

The Church (Part 1)

We creed concludes with a number of assertions related to the church. It comments in various ways on what the church is and how it functions. We will walk through these things in two parts. This week we focus our attention on the question: What is the church?

Discuss

What is the church and why does the church exist?

The Holy Catholic Church

The Creed concludes with a few assertions related to the church. They are introduced with the broad profession of: "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church."

There are two things to unpack here before we talk about what the church is and what the church does. Namely, what does it mean to be holy and what does it mean to be catholic?

Holy Church

The Creed affirms that the essence of the church is wrapped up in the character of holiness. To say something is holy implies two things.

1. Holiness means that we are "set apart."
2. Holiness speaks about our moral character. A holy church is a church that reflects God's moral goodness.

The Holy Church is set apart, consecrated to God, and a reflection of his character.

Catholic Church

The word "Catholic" is derived from the Greek word, *katholikos*, which means "according to the whole" or "universal." To say that we believe in the Catholic Church is to say we believe that there is one universal church that transcends denominational divisions.

Discuss

What things threaten our unity today? What divisions do you see in our midst (church, small group, family) that need to be addressed?

"The" Church

The church is not a building. The word "church" is derived from the Greek word *ekklesia*, meaning "the gathered people of God." What sets this gathering of people apart is that they are God's people, the gathering who have the very presence of God's Spirit in their midst.

“The gathered church is the place of God’s own personal presence, by the Spirit. This is what marks off God’s new people from ‘all the other people on the face of the earth.’”
-Gordon Fee

We don’t attend church; rather, we are the church.

Image: Church as an Eschatological Community

It is helpful to understand our identity as God’s gathered people in terms of an eschatological community.

As God’s people living in a time where God is unfolding his cosmic plan of restoration, we live as an eschatological community. That is, we live God’s unbroken future in the midst of our present broken world. As we live this way, we point to what the world looks like when God is fully reigning and ruling in peoples’ lives. We point to the future day when God’s Kingdom will come in its fullness.

This view of the church as an eschatological community helps us understand how we should live. Our practice as believers is not about following rules, but rather about living the life we are destined for—a life marked by God’s own character and shaped by His kingdom way of life.

“Paul [sees] the church as an end-time community, whose members live in the present as those stamped with eternity. We live as strangers on earth; our true citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20). Ethical life, therefore, does not consist of rules to live by. Rather, empowered by the Spirit, we now live the life of the future in the present age, the life that characterizes God himself.” - Gordon Fee

Discuss

What do you think it looks like to live the life of heaven here on earth today? What would you expect to see? What would you expect to do?

Three Functions of the Church

There are three central functions of the church:

1. **Worship** – the one and only God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
2. **Sanctification** – the ongoing work of transformation by the Spirit in the life of the believer.
3. **Mission** – making God’s restorative plan know to everyone. We are saved not for our exclusive benefit, but so that the world would know what God is doing to rescue his creation from death to life.