

Scripture Readings for June 19, 2022

Acts 4:32-35.¹

³²All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Galatians 3:26-29

²⁶So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Ephesians 4:1-6

⁴As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

1 Peter 2:9-10

⁹But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

¹ See also Acts 2:42-47 (and 6:1-7).

Sermon: We Believe in the Church

I mentioned at the beginning of this series on the Nicene Creed that its contents were controversial both at the time of writing and ever since. But as we have seen in what it says about the Trinity, the writers we're simply quoting various texts from the New Testament rather than inventing something new. As such the Creed points people *back* to the Bible for more details and is *not* a replacement for it. In addition to being controversial, the Creed today is *scandalous* in what it claims, because it goes against all appearances to the contrary. For example, to proclaim God as Creator goes against the apparent reality that the world is random or meaningless.² Moreover, to speak of Jesus as God-in-the-flesh is scandalous because many are not really convinced that God even *cares* for the world, let alone would *enter* it as a person to end up being crucified. And to speak of the church as "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic" seems the last straw because the appearance of the church today - not to mention the fiascos of church history - is far from that in every way, as we will soon see. If the church, the most physically tangible and public evidence for Christianity, doesn't match up to the Creed's claims, then it becomes a stumbling block to faith. This then is the so-called "scandal of appearances," because the Creed claims that *true* reality is far from what's self-evident (or is merely physical) and asks that we believe in this true reality by faith. The poor witness of the church in the court of public opinion makes this a hard sell. Dare we say, "We believe in the church?" And what does that mean? Let's explore!

The Creed affirms that not only does God create, save, and gives life, but that the church is the *continuation* of God's presence in the world through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Now this notion doesn't come out of thin air, nor is it justification for the *institution* of the church with its popes, doctrines, and polity – although some have misunderstood it as doing precisely that.³ Rather, just like before, the Creed simply quotes scripture. For example, Paul frequently mentions we are the "*body of Christ*,"⁴ and by that he means a gathering of the faithful in the Spirit is the place where the risen Jesus finds expression in the world.⁵ That is a *theological* statement and it therefore asserts that there is *more* to the church than we can see with our eyes, and we are proclaiming that belief to be true. Paul is not naïve; he knows from first-hand experience that churches are messy and are far from ideal because we are all fallible human beings. To see that, just read 1 Corinthians! It was the chaos and infighting within that church that prompted him to write that much-loved chapter on love.⁶ Nevertheless, to state "We believe in the church" is to say that the church is God's trial-and-error laboratory for communal life and that *community* itself is an essential feature of God's kingdom.⁷ Like the people of God in the Old Testament, the "people of the risen Messiah"⁸ seek their salvation as a

² This arises from scientific materialism and from the problem of evil and suffering.

³ Moreover, some argue that Nicaea enables a closer merger between Church and State and so birth Christendom.

⁴ See Eph 4:7-13; 1 Cor 12:27.

⁵ At least in principle - and "the faithful in the Spirit" is critical here. However, the Holy Spirit is not confined to the church, but you would at least expect the Spirit's presence to be found there.

⁶ See 1 Cor 13. (Remember, the church contains 'saints and sinners' in the *process* of being sanctified by the Holy Spirit.)

⁷ Or new creation.

⁸ Which is a long way of saying "Christians," since "Christ" is the Greek of the Hebrew "Messiah."

group of people, and not just as individuals.⁹ Christianity is a *shared, public* faith and *not* merely a private one. With that said, let's briefly consider what is meant by, "We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church."

First, that the "church is *one*." One way to understand what "oneness" means is to say that it's a principle of the communal life *within* the church: the church is one because it lives a life of *authentic unity*. This ideal is portrayed in the early Jerusalem church in the book of Acts, as we heard earlier. But as Luke continues to relate the church's beginnings, it doesn't take long before squabbles appear. It's interesting that the origin of that disunity is due to *racism* and *social inequality within* the church.¹⁰ Sadly, those tensions are still to be found within the church today. Those kinds of things were later evident in Corinth too, because by then the church explicitly included non-Jews as well as Jews. They had different social customs, dietary laws, ethical behavior, and histories. Nevertheless, Paul stresses the intended oneness, writing: "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form *one body*—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free."¹¹ Social status and race are irrelevant, *we are all one in the body of Christ!* "Whether or not you believe that is the case," says Paul, "live like you are what God says you are!"¹² Given one portrayal of the Trinity is "unity within diversity,"¹³ then this is also an appropriate description and goal of the people of God. "Oneness," then, describes a new way of living and this defines the *culture* of life "in Christ." What's going to make this vision a reality in life of the community? *Love*. If there is love evident *within* the church, then God's presence is also seen within the church.¹⁴

Second, we believe that the "church is *holy*." In Leviticus we hear this scary summary of the Mosaic Law: "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy."¹⁵ And in case we want to dismiss this as Old Testament thinking, Jesus repeats it in the Sermon on the Mount!¹⁶ However, it's worth remembering that Jesus' says that in the context of *loving* your enemies, and that links back to the oneness I mentioned moments ago.¹⁷ Paul also states that "God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life."¹⁸ And that's not simply in terms of *personal* behavior and integrity, but the character of the Christian *community* as a whole. That's because Paul regards our bodies as "the temple of the Holy Spirit."¹⁹ That means God's holy presence *abides within* us, and therefore we are to pursue *holiness*.

⁹ One of the things about the individualism all our times is that we forget that Christian salvation does not only pertain to individuals, it is understood in *communal* terms.

¹⁰ See Acts 6:1-7, and a team of seven were appointed to address these internal concerns.

¹¹ 1 Cor 12:12-13. See also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Unity-Diversity-and-Interdependence.pdf>.

¹² Three features of Paul's enduring message for the church are (a) Unity *not* division, (b) interdependence *not* individualism, and (c) building up both the body and connecting with God.

¹³ Note unity and diversity are *not* incompatible. (See also see Eph 4:7-12 and 1 Cor12:4-11.)

¹⁴ See John 13:35; 1 John 4:7-8, 11-12; 16b-21.

¹⁵ Lev 19:2; 11:44.

¹⁶ Matt 5:48; cf. Luke 6:36.

¹⁷ See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Love-Your-Enemy-Really.pdf>.

¹⁸ 1 Thess 4:7; see also 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 7:1.

¹⁹ 1 Cor 6:19-20.

The Holy Spirit is also known as the Sanctifier, and is the One who over time, and with our cooperation, makes us holy – or makes us more like Jesus himself. Yes, we *are* reminded every week of our assurance of forgiveness - that God sees us as a forgiven people or as righteous before God. In one sense it's a done deal, because of Jesus and the cross.²⁰ In another sense, being made holy is life-long process of transformation. And we all have different starting points and progress at different rates. So, let's be patient with each other and stop making comparisons! We tend to imagine that this holiness calling is only for special people, who are eventually recognised, are canonized, and become saints. But that is a major misunderstanding! We are *all* to become *like* Christ, who – in my estimation – didn't project a "holier than thou" attitude because *no one* wants to follow someone like that!

Third, "we believe the church is *catholic*," which doesn't mean Roman Catholic but *universal*. That not only means that it's worldwide and for all times, it's also all-embracing, it's a reconciling community. And that inclusivity crosses all kinds of *social* barriers: ethnicity, cultural, politics, gender, sexuality, status, and wealth - as well as *theological* differences. This was modeled by Jesus having table fellowship with sinners and social outcasts. Paul was adamant we have all been adopted into God's new community in which: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus."²¹ And again, this is still a work-in-progress.

Fourth, "we believe the church is *apostolic*," which means we have been *sent* on a mission. In the Book of Acts, Jesus promises his followers: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the farthest parts of the earth."²² And we are also reminded of that in the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's gospel, where the risen Jesus says "Go and make disciples of all nations . . . and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."²³ We are here today because numerous people earlier in history believed that to be true and acted upon it.

These so-called four *marks* of the church, to be "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic," describe an ideal that the church has never - and never will - fully realize. The Church of Jesus Christ is necessarily a place of tension and conflict, as well as a place of reconciliation. That's because the church contains free human beings whose varied life experiences leads them to think and behave differently, even about shared ideals. The challenge for us is to *all* grow into *greater maturity*, and to find ways of becoming *more united, more Christ-like, more inclusive, and more convinced* of our good-news mission to those around us. It requires a willingness and a determination to work together. Timothy Luke Johnson writes: "The greatest threat and challenge to the church is *not* its sheer survival, or even its success in obtaining followers, but in its ability to sustain life together with integrity." Paul understood this, which is why many of his letters emphasize creating unity and avoiding schism. All this takes discernment, wisdom,

²⁰ See Rom 8:1-2.

²¹ Gal 3:28.

²² Acts 1:8.

²³ Matt 28:18-20.

humility, grace, patience, and – of course - love. It's the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit! Now I suggest that it's important to have such ideals to work towards, without them becoming burdensome. If we don't have that, we'll settle for less than what God desires for us as a church, and it cheapens the cost of the cross.

Moving on, and being both realistic and frank, we don't need external critics to state what we know full well for ourselves. *Unity!* It's a joke; prayers for Christian unity only highlights how disunified we are. And church history is marked with division and the fragmentation of the church into a myriad of denominations. Even now, the Presbyterian Church in Canada is threatened by theological schism. *Holiness!* That's also a joke. Whether we are talking about the Southern Baptist Convention or the Roman Catholic Church, sexual abuse together with financial and ethical scandals repeatedly plague the church – as it has throughout history. The wider world sees us as hypocrites not holy! *Universal!* The church is far from an inclusive, reconciling community. And the world desperately needs to see modeled for it a welcoming, forgiving, and loving community.²⁴ *Missional!* Many in the West today are no longer convinced of the truth of the gospel message and so have nothing to proclaim. The light that we once had has, in places, all but gone out. Influential theologian Lesslie Newbigin, after spending nearly 30 years as a missionary in India returned to England only to find that his sending Presbyterian church had lost its confidence in the Christian faith. He spent the next 25 years trying to rectify that. And Swiss Reformed theologian, Emil Brunner reminds us that, "The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning. Where there is no mission there is no church." The Church's *essence* is therefore *missional*; we are meant to be a *sent* church that *re-presents* Christ to others in every generation.

In conclusion, when we proclaim that "We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church," it means that despite all the physical and historical evidence to the contrary, we believe in this *theological* vision for Christ's church. As we have seen, this ideal wasn't invented by the writers of the Nicene Creed, but comes from the words of Jesus, Paul, Peter, and others in the New Testament. They were writing when the new Christian movement was a struggling minority, and so still speaks into our situation today. The key question we all have to answer is "Do we believe in the Church as defined by the Creed?" If *not*, what *kind* of church *do* we believe in – and why? And if so, how are we progressing towards fostering church unity, holiness, acceptance, and having confidence in the good news of Jesus Christ? If we believe in the Holy Spirit as the *Life Giver*, as discussed last week,²⁵ and that the Spirit *still speaks* through the prophets,²⁶ that God has *not* finished with us yet, then we have good grounds to believe in the Church, even when the evidence is to the contrary. And if we believe what Jesus said to Peter, namely that "on this rock I will build my church, and the power of death will *not* overpower it,"²⁷ then we have a further basis for our conviction. Let's therefore have confidence that the God of history will complete what he has begun. Amen. Let us pray.

²⁴ As Archbishop William Temple said, "The church is the only society that exists for the benefit of its non-members."

²⁵ See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/We-Believe-in-The-Holy-Spirit.pdf> .

²⁶ And so *reforms* the Church.

²⁷ See Matt 16:17-19.