

The Apostle's Creed: I Believe in the Holy Catholic Church

Ephesians 2:11-22

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

As we work through the Apostles' Creed, we now come to the confession, "I believe in the holy catholic church." We'll begin our study of that particular affirmation from the Scripture in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

There are some challenges in explaining this particular part of the confession of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the holy catholic church." The first challenge is that this is the first clause of the creed that divides Christians. When you get to this clause of the creed, Roman Catholics and Protestants part ways as to what we mean when we say, "I believe in the holy catholic Church." Our Roman Catholic friends, when they profess this clause, mean that the Roman Catholic Church is the one true church, it is holy because it produces saintly people, and is preserved from radical sin; it is catholic because it is world wide in its spread; and it is the only place where the full faith is held in trust for all men. Now, obviously that's not what we are professing when we say the Apostles' Creed on Sunday mornings here at First Presbyterian Church. Protestants mean something a little bit different when we say, "I believe in the holy catholic Church." We mean that we believe in the worldwide fellowship of believers and their children, whose head is Jesus Christ. We believe that that world wide fellowship is holy, because it's consecrated to God, it's set apart by His Spirit, even though it is imperfect in every manifestation. And we believe it is a catholic Church because it embraces all true believers everywhere apart from specific denominational affiliations. So, obviously we mean something quite different when we say this particular phrase.

But it's also a challenge for a more significant reason. Here at First Presbyterian Church, we are evangelicals; that is, we are gospel-believing, Bible-believing Christians, often called evangelicals as a subset of the larger main stream Protestant churches of the last 100 years or so. And evangelicals, by and large, have not had a very high view of the Church. Evangelicals have been suspicious of the Church, because of its liberalism. Evangelicals often are either a subset of a larger liberal denomination, about which they are a bit skeptical, or they have actually joined a congregation or a church that has separated itself from a larger liberal denomination. So evangelicals can be a bit skeptical about the Church.

Evangelicals are often suspicious of heavy-handed denominational bureaucracy.

They've seen them in the hand of the liberals, and so they're very careful about committing themselves to a particular denomination. Evangelicals have often, especially in the last 50 years or so, seen ministry, as far as they are concerned, more effectively done through para-ministries than through the Church. Everything from youth work, men's discipleship, cultivation of home evangelism and world missions, they have seen done through para-ministries, and they don't sense a particular significance for the Church.

Furthermore, evangelicals tend to focus more on personal salvation than they do on the corporate body, which is created through personal salvation. Many of you may know, as an example of this, that a Protestant minister, Harold Camping, who owns a number of radio stations around the United States, especially in the western United States. He was the man who wrote the book, *1994*. This book predicted that Jesus Christ would come again in 1994. He didn't. Well, he's written another book now, and this book is basically saying that Christians need to leave the organized Church. They need to leave all organized churches because the Church has now come to the need of its time. We're in the age of apostasy and all of the churches are apostate. So Christians need to simply go into fellowship groups with no organized ministry and no longer affiliate themselves with local churches. He comes from a Dutch Reformed background, a Calvinistic background, out of the Christian Reformed Church, but he has come to this conclusion. And unfortunately, it's a conclusion consistent with what a lot of people in evangelicalism think of the Church--which is, not much. So against the backdrop of those two challenges, we're going to study what it means, as Christians, to confess, "I believe in the holy catholic church." Let's turn our attention to God's word in Ephesians 2:11.

"Therefore, remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called 'Uncircumcision' by the so-called 'Circumcision,' *which is* performed in the flesh by human hands—*remember* that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were formerly far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both *groups into* one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, *which is* the Law of commandments *contained* in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, *thus* establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near; for through Him, we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone*, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit." Amen.

And thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our heavenly Father, we ask that You would enable us to see the truth about Your body, Your people, Your assembly, Your Church; and from Your word, believe it, embrace it, and live it for Jesus' sake, Amen.

Matthew Henry once said that “when we take God for our God, we take His people for our people.” Do you believe that? If you do then, you can confess that “I believe in the holy catholic Church.” It is that same spirit that caused Timothy Dwight to sing, “I love Thy kingdom, Lord.” Do we truly love God's people because we love God? Augustine put it even more forcefully. He said, “He cannot have God for his Father, who refuses to have the Church for his mother.” Both of those statements are true. The Church is the vehicle that the Lord Jesus Christ has established for discipleship and witness in this world. He often uses other means; His kingdom is as wide as the world as well as the means that He uses, but the ordinary means whereby He builds up His Church begins with the local church. And yet, evangelicals have been ambivalent about the Church. Evangelicals can be ambivalent about church membership and its importance, and they often see the Church as peripheral to Christian life.

I want to look with you at the three components of this part of the Apostles' Creed. “I believe in the holy catholic Church,” but I want to do it a little bit out of order. I want to start with the Church, and I want to look very quickly at what the Bible says about the Church, and then I want to look at what it means for us to say that we believe that the Church is holy and catholic. So let's begin by looking at this passage that is right here before us in Ephesians 2:11&12.

I. God's corporate, churchly plan of salvation.

Here Paul tells us a lot about the Church; so much that we don't have time to look at all of it, but I want you to zero in on this one truth which comes through loud and clear. Here in Ephesians 2, Paul is teaching us about God's corporate, churchly plan of salvation. In other words, he's speaking to us here about the significance of the Church in the plan of God. In essence, Paul is saying to a group of Gentile Christians, who along with Jewish Christians are not only part of his universal Church but also part of his local church in Ephesus. He's saying to those Gentile Christians, “You are not second-class citizens.” It has been God's plan since the beginning to create a Church which was not simply Jewish but contained both Jews and Gentiles, indeed, people from both every tribe and tongue and people and nation would be gathered into this church and two groups which were once in opposition, once hopelessly and helplessly divided would now be made into one body.

And you, my Gentile Christian friends, are part of that body. In other words, Paul is saying that the corporate dimension of God's plan of salvation is inescapable; it is not simply that God desires to bring individual Christians into saving relationship with himself through Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, it is that God intends to bring Christians into relationship with one another especially expressed within the context of the local church through His plan of salvation, even Christians as different as Jews and Gentiles. It will be the glory of God to the world to show people who are different from one another in various and dramatic way living together in harmony loving one another, caring for one another, serving one another, witnessing together, building up the same kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ together. It will be the glory of God to witness by that kind of display in the world.

The church then is a display of God's glory, and Paul is saying that it has been, my Gentile friends, God's plan from the beginning not only to save you but also to bring you into one body. Look at the language that he uses in verses 21 and 22. "In whom the whole building being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit." In other words, my Gentile Christian friends, you together with your Jewish Christian brothers and sisters are being brought into one body, one building, one people, one temple, one house, one family and together you will magnify the Lord. The old wall of the ceremonial code and the mosaic code has been broken down fulfilled by Jesus Christ and now you are on the same standing with your Jewish Christian brothers and sisters.

Paul is saying that this plan of God to bring together in the Church these two at enmity peoples, the Jewish people and the Gentile people, is part of God's central plan of redemption. In fact, it is a focal result of that plan of redemption. Again, he plans not only to save individual Gentiles but also to incorporate them into the body of Christ, the Church, the temple of the living God.

Now, that's one purpose, but Paul didn't invent it. This is not a new teaching that the Apostle Paul pulled out of the hat somewhere that no one had ever heard of before, because the fact of the matter is, when you study the Scriptures, God's corporate plan of salvation has been the same in the Old and the New Testaments. Let me give you just a few examples of that. Turn first to Genesis 15, verses 1-5. There you will see God reiterate His promise to Abram, and Abraham's response is very interesting. God tells Abraham that he will be His great blessing. "Do not fear Abram, I am a shield to you and your reward will be very great." And look at Abram's response. "O, Lord God, what will you give me since I am childless and the heir of my house is Eleazar of Damascus?" Of course, there is a context there; the context of God's promise to give Abram a seed who will carry on his line, his spiritual as well as his physical lineage, but isn't it interesting that when Abram is assured by God that God will give him every spiritual blessing, Abram's response is, "What does that matter if I can't pass it on?" In other words, he is thinking distinctly, not only familial, but also in

corporate categories, and that shouldn't be surprising. Turn back to Genesis 12:2, because when God first called him out of the Ur of the Chaldees, He told Abram this, "I will bless you and make your name great and you shall be a blessing, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." In other words, God's agenda was not just for Abraham and a tiny little group to find and to know His blessing, but also through Abraham for all the families of the earth to be blessed. In other words, there was a corporate component to God's plan of salvation. He was in the business of creating a gigantic people, a multitude which no man can number that would receive his heavenly salvific blessing. And it would be through Abraham that He would do this.

This plan is carried out throughout the Old Testament, and time after time, you find the gospel, as it were, going to the Gentiles, whether it's Namaan the Syrian, or whether it's Jonah being sent to the Ninevites, much against his own inclination, I might add, to share the word of salvation to them. And the Ninevites repented and came to faith in the God of Israel.

And this continues in the New Testament. Turn to Matthew 1:21, where, for the very first time the work of the Lord Jesus Christ is described in the New Testament, and notice what is said. Matthew tells us that Jesus was given His name, "Because He will save people." No. That's not what it says. "He will save *His* people." In other words, the people of God would be saved through Jesus Christ. All those who trusted on God through Jesus Christ, all who place their trust in Jesus Christ as He is offered in the gospel, are the people of God. Jesus came to save *His* people. Not just "people individually," not just "individuals in personal relationship with Him," but "A people, the people of God." That's who He came to save.

And the author Hebrews puts this more strikingly in Hebrews 11:39-40, after listing those amazing heroes of the faith in the Old Testament, we read "And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised." In other words, all of these old covenant saints, so faithful to God, did not receive the final blessing that God had promised, "that city that has foundations whose architect and builder is God," and all the blessings that go along with it. They didn't receive it. Now he's going to explain to you why in verse 40, "because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us, they should not be made perfect." That is absolutely staggering. Do you realize what the author of Hebrews is saying? He is assuring us that the reason why the old covenant saints did not receive the fullness of the promise in their time is that God wants all of His people to enjoy those promises at the same time together. In the great resurrection, the living and the dead in Christ will be raised to glory, in body and soul, to experience all the fullness of the benefits of Christ together. We see again the corporate plan of God, to bring together all the people of God into one body.

Now, the New Testament celebrates that truth in a variety of ways. The New

Testament reminds us, for instance, that the relationships that we have in the body of Christ are meant to mirror the relationships that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit manifest in the one true God, the Holy Trinity. So, the New Testament makes it clear that we are the family of God the Father, and we are the body of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we are the temple of the Holy Spirit. But the New Testament also makes it clear to us that to be the Church is to be the body of the risen and reigning Christ. When you're united to Jesus Christ, you're united to all who are united to Jesus Christ. That is, you are a member of His body, and you can't really love Him if you don't love His body. John will say, "Don't say you love God if you don't love the brethren." You can't do it. You can't love God and hate the brethren, or ignore the brethren, and so in the New Testament there is both a vertical and horizontal dimension to our Christian discipleship. We love God and we love His people, and we love His people because His people are God's people and thus our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The New Testament also makes it clear that the Church is the covenant community, a people that has been called into gracious covenant relationship with God. Paul is celebrating that for the Gentiles here in Ephesians 2, where he says there was a time when you were strangers and aliens to the covenant promises, but now God has brought you in. He's made you a new community now, of Jews and Gentiles, that are all the people of God. So when you study the Church, you can't just look at isolated verses which use the word Church, you have to go to these passages and these great themes throughout the Scripture that highlight for us the importance of the doctrine of the Church. The main point here is that God's saving purposes in the Bible have always had a corporate dimension. God is out to save a people, a family, and a body, a Church. Not lone rangers, not isolated individuals, for we are not saved by being in the Church visible, but we are saved into the Church invisible. We are saved by grace through faith in Christ alone, but having been saved by grace through faith in Christ alone, we are saved into a body. We have an indivisible connection with our brothers and sisters in Christ who have been saved by grace through faith in Christ alone. We are saved into a body as Christians.

II. God calls His people to holiness.

What do we believe about that body? We believe that body is holy and catholic, and now we're back to the Apostles' Creed again. What does it mean when we say, "We believe the Church is holy?" Now some of you may be saying, "I don't want to join that church because they're a bunch of hypocrites there." And I know the response is, "Come on, one more won't hurt." But let's take that seriously for a moment. There are lots of people who can point their finger at the failings of the Church, and when we say we believe the Church is holy, we are reminding ourselves that God calls His people to holiness. Turn with me to 1 Peter 1:13-16, where Peter says to the Christians, "Prepare your minds for action. Keep sober in the Spirit. Fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the

revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the holy One who called you, be holy yourselves in all your behavior, because it is written, 'You shall be holy for I am holy.'

Peter is describing to us what the Church is and what the Church is called to. The Church has been made holy, set apart from the world by the Holy Spirit, but the church is called to holiness. We're called to pursue holiness, to be different from the world.

But isn't that our great challenge? Isn't the great challenge to the evangelical Church in America today precisely that we are worldly? We are so much like the world. We think like the world, we love the things of the world, we act like the world, but you know what friends? The test of what you believe is what you choose and what you do. Do you want to know what a person believes? Watch what they choose and what they do. And Peter is saying, "Choose and do what God would have you do, not what the world would have you do. Show yourselves to be different." Every Christian is called to holiness, because the Church is called to holiness, and a lack of holiness, my friends, is the single greatest barrier to our corporate witness.

Recently I spoke with a friend whose daughter is undergoing a tremendous struggle in the faith. In talking with her, she said to him, "You know, nobody in this church (speaking of their local church) is a hypocrite, and their lives are all focused on God. And I'm just not there." You can imagine that would be heart breaking for my Christian, God-fearing, gospel-preaching friend to hear his daughter say, "that that's not where her heart is." But do you see that by the testimony of that local congregation, however imperfect it might be, that child at least perceives that they are different, and she's coming under conviction because she knows that's what a Christian ought to be like. Christians ought not to be hypocritical, and Christians should have lives focused on God.

I want to tell you, my friends, that if that could be said about First Presbyterian Church, we would have real space problem. Folks from the community would be knocking the doors down in order to be a part of this fellowship, if it could be said, "These people are holy, they are not hypocrites, their lives are consumed with God." Wouldn't it be a wonderful thing for someone to say about First Presbyterian Church? And my friends, we're called to reject worldliness and embrace the holiness of God, and that ought to show in your conduct in school, it ought to show in your treatment of the opposite sex, in your honesty, in your respectfulness, in your willingness to think and talk and act like a Christian when you feel the pressure to do otherwise. When you make a profession of faith and you're in high school, your sexual purity, the purity of what you do with your body, reflects upon the reality of that profession of faith, and it reflects upon the whole body. One sin, Achan's, almost brought the whole nation under condemnation. Don't think that your individual sins can be hidden in their impact upon the totality

of this local body. The Church is called to holiness.

III. God calls all His people to love and care for all His people.

The Church is called to catholicity--to be catholic. In other words, God calls all His people to love and care for all His people. There is a problem of individualism and self-centeredness, isn't there. The Christian who is catholic in his outlook is a Christian who has a love for the kingdom, the Church, and all of God's people, even if they're not in your own local congregation, even if they're not in your denomination. If they're true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, you have a love for them no matter how different they are from you. You have a love that transcends your other differences, and you want to express that love practically, tangibly. Here's what Jesus says to the apostles in John 13:34-35, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Isn't it interesting that one of the last things that Jesus had to tell His disciples, before He went to cross, was, "Guys, love one another, please." Think about it. This is a very disparate group of people. On the one hand, there's Simon the Zealot; he's part of a nationalist movement that wants to forcibly kick the Romans out of Palestine. And then there's Matthew who works for the Romans collecting taxes. Now you think that Democrats and Republicans have a hard time getting along in a local congregation? Try Hamas and the Israeli cabinet living together in a local congregation. There it is--Simon the zealot and Matthew. No wonder Jesus has to say to them, "Brothers, love one another." It's not surprising is it, that Luke tells us that on the way to and after the upper room, do you know what the disciples were talking about? They were talking about which one of them was the greatest. That's what they were talking about; the gospels tell us that. And Jesus says, "Brothers, love one another."

Now, I want to tell you that's actually very encouraging for a preacher because about half of what a preacher does in pastoral care is saying to members of his congregation, "Brothers, love one another." Friends, we have enormous differences in this room. There are different political opinions, there are different social standings, there are sometimes job occupations that pit us against one another in the community; sometimes we're competitors; sometimes we're the sue-er and the sue-ee. But all of these things can pit us against one another, and Jesus is saying the way that the world knows that people are My disciples is that they tangibly care and love for one another; they put one another before themselves, and they love one another no matter what their differences are.

Friends, is that your kind of spirit within this congregation? Let's go back to Packer's quote. "The acid test of what you believe about the Church is expressed in the life of the local church." What does my life say then about what I believe

about the Church. My friends, we are called to a holy catholic Church. That will show in the way we relate to friends who don't go to the high school that we go to. It will show in the way we relate to friends that didn't go to the state university that we went to. It will show when we relate to friends who are from different racial backgrounds than ours. We're all friends in Christ with enormous differences, but we love one another in spite of those differences and in fact, because of those differences because those differences gloriously show the unity of the body of Christ as God brings us together apart from and in spite of and because of those differences.

One last thing. You may be sitting here saying, "Yea, but at First Presbyterian Church you're a bunch of hypocrites." And you may be rejecting the gospel message because you see our weaknesses, our hypocrisy, and our failings in holiness. Let me say one thing to you. Jesus and His apostles in the New Testament told the Church that we would struggle with that. In fact, it is a standing Christian doctrine that there will be no perfect church on earth. So, my friends, when you see hypocrisy in the Church, all you're seeing is the proof that Jesus spoke the truth. Don't use that as an excuse because the church is not the place where perfect saints gather; it is a hospital for sick sinners to get well. Come join us and get well with us in Christ. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the foundation of the Church, Jesus Christ. We glory in the fact that the foundation of the Church is not us else the Church would have fallen and the gates of hell would have prevailed. But because He is the foundation, the head and cornerstone, the Church will never perish. Help us then to love her with all her blemishes, with all her failings, with all her weaknesses because she is the family of God on earth and grant that we would be part of that family. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A Guide to the Morning Service

The Worship of God

"We worship God because God created us to worship him. Worship is at the center of our existence, at the heart of our reason for being. God created us to be his image—an image that would reflect his glory." (Hughes Old)

The Hymns

Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation

This hymn is set to Henry Purcell's glorious and joyful tune "Westminster Abbey" (and even if you don't know that tune by name, you'll feel like you've known it all your life when you hear it!). The hymn text itself comes from a very ancient Latin

hymn translated by the famous John Mason Neale, and is focused on praise to God for His divine creation: the Church.

The first stanza rivets our attention on the foundation of our salvation, of our inclusion in the Church: “Christ is made the sure foundation” – the Lord Jesus himself! The rest of the stanza piles up accolades for the Captain of our salvation: He is the head of the Church, He is the cornerstone, He is chosen of the Lord, He is precious to the Father, He binds the Church together, He is our eternal helper and our only confidence. Now that's something to sing about!

In the second stanza, our focus of praise shifts to consideration of the glorious task of the church: the eternal worship of our triune God. “All that dedicated city” (what a beautiful phrase), the hymnist says, is dearly loved of God on high and pours our perpetual songs to God the Trinity. The praise is still to God here, but the praise is thanking God for loving us as He does and for giving us the privilege of participating in eternally worshiping Him.

The third stanza of the hymn is a petition. It pleads with God to come “to this temple” (the Church) and to bring with Him His needed lovingkindness – in order to graciously hear and answer our prayers, and to pour out His undeserved blessings on us. The phrase, the plea “thy fullest benediction shed within its walls always” grips the heart even as we think of it.

The fourth stanza continues this petition, asking the Lord to “vouchsafe” (that is, to be gracious enough to grant) the prayers of His people as well as the blessed eternal promises which He has made to us for here and the hereafter. The final stanza breaks into an unrestrained doxology to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (which manages, impressively, in about sixteen words to stress in an orthodox manner the massive theological concepts of the simultaneous threeness and oneness of God, the equal power of the persons of the Trinity, the identical glory of the persons of the Trinity, and their shared eternity).

Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken

This hymn speaks of the glory of God's Church (spoken of as “Zion”). Though the Church may seem weak and despised by the world, yet she is the apple of God's eye.

I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord

Written by the famous Timothy Dwight, for many years president of Yale; this is thought to be the oldest hymn still in common use written by an American. Its theme, the kingdom of God, fits well with the theme of today's message: the kingdom of God as it finds expression in the universal and local church.

The Church's One Foundation

Yet another hymn on the subject of the Church. One of the reasons for singing it is because of the appropriateness of the words. The first stanza focuses on the foundation of the Church, Jesus Christ. The second stanza glories in the fact that though she is gathered from every tribe, tongue, people and nation, she is one – one church, one body, one family. The third stanza reminds us that the Church is indestructible and will never end, no matter how dire the trial – a truth we truly need to hear. The fourth stanza tells us that even though plagued by divisions (“schisms” — properly pronounced “sih-zums,” by the way), the Church will go on and prevail. The fifth stanza assures that the Church militant will one day be the Church triumphant. The sixth stanza, after reminding us of the communion we already enjoy here with the Triune God and the saints above, ends with a prayer that we would truly be part of “the invisible church” — that is, God’s true people.

This guide to worship is written by the minister and provided to the congregation and our visitors in order (1) to assist them in their worship by explaining why we do what we do in worship and (2) to provide them background on the various elements of the service.

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