as if it is. In many cases, sincere believers think that organizations like the church are human inventions that intrude into our personal relationship with God. But Scripture teaches a very different perspective. In the broadest sense, the church is God's kingdom on earth, the congregation of his special people, and a central means through which he dispenses grace to those who are faithful to him. According to the Scriptures, the church is critical to establishing and maintaining our relationship with God.

When we say that the church is sanctioned by God, we mean that he created it for a purpose, and that he vested it with authority. In general terms, the Scriptures teach that God approves of the church. It is the organization he ordained to carry out his mission in the world. As Jesus himself said in Matthew 16:18:

**I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it (Matthew 16:18).**

The church is not the invention of fallen human beings. Jesus himself is the founder of the church.

So, even though we see flaws in the church throughout history, and sometimes churches turn so far away from the gospel that they are no longer the church of God, we must not conclude that the church is useless or unnecessary. The *Apostles' Creed* affirms this divine sanction for the church with these simple words:

**I believe in ... the ... church.**

As you will recall from prior lessons, the *Apostles' Creed* is a summary of the early churches' rules of faith. And those rules of faith were summaries of Scripture. So, when the creed professes belief in the church, it intends to affirm what the Bible teaches about the church. And the most basic aspect of the Bible's teaching about the church is that God appointed the church to fulfill his purposes in the world.

As we consider the church's divine sanction, we'll focus on three main ideas. First, we'll look at the Old Testament background of the church. Second, we'll focus on what Jesus did to establish the church during his earthly ministry. And third, we'll explore some implications of these biblical points of view. Let's begin with the Old Testament background to the church.

## OLD TESTAMENT

The concept of the church in the New Testament actually finds its roots in the Old Testament.

**Many would think that the church has started by the day of Pentecost when Jesus went up to heaven and he poured his Spirit on the disciples. But I think this is a misunderstanding of the nature of the church. I think the church is a continuity of the people of God in the Old Testament. God has called Abraham and the people of the Old Testament, and we can easily say that this is the church, the beginning of the church. So the church has started there, it continues in our age, and it will continue to the consummation, to the day when Jesus comes back from heaven.**

— Dr. Riad Kassis

The New Testament speaks many times of the church using the Greek word *ekklesia*. But this term was derived from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, *ekklesia* and its Hebrew counterpart is frequently used to identify the gathered nation of Israel. We see this in Deuteronomy 9:10, 31:30; Judges 20:2; 1 Kings 8:14; Psalm 22:22, 25; and many other places.

Even in the New Testament, where *ekklesia* has become a technical term referring to the church, the word is still used to refer to the assembly of Old Testament Israel. For instance, in Acts 7:38, we read these words in Stephen's speech to his murderers:

**[Moses] was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us (Acts 7:38).**

Here, the Greek word translated assembly is *ekklesia*, which is more commonly translated "church." This indicates that the assembly of Israel was the Old Testament equivalent and predecessor to the New Testament church.

And in 1 Peter 2:9, Peter also called the church by names that applied to Israel in the Old Testament. Listen to what he wrote:

**You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God (1 Peter 2:9).**

Here, Peter quoted from several Old Testament passages that spoke of the nation of Israel. And he applied Israel's special names to the New Testament church. In this way, he indicated that there are important continuities between these two groups.

**If we think about a text such 1 Peter 2 where Peter applies a whole series of titles that were originally given to Israel in the Old Testament now to the church: "You are royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God." We see that Peter is teaching a group of churches in a variety of regions who are predominantly Gentiles to see themselves as really the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel, and to recognize that that is their identity.**

— Dr. Dennis Johnson

Of course, this is not to say that the New Testament church is precisely the same as Israel's Old Testament assemblies. They are connected, but they are different as well. In Romans 11, Paul used two metaphors to talk about the relationship between the Old Testament assembly of Israel and the Christian church. He spoke of them as a batch of dough, and an olive tree.

Listen to what he wrote in Romans 11:16:

**If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches (Romans 11:16).**

First, Paul said that the Old Testament assembly was the firstfruits of the same batch of dough from which the New Testament church had been made.

Leviticus 23:17 required Israel to bring a firstfruits offering of bread to the Lord. The firstfruits were not a separate harvest. They were part of the whole harvest, and representative of the whole harvest. So, when Paul said that Israel and the New Testament church came from the same batch of dough, he indicated that both Israel and the New Testament Christians were part of the same organization, the same people of God, the same church.

Second, Paul said that the Old Testament assembly was the root of a tree, and that the New Testament church was the branches of this same tree. Paul actually expanded on this illustration for several verses. He compared the church throughout all ages to a cultivated olive tree. The Old Testament church, consisting primarily of Jews, was the bulk of the tree: roots, trunk, and many branches. And Gentile Christians were wild olive branches that had been grafted onto the tree. Put simply, Gentile Christians were grafted into the Jewish church. So, even though the church in Paul's day consisted of both Jews and Gentiles, its trunk and roots were the same tree that stretched back in time throughout the Old Testament. Yes, this new tree is different in many respects. It has been improved and built up. But it is still the same tree. In the same way, the Old Testament church has been improved and built up into the New Testament church. They are different in important ways, and they represent different stages of growth. But they are still the same church.

Now that we have considered the sanction of the church from the perspective of Old Testament background, let's see how Jesus built his church in a way that relied on but also advanced the Old Testament church.

## **JESUS**

There can be no denying that when Jesus came, his earthly ministry had a dramatic impact on the world and on the people of God. It is with good reason that many theologians have noted that Jesus did not simply perpetuate the old order, including its old church. At the same time, it's important to recognize that Jesus did not establish a church that was totally new. His church has great continuity with the Old Testament church.

Jesus only mentioned the church by the name *ekklesia* on three occasions recorded in the Gospels. In fact, these are the only times the word *ekklesia* appears anywhere in Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. All three of these passages are in the Gospel of Matthew — one in 16:18, and two in 18:17. Let's look at both of these verses more closely.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus spoke these words:

**I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it (Matthew 16:18).**

The word *oikodomeo*, translated here as “build,” can refer either to building something brand new, or to rebuilding and restoring what already exists. Although Jesus did not explicitly state which meaning he intended, what we have already seen from Paul's teaching in Romans 11 should incline us to favor the view that Jesus was rebuilding and restoring the Old Testament church.

Jesus' words in Matthew 18:17 are less ambiguous. Listen to what he said there:

**If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector (Matthew 18:17).**

In this verse, Jesus was talking about church discipline. And his exhortation was that an unrepentant person should be brought before the church or assembly. In the original context of Jesus ministry, the only church that existed was Jewish synagogues scattered throughout the region and the temple in Jerusalem. These were distinctively Old Testament forms of Israel's assemblies, but Jesus still called them “the church.”

The Old Testament required that disputes normally be handled by the elders, priests and judges — the representatives of the assembly that had been appointed the task of rendering judgment. We see this in places like Exodus 18, and Deuteronomy 1 and 19. Jesus affirmed this principle in his day, reminding his audience that they were still obligated to resolve their disputes within the assembly of Israel. But Jesus also intended his words to apply to his own church, the one he had mentioned earlier in Matthew 16. This is why Matthew recorded Jesus' words for us. You see, in the minds of Jesus and Matthew, just like in the mind of Paul, the church of the New Testament was a development of Israel's Old Testament assemblies. Jesus did not come to replace Israel with the church; he came to rescue and restore Israel in the form of the New Testament church.

As we look at the continuity between the Old and New Testament churches, it's important to recognize the central role that Jesus plays in tying these two churches together.

First, broadly speaking, the New Testament presents Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. As we see in Romans 8:1-4 and Galatians 3:16-29, Jesus is the faithful Israelite who keeps God's covenant and inherits all the blessings God promised to Abraham and Moses. And as we learn in Luke 1:32 and Acts 2:31-33, he is the son of David who restores David's throne and rules over Israel and Judah. Jesus did not break



with the past. He is the culmination of the Old Testament church, its most perfect member and minister.

And second, Jesus is the founder of the New Testament church, the one who brought the restoration and renewal that transformed the failing Old Testament church into the New Testament church. Scripture calls him the head of the church in Ephesians 5:23 and Colossians 1:18. He is the church's husband in Ephesians 5:22-33 and Revelation 19:1-10. And it's Jesus himself who appoints the church to receive his delegated authority in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. Jesus loves, approves of and authorizes the church.

**The Old Testament church's relationship to Jesus Christ is at its essence, at the heart, exactly the same as the New Testament church's relationship to Jesus Christ. For some Christians, the term Old Testament church would sound rather strange. We might think that the church was born on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. But, if we think of the Church as the people of God with whom He has established a Covenant, the people of God that God has redeemed through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, then the Old Testament church is simply the body of believers who look forward to God accomplishing salvation one day when the Messiah would come. And so the Old Testament church trusted in God's grace, God's shed blood, the blood of Jesus Christ on the cross. Old Testament Christians, Old Testament believers, Old Testament Church members look forward to the accomplished work of our Lord Jesus Christ. They trusted in the all-powerful, undeserved grace and mercy of God that would forgive their sins and set them right with God. So, at the heart of the matter, the relationship of the Old Testament believer and the Old Testament church, their relationship with God is exactly the same as our relationship with God, as New Testament believers and a New Testament church.**

— Dr. Samuel Ling

So far, we've looked at the sanction of the church from the perspective of its Old Testament background and the earthly ministry of Jesus. At this point, we're ready to consider some implications of these points.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

When we realize that Jesus ordained the New Testament church as the restoration and development of Old Testament Israel, one important implication is that there is fundamental continuity between Israel in the Old Testament and the Christian church in the New Testament. On a practical level, we should expect the community of God's people in the New Testament to reflect its Old Testament roots. Of course, some things

are different, and the New Testament takes care to point out these changes. But the New Testament also teaches that the church is very much like Israel.

There are too many points of continuity for us to mention them all. But it is worth taking the time to list three of them explicitly. First, there is great continuity of purpose between the Old Testament church and the New Testament church.

## **Purpose**

Theologians often summarize the history of the world in terms of three stages: creation, fall and redemption. In the stage of creation, which is described in Genesis 1–2, God created the world, the plants, the animals, and humanity. And in one special part of the world, he formed the Garden of Eden. And following God's mandate, it was humanity's responsibility to fill and subdue the earth, making it like the Garden of Eden, a place fit for God's holy, manifest presence.

In the stage of the fall, which is recorded in Genesis 3, humanity rebelled against God and was cast out of the Garden of Eden. And in humanity's fall into sin, the entire creation was corrupted. Paul explained this in Romans 8:20-22.

The rest of history makes up the stage of redemption, in which God is working to restore humanity to a perfect condition, and through humanity to restore creation to its pristine state. The final state of the period of redemption will be the new heavens and new earth that we read about in Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22, 2 Peter 3:13, and Revelation 21:1. And this redemption of humanity and creation has always been the purpose for God's church in both Testaments.

In the modern world, the church is still striving toward this goal of restoring creation. Following the priorities of New Testament teaching, we do this primarily by preaching the gospel, knowing that every person that comes to Christ represents a step toward the final state of redemption. We also do it by living as Christians in the world, showing Christ's love to our neighbors, and changing the cultures around us to reflect the glory, honor and character of God. And we do it by hoping and praying for the day when Jesus will return to complete his work of redemption.

A second point of continuity between the Old Testament church and New Testament church in the present age is that both assemblies of God's people include believers and unbelievers.

## **Believers and Unbelievers**

Remember that in the Old and New Testaments, the church of God was never perfect. In the Old Testament, some ancient Israelites were faithful to God and received God's blessings. But many others rebelled against God in unbelief and fell under his divine curses. We see this throughout the Old Testament, but it is perhaps most clear in the summaries of God's covenant blessings and curses, like the ones we find in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 27–30.

And the same kind of thing is true of the assembly of the followers of Jesus, the New Testament church. There are always unbelievers mixed among the believers in our

churches. For instance, Judas was unfaithful among the apostles. We are specifically told this in John 6:70-71, and we also see it in his betrayal of Christ. The mixed nature of the church is also evident in the letters to the churches in Revelation 2–3. These chapters of Revelation expect true believers in the church to overcome. But they also warn that those who do not overcome will demonstrate their unfaithful hearts. And much of the letter of 1 John is dedicated to distinguishing between true and false believers in the church. Beyond this, many other passages warn of false teachers in the church, or encourage those who profess belief to persevere until the end in order to prove their faith.

In 2 Corinthians 13:5, Paul also recognized this truth, and encouraged people to reflect on it. Listen to what he wrote there:

**Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you — unless, of course, you fail the test? (2 Corinthians 13:5)**

Paul wanted everyone to recognize that things like church membership, and baptism, and a credible profession of faith are not sure signs of saving faith in Jesus Christ. People who have never truly come to Christ in faith also do these things. So, Paul encouraged people in the church to examine themselves, to make sure that they were truly trusting in Christ for salvation.

Of course, as human beings we can't know the condition of another person's heart. We can only see their actions and hear their words. So, it's often impossible for us to tell who the true believers are. But the knowledge that there may be unbelievers in our congregations should still affect the way we view ourselves and others in the church. We should remember to keep teaching and preaching the gospel to the whole church in order to save those who have not yet come to faith — even though we might not know who they are. We should be receptive to those in the church that are seeking God, not discouraging them from coming to church even though they may not yet have trusted in Christ yet. And we should be inclined to be patient with others, knowing that there is a wide diversity in faith and maturity, even among people who have been in the church for a long time.

A third point of continuity between the Old Testament church and the New Testament church is that they had similar obligations before God.

## **Obligations**

The people of God in both Testaments were given the responsibility of loving God, spreading his kingdom throughout the world, and bringing him glory. With regard to love for God, Deuteronomy 6:5-6 taught the Old Testament church to love God from heart, to obey his law from the heart.

In the same way, the New Testament church is called to love God and to obey his law. As Jesus taught in Matthew 22:37, heartfelt love for God is the greatest commandment of the law. And as John taught in 1 John 5:3, heartfelt love for God results in heartfelt obedience to his commands.

**One of the questions that people often ask is whether the New Testament church is required to keep the Old Testament law. And the answer is an unequivocal yes and no. No in the sense that those specific prescriptions that are found in the Old Testament Torah are in fact removed for us. We are not required to circumcise our boys. We are not required to go to the Temple three times a year. We are not required... and you can go down the list. In fact, this was the discussion of the council in Jerusalem that's recorded in Acts 15. However, what is the intent of the Old Testament Torah? In the sense that the Torah reveals to us the character and nature of God and the character and nature which we are expected to share, in that sense, yes, the Torah still applies. And I think you see this in Paul's letters. Paul can say to his readers, "No, you are free. You do not have to do all those things. And since you're free, of course, you're not going to steal, you're not going to lie, you're not going to covet, you're not going to commit adultery." So that, is it necessary for Christians to keep the Torah for our salvation? Absolutely not. But as those who have been freely saved, are we expected to share and exhibit the life of God? Yes.**

— Dr. John Oswalt

Notice that God's people in both the Old and New Testaments were to spread God's kingdom. The Old Testament church knew that in Genesis 17:4-5, God had promised that Abraham would be a father of many nations. And as Paul taught in Romans 4:13, the Old Testament church knew that this promise obligated them to spread God's kingdom to the whole world by faith. In the same way, the New Testament church is still carrying out this plan by carrying the gospel to every nation. As Jesus commanded his church in Matthew 28:19:

**Go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19).**

A third obligation shared by Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church was to glorify God. For the Old Testament church, we see this in Psalm 86:12, Psalm 115:18, and even in New Testament descriptions of the Old Testament world, like Acts 17:24-28. It is also implied by the very fact that we are created in God's image, as Genesis 1:27 teaches. In the Old Testament world, images were statues of kings that reminded people to love, obey and glorify the kings. As images of God, human beings are designed to bring him glory.

And in the same way, the New Testament church is also to glorify God. This is taught in 1 Corinthians 10:31, 1 Peter 4:11, Revelation 4:11, and many other places.

The responsibilities God lays on the church are not burdensome — not when we are in Christ. If we had to stand before God on our own merit, we would be crushed under the weight of our obligations. But in Christ, true believers in the church are free from condemnation, able to work toward spreading the Lord's kingdom, keeping his law, and bringing him glory, without fear of failure. In fact, success is ultimately guaranteed.

Though we may encounter temporary setbacks, history is moving toward God's unstoppable victory. And it is advancing through the church. So, the more obedient we are — the more we keep our obligations — the sooner God will bring his kingdom to its glorious fulfillment.

By looking at the way the church developed through its initial stages in the Old Testament into the body that Jesus endorsed in the New Testament, it is clear that the church is fully sanctioned by God. The church exists because God wants it to exist, and because it serves his purpose. It is not a mere human invention. And it is not a corruption of biblical religion. It is the very bride and body of Christ, loved by God, and dedicated to his service and glory.

With this understanding of the church's divine sanction in mind, we are ready to turn to our second major topic: the fact that the church is holy.

## HOLY

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Throughout the Bible, many different words are used to refer to the idea of holiness. In the New Testament, the church is described as holy or sanctified. And people who are part of the church are called saints. All three of these words — holy, sanctified and saints — come from the same word group in Greek. “Holy” translates the adjective *hagios*. “Sanctified” is from the verb *hagiazō*, which means make holy. And “saints” is from the noun *hagios*, meaning one who is holy.

In the Old Testament, the same concepts are represented by Hebrew words like the adjective *qadosh*, meaning holy; the verb *qadash*, meaning make holy; and noun *qodesh*, meaning one who is holy.

Now, when we talk about holiness, many Christians are used to thinking that holiness is what distinguishes God from his creatures. It is often said that God's holiness is his quality of being entirely other, or entirely different from his creatures. But this is not the only way the word “holy” is used in Scripture. The Bible also refers to creatures and objects as holy when they have special qualities that reflect God's own holiness. And it is in this sense that the *Apostles' Creed* says that the church is holy.

We'll consider the idea that the church is holy in two parts. First, we'll explore the definition of the word “holy.” And second, we'll use this definition to identify the people that are holy. Let's begin with the biblical definition of holiness.

## DEFINITION

In Scripture, the concept of holiness is complex. But it is fair to say that when the Bible refers to someone or something as holy, the most basic idea is that the subject is morally pure, and in a related sense, “holy” can also describe people and things that are set apart for use in special service to God.

Let's look at both aspects of this definition, beginning with being morally pure. When we say that someone or something is morally pure, we mean that it is free from sin and corruption. In the sense of moral purity, holiness is rooted in God's character.

Scripture describes God as the Holy One in many places, such as in 2 Kings 19:22, Proverbs 9:10, Isaiah 30:11-15, and 1 John 2:20.

**It's not just that God is bigger than we are; it's not just that God is infinite and we are finite, but that he is morally *other* than we are. In him there is no darkness or shifting shadow. In him there is no evil impulse or inclination to do what is wrong. In him is not the slightest hint or desire to do evil.**

— Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III

Because God is utterly holy, anything sinful that enters his immediate presence is subject to his judgment and wrath. We see this in places like 1 Samuel 6:20, 2 Kings 24:3, and Hebrews 12:14. Although God may withhold judgment for a while, his holy presence will ultimately destroy those whose sin is not covered. As a result, anyone or anything that is to enter his presence must first be made holy. For instance, consider Isaiah's words in Isaiah 6:3-7:

**[The seraphim] were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty" ... "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said ... "[Y]our guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." (Isaiah 6:3-7).**

In this passage, Isaiah feared that he would be destroyed in the special presence of the Holy Lord because of his guilt or sin. So, the seraph, one of God's attending angels, cleansed Isaiah's sin with a hot coal taken from God's holy altar. By this cleansing, Isaiah was purified from sin — he was made holy. And because of his new holiness, he was able to stand in the Lord's presence without falling under judgment.

As we see in Isaiah 6, God's holiness is one of his communicable attributes — an attribute that characterizes him perfectly and completely, but that can also characterize his creatures in finite ways. The communicable nature of holiness lies behind the many biblical commands for believers to be holy, as in Ephesians 1:4, Hebrews 12:14, and 1 Peter 1:15-16. We are to strive to be as morally pure as God is. Of course, in our own strength we can never succeed in this attempt. But Christ himself has perfect moral purity. And when we are in him, his righteousness is credited to us, and we are counted as being absolutely pure, completely free from sin and corruption.

The second aspect of our definition of the word holy is that it describes people and things that are set apart for use in special service to God. In this sense, things can be holy even if they are not morally pure. As just one example, listen to what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 7:14:

**The unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband (1 Corinthians 7:14, NRSV).**

Here, Paul said that when a believer is married to an unbeliever, the unbeliever is made holy, or as other translations put it, the unbeliever is “sanctified.” The idea is that the unbeliever is identified with God and made useful for his service — even though the unbeliever has not been morally purified by God in Christ.

Some Christians find it strange to think that God sets apart imperfect and impure people for his service. But if we think about it, the Bible provides many examples of unbelievers that God set apart to accomplish his will. Probably the greatest example of this is the fact the apostle Judas betrayed our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. As Jesus himself taught, Judas was chosen for that very purpose. And his betrayal resulted in the purest, most holy offering ever rendered to God — the precious death of his Son. And if God is able to use even wicked unbelievers in his service, how much more can he be glorified by the special service of the holy ones that love him?

Now, as we have seen, the concept of holiness has many dimensions in the Bible. So we must be careful to understand what the Scriptures mean when they use words like “holy,” or “sanctified” or even “saints” as descriptions of the church. Sometimes, the Bible is calling attention to the fact that true believers in the church are morally pure because of the holiness of Christ given to them. At other times, it refers to people who are set apart from the world for special service to God, even if they are not true believers. And in some cases, it refers to the idea that true believers have been set apart for special service to God.

Whatever the case, one thing we know is that everything and everyone that is holy is special to God. We revere God’s name, refusing to take it in vain, because it is holy. We submit to the Bible because it is the holy word of our holy God. We respect and strive for moral purity in every aspect of life, knowing that the Lord calls us to holy lives. And we participate in and submit to his holy church. Wherever we find holiness, we recognize God’s hand, and we take special care to treat it with godly respect.

With this definition of “holy” in mind, let’s use it to explore the identity of the people that are holy.

## **PEOPLE**

Most broadly speaking, the Bible refers to people as “holy” when they are set apart from the rest of the world in order to be useful in special service to God. For example, the entire nation of Old Testament Israel was regularly called “holy” because God was in covenant with the nation. We see this in places like Exodus 19:5-6, Deuteronomy 7:6-9 and 28:9, and Ezekiel 37:26-28.

And this theme is also continued in the New Testament church. For example, Luke 1:72 speaks of Jesus as coming to fulfill God’s holy covenant. And because the church is understood to be the renewed and restored Israel of the new covenant, it is also called holy. We see this in Colossians 3:12, Hebrews 10:29, and several other places. As one example, listen again to Peter’s words to the New Testament church in 1 Peter 2:9:



**You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God (1 Peter 2:9).**

Here, Peter quoted from several Old Testament passages that spoke of the holiness of Israel, but he applied them to the church. His point was that the church in both the Old and the New Testaments was one and the same holy group.

As we have seen, though, not everyone in Israel or the New Testament church was a true believer. Even so, they were all considered holy because they were part of God's covenant community, that is, the people who were in covenant with God.

For the believers in the covenant community, their holiness exceeded the holiness of the unbelievers. Unbelievers were holy only because they were set apart for God. But believers were holy, not only because they were set apart, but also because in Christ they were morally pure and obedient to God. Of course, the goal was always for the entire covenant community to believe — for everyone to be faithful to God and to live morally pure lives.

One helpful way to think about holy people can be found in the traditional distinction between the visible church and the invisible church. Let's look at each of these categories, beginning with the visible church.

## Visible Church

**The visible church refers to the church we can see, obviously visible in that sense. The visible church, then, would be those who claim to be the church around the world. All of the denominations that claim to follow a Jesus Christ, claim to follow God's purpose and Word in the world today. That would include multiple denominations, it would include those who would not identify with any specific denomination but would consider themselves to be Christ's followers.**

— Dr. Mark Strauss

At any given moment, the visible church includes everyone who is regularly part of the gathered church, regardless of the condition of their hearts. There are several different ways people can be counted as part of the visible church. They can be confirmed in God's covenant, such as by baptism in the New Testament, or circumcision in the Old Testament. Or they can have or profess faith in Christ. In churches that don't maintain official membership, or that don't practice covenant confirming rites like baptism, they might be counted as covenant members simply because they regularly submit to the teaching of the church. Or, as Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 7:14, they can simply have a believing parent or spouse.

For example, in the Old Testament, the entire nation of Israel was part of the church, even though not everyone had saving faith. At the very least, they were all present within the nation. Beyond this, as God instructed in Genesis 17, they had all been confirmed in God's covenant through the circumcision of the males.



In the New Testament, we see something similar. Everyone who was part of the church gatherings was counted as part of the church. This included everyone who professed faith, everyone who was baptized, the children and spouses of believers, and often their household servants and slaves. For instance, when Paul wrote letters to various churches, he intended those letters to be read to everyone who was directly associated with those churches. And as we can see from his exhortations to Christians to test themselves to see if they really had faith, Paul fully expected that there would be unbelievers within the church. We see this in passages like 2 Corinthians 13:5. Jesus also had the same expectation in his parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matthew 13:24-30, where he said not to take the unbelievers out of the church. We also see the same thing in the letters to the churches in Revelation 2–3, where Jesus consistently encouraged them to overcome and to endure to the end. And we see the same emphasis in the warnings against breaking the new covenant in passages like Hebrews 6:4-8 and 10:29.

As just one example, listen to these words from Hebrews 10:29:

**How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? (Hebrews 10:29).**

In this verse, the author of Hebrews indicated that it was possible to reject Christ after having been sanctified in covenant with God. As the rest of the chapter makes clear, the punishment in view here is eternal suffering in hell.

**It's important to remember that in the visible church there will always be "wheat and tares," as Jesus said. You'll have the true people of God; you'll have those that appear to be. Just like you had the disciples who were those faithful to Jesus, but you had Judas in there. Paul had his Demas among those that were his disciples, if you will. So, there will always be those in a local church.**

— Dr. Donald Whitney

The mixed character of the visible church means that we must always be on guard against unbelief and error in the church. At the same time, the holiness of the church persists even when unbelievers are involved in its ministries. So, we honor the sacraments, God's holy ordinances. And we respect God's holy Word, even when it is preached poorly or hypocritically, as Paul taught in Philippians 1:14-18. The holiness of the church is both a warning against looking to the church in place of God, and an assurance that God uses the church effectively despite human sin and unbelief.

With this understanding of the visible church in mind, let's consider the idea of the invisible church.

## Invisible Church

**The visible church is the gathering of believers, Sunday by Sunday, in a local community, and across and around the world and it's made up of those who have shown some outward profession of faith. It's those who would meet together and to share the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and by that give an indication that they are active members of God's visible church.**

— Dr. Simon Vibert

Whereas the visible church includes everyone who is part of God's covenant community, the invisible church is composed only of those who have been united to Christ in salvation. For this reason, it is sometimes called the "true church." We might think of the invisible church as a smaller group contained entirely within the visible church. Generally speaking, we treat most people in the visible church as if they were truly saved, giving them the benefit of the doubt. But the reality is that only God can see the heart, as we see in Scriptures like Psalm 44:21 and Acts 15:8. And as a result, at this stage in history, only God can identify the invisible church with full certainty. Although we'll focus primarily on the invisible church as it exists on earth at any given moment, it is important to recognize that the invisible church also includes every believer who has ever lived, both before Christ's earthly ministry and after.

Usually, Scripture is addressed to the visible church rather than to the invisible church, but it generally gives its audience the benefit of the doubt with regard to their salvation. There are some noteworthy exceptions to this, such as 1 Corinthians 5, and 1 Timothy 1:19-20. And some of the letters to the churches in Revelation 2-3 are not very optimistic about their audiences. But in general, the authors of Scripture expected their readers to believe and trust in God, and to obey him faithfully. The goal was for everyone to be proven faithful — for the entire visible church to be part of the invisible church.

When Jesus returns, he will completely purify his church. He will purge all the unbelievers from it, so that the invisible church will be identical to the visible church. We see this in places like Matthew 7:21-23 and 13:24-30, 1 Corinthians 3:12-15, and 1 Peter 4:17-19. But until that time, the identity of those in the invisible church will be known with certainty only to God.

The fact that there is currently an invisible church within the visible church has important implications for everyone who claims to be a Christian. And one of the greatest implications is that the church needs to hear the gospel on a regular basis. We know there are unbelievers in the visible church. And that means that church membership is not enough to guarantee our salvation. And for this reason, we have to continue to teach, and to preach the gospel of redemption not only to ourselves, but to others as well. We have to make sure that the unbelievers in our congregations are invited to come to Christ and to be part of the invisible church.

When the *Apostles' Creed* affirms that the church is holy, it means that the church is in covenant with God, that it is set apart as God's special people, dedicated to his service. It also means that the ultimate goal of the church is moral purity, and even that the present experience of believers in the church hides them in the moral purity of Christ. Beyond this, as we submit ourselves to the Lord's commandments, we are constantly

purified from the sin we commit, bringing us closer to the goal of perfect holiness that God has laid out for us.

Now that we have looked at the divine sanction of the church, which gives the church its importance and authority, and at the idea that the church is holy to God, we are ready to address our third topic: the fact that the church is catholic or universal.

## CATHOLIC

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Our discussion of the term catholic will divide into three parts. First, we'll offer a definition of the word "catholic." Second, we'll look at the catholicity of the visible church. And third, we'll turn to the catholicity of the invisible church. Let's begin with a definition of the word "catholic."

### DEFINITION

As we mentioned in an earlier lesson, the word catholic means: universal; or including all Christians in all congregations. The word "catholic" translates the Latin word *catholicus*, which in turn derives from the Greek preposition *kata* and the adjective *holos*, meaning "whole" or "complete." It's not a reference to the Roman Catholic Church. Rather, it's a description of the unity that exists between all churches that faithfully follow Christ.

You will remember from earlier lessons in this series, that the form of the *Apostles' Creed* we have today developed from early baptismal creeds. At the time these early creeds were written, the various Christian churches around the world had not yet come together under a single, overarching church government. So, when the *Apostles' Creed* speaks of the catholicity of the church, it does not have in mind an organization of all Christian congregations. Rather, it's talking about the unity of the Holy Spirit that exists between all legitimate Christian churches, despite our organizational differences. At this stage in history, the word "catholic" was inclusive. It was meant to extend the name "church" to every Christian congregation.

This idea was in keeping with Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 1:2, where he addressed his letter in this way:

**To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ — their Lord and ours ... (1 Corinthians 1:2).**

Here, Paul indicated that the various Christian congregations in Corinth, which he referred to collectively as "the church ... in Corinth," were part of a larger church that included all who called on the name of Christ, regardless of where they lived.

In the middle of the third century, Cyprian of Carthage began to emphasize the role of bishops or priests in defining the church. In his *Epistle 68*, he had this to say:

**They are the Church who are a people united to the priest ... [T]he Church, which is Catholic and one, is not cut nor divided, but is indeed connected and bound together by the cement of priests who cohere with one another.**

For Cyprian, the church's unity was rooted in the unity of the clergy and its ministry. As this view began to grow, Christians also began to affirm the unity of the church in its unity of government. The church was a single organization that was present everywhere throughout the world because its bishops and priests were present throughout the world.

Even at this point, though, the word "catholic" was intended to be inclusive, encompassing all people and congregations that were called by the name of Christ and that were faithful to the traditional doctrines of the church.

Later, however, the church was fragmented by divisions. For example, in A.D. 1054 the Roman Catholic Church excommunicated the churches of Eastern Orthodoxy, and the churches of Eastern Orthodoxy excommunicated the Roman Catholic Church.

At this time, these churches began to use the word "catholic" in a new exclusive sense. By insisting that their own churches were catholic or universal, each meant to identify itself as the only valid church, and to condemn rival churches.

Later, in the wake of the Reformation of the 16th century, most Protestant churches took a different approach. Essentially, they returned to the original meaning of the creed, appealing to the earlier inclusive meaning of the word "catholic." In agreement with both Scripture and the *Apostles' Creed*, Protestant churches affirmed the unity of Spirit that all Christian churches share under the headship of Christ. And they recognized that this unity could be maintained even without solidarity in the area of church government, and without losing the positive contributions made by each of their denominations.

Recognizing the catholicity of the church in the modern world means affirming the validity of every church that maintains the doctrines affirmed in the *Apostles' Creed*. All Christians in all faithful churches are under Christ's covenant headship, and all true believers are blessed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. And for this reason, we should be eager to benefit from the gifts of every true Christian in every faithful church, and we should be willing to serve alongside them as much as possible.

With this definition of the word "catholic" in mind, let's look at the ways in which the visible church can be called "catholic."

## VISIBLE CATHOLIC CHURCH

When we combine our understanding of catholicity with our understanding of the visible church, we can define the visible catholic church as: one worldwide fellowship of all people in covenant with God under the headship of Christ. Obviously, this fellowship is one of Spirit rather than of church government. There is no single denomination whose government extends over all Christian congregations. Rather, the unity of the visible church is based on the fact that each church is in covenant with the same God, and under the covenant headship of the same Christ.

Historically, the visible church has traced its catholicity in a variety of ways. In some traditions, it is traced through church government. The church expands as it multiplies itself, each new minister being ordained and having hands laid on him by those who are already ministers.

But generally Protestants have emphasized that the unity of the entire church rests in our faith in Christ and the work of the Spirit, rather than in the succession of ordained ministers and priests. For this reason, new congregations can arise wherever unity of Spirit exists, wherever those who are in covenant with God gather in the name of Christ. Protestants insist that the visible church is catholic because it exists everywhere that people are in covenant with God, under the headship of Christ, in the unity of the Spirit.

One of the most common problems that many Christians face today is knowing which churches they should embrace as part of the catholic or universal church of Christ. In most parts of the world, there are so many varieties of churches that claim to be Christian that well-meaning Christians often go to one of two extremes. Either they open their arms too widely and embrace any church that claims to be Christian, or they exclude everyone except their narrowly defined congregation or denomination.

One helpful solution to this difficulty can be found in the three traditional marks of the church. These marks were formulated by John Knox in 16<sup>th</sup> century Scotland, but they represented the thinking of many Protestant churches during his day. Essentially, the marks enable Christians to distinguish genuine congregations of the visible catholic church from impostor congregations.

**The marks of the church were absolutely necessary in order to find out where the church is, because in reality, anything could call itself a church. In points of great theological crisis, such as in the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the question is, “Where is the true church to be found?” And thus the reformers, for instance, most carefully defined the marks of the church by saying, “Well it’s not the sign out front. It’s not the architecture of the building. It’s whether or not, first of all, there is the preaching of the word of God.” Wherever there is the right preaching of the word of God, there is a church. Wherever the ordinances, the sacraments, are found rightly administered, there is the church. Later marks included, especially, the discipline of the church — understanding that without that mark of discipline the purity of the church is surrendered, and thus the church eventually is surrendered in terms of its integrity and identity.**

— Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

Let’s take a look at each of the three traditional marks of the visible catholic church, beginning with the Preaching of the word of God.

There is no church or denomination that has an exclusive claim to the possession, interpretation, application or proclamation of the word of God. Some churches and denominations claim to have the exclusive right to interpret and teach Scripture. Some claim to have special enlightenment that makes their understanding of the Bible truer than all others. But no church perfectly manifests any of the marks, including the

preaching of the Word. God has given the Bible to the whole visible church. And he has given the whole visible church his Holy Spirit to help us understand the Bible. We see these things in passages like 1 Timothy 3:15, and Hebrews 4:11-13 and 6:4-6. Moreover, Scripture exhorts the whole visible church to read, to understand, and to teach God's word, as we see in Matthew 28:20, 1 Timothy 4:17, and 2 Timothy 2:15 and 3:14-17.

The second mark of the church is the right administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. These sacraments belong to the entire visible church, not just to one denomination or another.

It is the privilege and responsibility of every congregation within the visible church to administer the sacraments according to the Scriptures. We see this in the Great Commission's command to baptize in Matthew 28:19, and in Paul's teaching on baptism in 1 Corinthians 1:13-17. We also see it in Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper in Luke 22:15-20, where the Lord indicated that the supper was for his entire kingdom, for all those who were included under his covenant headship. Passages like these are the reason that most Protestant churches recognize and affirm the sacraments of other churches and denominations.

The third traditional mark of the visible catholic church is formal church discipline, such as excommunication.

No Christian enjoys exercising formal church discipline, especially excommunication. And this has often led churches to avoid the use of formal discipline. Of course, forbearance also has biblical warrant, as we can see in the parable of the wheat and the weeds, found in Matthew 13:24-30.

Even so, discipline has its place. There are times when a person's sin is so troublesome that it must be addressed through discipline — especially when it endangers the church and its reputation. At times like this, discipline is intended both to protect the church and to drive the offender to repentance. Scriptural grounds for formal discipline can be found in passages such as Matthew 16:19 and 18:18, John 20:23, and Titus 3:10. And we see it practiced in passages like 1 Corinthians 5:1-13. Because the entire visible church belongs to Christ and represents him on earth, it's important for every part of the visible church to protect Christ's people and to defend his honor through the proper exercise of church discipline.

The marks of the church are still important for us to consider today. They help us ensure that our own congregations remain within the boundaries of the visible catholic church in covenant with God under the headship of Christ. They also help us identify impostors and enemies of the church, so that we can warn Christians away from such groups, and so that we can proclaim to the world that these false groups do not represent our Lord and his gospel. They can also encourage us to work across denominational lines as we engage in ministry. When we recognize that the body of Christ is not limited to our churches or denominations, but extends universally throughout the world wherever the gospel of Christ is proclaimed, we can be encouraged to embrace everyone who is part of the visible church.

Now that we have looked at the universal nature of the visible church, let's consider some ways in which the invisible church is also catholic or universal.

## INVISIBLE CATHOLIC CHURCH

When we combine our understanding of catholicity with our understanding of the invisible church, we can define the invisible catholic church as: all people from all ages who have been united to Christ for salvation. As we have said, the invisible church is a subsection of the visible church, so it is also true that everyone in the invisible church is in covenant with God under the headship of Christ. But in order to distinguish the invisible church, our definition focuses only on how it differs from the visible church.

While there are many ways to think about the catholicity of the invisible church, we'll focus on just two. First, the invisible church is universal because there is only one Savior. And second, the invisible church is universal because there is only one true religion that can lead us to that Savior. Let's look first at the idea that there is only one Savior.

## **One Savior**

Scripture clearly teaches that Jesus Christ is the only savior available to humanity. He is the only one who has ever had the power to save us, and the only one who ever will. As Peter insisted in Acts 4:12:

**Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).**

Jesus Christ has always been the only Savior available to human beings. Our Lord himself proclaimed this truth in John 14:6 when he spoke these words:

**I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6).**

**Why is Jesus the only one who can save us? Well, the Savior must be perfect man as well as perfect God, and Jesus had to be a perfect man in order to stand in our place, in order to be our sacrifice, in order to be our substitute. And Jesus is the only one who could fulfill that role. And, of course, this is prepared for over redemptive history when God appointed the Lion of David ... to be the Messiah of God, to be the Anointed One. And Jesus is the great King to come after David, and Jesus holds this office, and so the whole Old Testament prepares us for the coming of Jesus. So, Jesus is the only one who meets the criteria for saving his people completely from sin.**

— Dr. John Frame

Jesus is the savior of Presbyterians, and Baptists, and Anglicans, and Methodists, and Lutherans, and Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox, and those in every other denomination of the visible church.

There is only one invisible church because everyone who is saved is united to the same Christ, the same Savior. He is the source of our unity. And because he himself is undivided, so are we.



A second idea related to the fact that the invisible church is catholic or universal is that there is only one true religion that can lead us to Christ.

## One Religion

It's important to realize that Christianity is not primarily a system of salvation, but a covenant relationship with God. That is to say, unlike other religions, Christianity is not fundamentally a method for obtaining salvation. Instead, it's a relationship between God and his people. Yes, faith is critical as a means to putting us in a right relationship with God. But the *big* question is: What is your identity as you stand before God? Are you a faithful citizen in God's kingdom? When God looks at you, does he see someone that is hidden in the covenant blood of Christ? Or are you a citizen of the kingdom of his enemies? Are you one who stands before God on your *own* merit, who must therefore pay the penalty for your own sin?

Sadly, those in false religions are members of enemy kingdoms. They are not part of God's covenant people, and therefore they do not and cannot belong to Christ. Only Christianity can give us access to the savior. This is why biblical Christianity denies the possibility that people can be saved through other religions, even if those people or religions appear to have good intentions.

**As we know, there are many non-Christian religions, what are sometimes called the “great religions of the world” because of their size and because of their influence. And it's often asked if a person who is not a Christian, but they are faithfully involved in one of these other great religions of the world, they are devoted followers of the doctrines and of the practices of that particular religion, if they are sincere in their practice, will they go to heaven even though they do not acknowledge Christ — maybe they've never even heard of Christ. Well, the Bible is clear on that. In John 14:6, Jesus was explicit in dealing with this particular situation. He said of himself, “I am *the* way; I am *the* truth; I am *the* life,” and if that were not clear enough he goes on to say, “And no one comes to the father, but through me.”**

— Dr. Donald Whitney

**Because of God's common grace we see all sorts of goodness in people's lives regardless of what religion they hold to. But we also see great evil in people's lives, and if we recognize the holiness of God and the fallenness of human beings, we realize that coming before God and having a relationship with him requires much more than merely ethical behavior. We can never do anything pleasing to God in our sinful condition. And so we need a Redeemer and a Savior, not just religious practice. And Jesus is the only one who provides that way to establish a relationship with God again.**



— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

As we have said, the living members of the invisible church are ordinarily contained within the visible church. For this reason, many theologians have made the point that salvation is not ordinarily possible for those outside the *visible* church. That is to say, if a person is not part of the visible church, that person has no ordinary opportunity to be saved.

The early church father Cyprian, who lived from A.D. 200 to 258, put it this way in his treatise *On the Unity of the Church*:

**Whoever is separated from the Church and is joined to an adulteress, is separated from the promises of the Church; nor can he who forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ. He is a stranger; he is profane; he is an enemy. He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother.**

Here, Cyprian was arguing against those who had left the visible church. And his point was that you cannot enter the invisible church to receive the rewards of Christ unless you are also part of the visible church. This argument is consistent with what we have said about the visible church being in covenant with God.

The fact of the matter is that salvation itself is a blessing of God's covenant. We see this in Jeremiah 31:31-34, Luke 1:69-75, Romans 11:27, Hebrews 7:22-25, and many other places. As just one example, listen to Jesus' words in Luke 22:20, as he instituted the Lord's Supper:

**This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you (Luke 22:20).**

On the night of his arrest, Jesus said that the blood he would shed in atonement for our sins would be a covenant. In other words, salvation in Christ's blood comes only through his covenant.

Since God's covenant is made with the visible church, salvation ordinarily comes *through* the visible church. This happens when people within the visible church come to faith, or when the visible church gains converts through evangelism. Of course, sometimes people also get saved apart from any interaction with the church. But when this happens, it's important to recognize that something unusual is taking place — something *extraordinary*.

Because the invisible church is universal, only those who are faithful to God's covenant can be saved. There is no hope that people in other religions will make it to heaven by being good by the standards of their own religions. We must evangelize. We must tell people about the only Savior. We must bring them into the only covenant community, the earthly kingdom of God, and teach them to love and obey its Lord and King. The catholicity of the invisible church is a great encouragement to all of us who are saved — it is our solidarity in Christ. But it's also a terrible warning to everyone who has not yet come to Christ.

So far in our lesson on the church, we have looked at the divine sanction of the church, and we have seen that the church is both holy and catholic, or universal. At this point, we are ready to turn to our last major topic: the idea that the church is a communion of saints.

## COMMUNION

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In our discussion of the word “holy,” we saw that the term saints refers in a general way to everyone that is in the visible church, and in a special way to everyone that is in the invisible church. So, as we discuss the communion of saints, we’ll focus our attention on the term that we have not yet investigated, namely communion.

In ancient Greek versions of the *Apostles' Creed*, the word for communion is *koinonia* (κοινωνία). Scripture commonly uses this word to refer to the fellowship that exists between members of the church, especially through their union with God. We see this in passages like Acts 2:42, 2 Corinthians 13:14, and 1 John 1:3.

The New Testament also uses *koinonia* (κοινωνία) to refer to sharing, often of materials goods and money. We see this in Romans 15:16, 2 Corinthians 9:13, and Hebrews 13:16. It is also used to describe the sharing of the gospel — not primarily in evangelism, but in a mutual way within the church, as in Philippians 1:5 and Philemon verse 6.

In line with these ideas, the word “communion” in the creed has traditionally been taken to refer to the fellowship between members of the church; to the sharing of things we possess in common; and by implication, to our mutual dependence on those who share with us.

As we explore the communion of saints, we’ll organize our discussion around a distinction that should be familiar by now. First, we’ll look at the communion that exists within the visible church. And second, we’ll consider the communion that exists within the invisible church. Let’s begin with the communion of saints in the visible church.

## VISIBLE CHURCH

While there are many aspects to the communion that exists in the visible church, we’ll focus on just three: first, the means of grace; second, spiritual gifts; and third, material goods. Let’s start by looking at the means of grace.

### Means of Grace

Means of grace are tools or mechanisms that God ordinarily uses to apply grace to his people. John Wesley, one of the founders of the Methodist Church, described the means of grace in a way that reflects the beliefs of many Christian traditions. Listen to what he wrote in his *Sermon* number 16, based on the text of Malachi 3:7:

**By "means of grace" I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.**

**The means of grace, which some people refer to as spiritual disciplines or works of piety, depending on the tradition that you come from, when I hear that phrase, "How do they work?" The thing that I always want to say is, "They don't work. It is God who works; it is the grace of God that is at work." But, the means of grace provide us with the opportunities to receive and process that grace. They create the time and the space to pay attention to the grace of God at work in our lives. I like to think of them as pipelines. We don't want to confuse the pipe with the water. It's the water of life that we want to receive. But it's the pipelines that help carry that water to us. So that we can drink of that water, the means of grace enable us to drink of water of life.**

— Dr. Steve Harper

Practically speaking, there are many means God uses to apply grace to us, including such things as adversity and suffering, faith, charity, and fellowship itself. But traditionally, theologians have focused especially on three particular means of grace: the Word of God, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and prayer. All three of these means of grace belong to the visible church as a whole, including both its believers and its unbelievers.

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, a traditional Protestant summary of Christian teaching, describes the means of grace in this way in its question and answer number 88:

**Q: What are the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?**

**A: The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.**

Scripture talks about the benefits of these means of grace in places like Romans 10:14, 1 Corinthians 10:17, and 1 Peter 3:12, 21.

Now, even though the benefits of redemption are only for those who are saved, that is, only for the invisible church, the ordinances themselves are for the entire visible church. Remember, the invisible church is just that: invisible. We don't know who's in it. It doesn't hold its own worship services. It doesn't have its own ministers. It doesn't have its own church government. Those things are appointed to the *visible* church. In the same way, all our means of grace — our preaching, baptisms, celebrations of the Lord's Supper, and prayers — can be observed by others. They are visible. They are things that

the visible church shares in common, and therefore they are part of the *communion* of the visible church.

The means of grace have always been important ordinances through which God ordinarily applies the blessings of redemption to our lives, and we should take full advantage of them. We should preach the gospel that converts, and teach the word that brings wisdom and maturity. We should celebrate the sacraments that visibly present the gospel and seal us in God's covenant. And we should pray for God's grace and forgiveness, for conversions and maturity, for help to resist sin, for protection from evil, and for rescue in our times of need. In all these ways and more, the means of grace are valuable ministries of the visible church.

Besides the means of grace, the visible church also possesses spiritual gifts in common.

## Spiritual Gifts

Now, it's important to understand that when we say spiritual gifts belong to the entire visible church, we are not saying that everyone in the visible church is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. They are not. Only believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Even so, the Holy Spirit uses all spiritual gifts for the purpose of building up the visible church. For some people, this means increasing their sanctification and growing toward maturity. For others, it means bringing them to faith first. But in all cases, everyone in the visible church is exposed to spiritual gifts, and even allowed to participate in them in some measure. And because of this, it is right to say that spiritual gifts are shared by the entire visible church.

That spiritual gifts are shared by the entire visible church is demonstrated in several ways. First, they are used in public worship services. We see this explicitly in 1 Corinthians 14:13-26. Second, the gifts are given to build up the entire church. We see this in places like 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 and Ephesians 4:3-13. Third, Paul specifically said that tongues are a sign even for unbelievers within the church, as we read in 1 Corinthians 14:21, 22. Fourth, unbelievers within the church are condemned for failing to benefit from spiritual gifts in Hebrews 6:4-6. In these ways, Scripture makes it clear that believers and unbelievers alike share and partake in the spiritual gifts of the church.

Like the means of grace, spiritual gifts are a great benefit to the modern visible church. They are useful for proclaiming the truth and converting the lost. They are useful for helping believers grow in faith and maturity. And many gifts, such as mercy and hospitality, are useful for meeting the earthly needs of God's people. Whenever the Holy Spirit grants gifts to his people, we should encourage them to use those gifts for the benefit of all, and not to withhold them from anyone in the visible church.

Communion also exists in the visible church in the way that members share their material goods with each other.

## Material Goods

Part of the meaning of communion, or *koinonia* (κοινωνία), in the Bible and early church was that Christians shared their material goods with others in the visible church who were in need. The word *koinonia* (κοινωνία) was often used to refer to contributions for the poor, as in Romans 15:26, 2 Corinthians 8:4 and 9:13, and Hebrews 13:16.

Even when the word *koinonia* (κοινωνία) is not used, this aspect of communion can be seen in the practice of early Christians. For example, many early Christians sold their possessions and gave the proceeds to the church, as we see in Acts 2:44-45, and 4:34-35. In the early church, some heroic Christians even sold themselves into slavery in order to free others or to raise money to feed the poor.

The early church father Clement, who lived from A.D. 30 to 100, wrote about this practice in a letter commonly known as *1 Clement*, which he wrote to the Corinthians. Listen to these words from 55 of that letter:

**We know many among ourselves who have given themselves up to bonds, in order that they might ransom others. Many, too, have surrendered themselves to slavery, that with the price which they received for themselves, they might provide food for others.**

The sense of communion was so strong in the early church, and believers considered others so much more highly than themselves, that they were not only willing to share their possessions, but even to sacrifice their freedom for the sake of giving to others.

Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 8:3-5 help explain their thinking. Listen to what he wrote there:

**They gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability... [T]hey urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints... [T]hey gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will (2 Corinthians 8:3-5).**

In this passage, Paul described the generosity of the Macedonian churches. And he explained that it was their dedication to the Lord that led them to be so sacrificial in their sharing with the Lord's visible church.

Sharing material goods with those in need is an important part of the life of the visible church. The entire church is God's people, his covenant community. He cares for everyone in it, and he calls us to do the same. To put it plainly, all we have belongs to the Lord. He has only made us stewards of his property. And that means that our charity and giving are the *Lord's* ministry to his people, and *his* witness of the gospel to the world. So, if we want to be faithful to him, we must not withhold the Lord's property from his people who need it.

Now that we have explored the communion of the saints in the visible church, we are ready to consider the communion that the invisible church shares.

## INVISIBLE CHURCH

We'll look at two main ideas related to the communion of saints in the invisible church. First, we'll talk about the union that all believers share with Christ. And second, we'll speak of the union we share with other believers in the invisible church. Let's begin by looking at our union with Christ.

## Union with Christ

The New Testament frequently mentions that believers are united with Christ. This idea is most commonly presented by saying that believers are "in Christ," or "in Jesus" or "in him." On the one hand, this union means that Jesus represents believers before the Father, especially in his death and resurrection. But on the other hand, it means that believers are mystically united to Jesus in a vital way. Jesus dwells in believers, and they dwell in him.

**I think one of the central teachings in the apostle Paul in particular is that we're united with Jesus Christ; that we belong to him. When we look at all of Biblical revelation, I think the Bible teaches that we are either in Adam or we're in Christ. Of course Adam was the first human being. All human beings are born as sons and daughters of Adam. And therefore they come into the world as sinners. They have a sin nature. They are alienated from God. What it means to be saved and redeemed and to trust in Christ is to be incorporated into Christ, to belong to Christ. What it means to be united with Christ is to be part of his person.**

— Dr. Tom Schreiner

**It is in union with Christ that we receive all the benefits of Christ. Historically we understand these benefits to be: justification, sanctification, adoption — all of the things that we describe in terms of what we receive in Salvation. They are only received in Christ. And therefore, it is important for us, it is essential for us, to be united with Christ to receive these benefits. And how do we receive these benefits, or how are we united to Christ? We are united by faith, and faith alone. It is faith that brings us into union with Christ, that gift of faith that comes from God.**

— Dr. Jeffrey Jue

Theologians often speak of this vital union between Jesus and believers as *mystical* because the Bible doesn't explain exactly how it works. But Scripture does make it clear that this union involves both our bodies and our spirits. We see this in John 15:4-7, Romans 8:9-11, and many other places. As just one example, listen to Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 6:15-17:

**Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? ... He who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit (1 Corinthians 6:15-17).**

Charles Spurgeon, the famous Baptist preacher who lived from 1834 to 1892, spoke of our union with Christ in his sermon *The Matchless Mystery*, based on Ephesians 5:30. Listen to what he said:

**A vital union exists between us and Christ... It is not unity; it is identity. It is more than being joined to; it is being made a part of, and an essential part of the whole... Christ ... must have his people; they are essential to him.**

It is amazing to think that our union with Christ is so vital that Christ himself would be at a loss if we were taken from him. He loves us, and died so that we could be his prize, his inheritance. Because we are united to him, every believer should feel great security in our salvation, great assurance of pardon, and great encouragement of our right standing before God. We should draw strength from this union, being nourished by Christ and sustained by his Spirit. And we should feel boldness in our fellowship with God, knowing that because we are hidden in Christ, we are perfect in the eyes of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This does not mean they will not discipline us for our sins. But it does mean that when they do, it will be a work of love, intended to bring us to a maturity and perfection fit to be united to God forever.

Now that we have looked at believers' union with Christ, we are ready to look at our union with other believers in Christ.

## **Union with Believers**

Because every person in the invisible church is united to Christ, believers are also united to one another in him. We see this in Romans 12:5, Galatians 3:26-28, Ephesians 4:25, and a number of other places. Listen to the way Jesus spoke to the Father about this communion in John 17:22-23:

**I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:22-23).**

Whereas our union with the visible church is relational and experiential, our union with the invisible church is spiritual and ontological. Our very beings are knit together through Christ and his Spirit. As a result, we all have equal dignity in Christ, as Paul taught in 2 Corinthians 5:14-16, Galatians 3:28, and Colossians 3:11. And we even experience each other's joys and pains, as we read in 1 Corinthians 12:26.

And the communion of the invisible church is not limited to the church on earth; it also extends to the church in heaven, to those believers who have already died and gone

to be with the Lord. Just as believers on earth have a mystical communion with each other in and through Christ, we have the same communion with everyone who is united to Christ — including the believers who are now in heaven. Scripture teaches this idea in places like Hebrews 11:4 and 12:22-24.

One striking image Scripture uses to teach this fact is the portrayal of the church as the bride of Christ. There is a sense in which the visible church is treated as the bride of Christ, but this is always with a view toward the perfection of the bride in the invisible church. We see this in the Old Testament in Isaiah 54:5-8, Hosea 2:19-20, and Ephesians 5:26-27. And the fulfillment of these images appears in the perfected invisible church in Revelation 19.

Listen to the account of John's vision in Revelation 19:6-8:

**Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) (Revelation 19:6-8).**

Here we see that the bride of Christ consists of all the redeemed saints of all ages, in communion with each other. We all stand as one, wearing one wedding gown composed of the righteous acts of every believer.

Scripture draws many applications from the fact that believers are united to each other in Christ. It teaches us that every believer is valuable and even indispensable to Christ. It teaches us to honor each other, and to minister to each other. It teaches us to be compassionate toward each other, to be kind, to be gentle and patient, and to forgive. It teaches us to treat others the same way we want them to treat us, and the same way we treat ourselves. Because in our union with them through Christ, they are just as much a part of us as our own bodies are.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson on the *Apostles' Creed*, we have explored the doctrine of the church. We have looked at the church's divine sanction as God's special community. We have discussed the fact that the church is holy, being both set apart and pure. We have spoken of its catholic or universal nature. And we have explained the ways in which it is a communion of saints.

As modern Christians, our experience of the church is often very different than it was in the days of the Bible, or even in the days when the *Apostles' Creed* was formulated. But the underlying realities of life in the church have never changed. The church is still God's covenant people. It is still his chosen vessel for bringing the gospel to the world, and for turning the world into his kingdom on earth. We, the church, are



holy to the Lord. We are his kingdom. We are his people, united to each other in him.  
And the Lord himself is working through us.

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