

One Holy Catholic and Apostolic

The church is the assembly of God's people. The Greek word for church, *ekklesia*, is derived from the verb 'to call out' – it means a congregation, a community. In the New Testament it refers to all God's people (Eph 1:22; 3:10; 5:23), but more frequently, to local communities of believers (Acts 5:11; Rom 16:4).

The church is the family of God (Eph 2:18; 3:15; 4:6); the body and bride of Christ (Eph 1:22, 23; 5:23-32; Rev 19:7), and the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16; Eph 2:19-22).

In the Nicene Creed (325 AD) we confess that the church is 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic'.

(1) *One*. Christ has one body, the church, made up of many members. 'For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ' (1 Cor 12:12). The church's unity is not the result of centralized and world-wide organization. The unity is spiritual, as the Scripture insists, 'for by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body' (1 Cor 12:13).

The church of Christ is manifest on earth in many different local communities of believers. Through having distinctive slants and characteristics, the local churches find their unity in their faith in Christ, their Head and Saviour, and in their love for one another.

(2) *Holy*. The church is a holy because it set apart from the rest of the world and consecrated to God; it is not sinless, but it is cleansed and forgiven, 'sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all' (Heb 10:10). All Christians are saints (holy ones), 'sanctified by faith' in Christ (Acts 26:18). The Lord is building us together into a holy temple, the dwelling place of God by the Spirit (Eph 2:19-22).

(3) *Catholic*. The church is catholic (meaning 'universal') because it is made up of people of all languages and countries, Jews and Gentiles. With one mind and one voice we praise the Lamb: 'You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation' (Rev 5:9).

(4) *Apostolic*. The church is built on the teaching of the apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20). Their doctrine is recorded in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. A particular church is truly apostolic as long as it faithfully embraces the teachings of the Bible. A church is not necessarily apostolic because its leaders claim to be historical successors of the apostles. The Bible warns us that false leaders – the apostle Paul calls them savage wolves – arise even from among the bishops of the apostolic churches (Acts 20:29). Doctrine, and not historical lineage, is the acid test for the church.

Every disciple of Christ has the privilege and duty join other believers in a local church for mutual edification. 'Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching' (Heb 10:24, 25). The lone Christian is a contradiction to the saving work of God – can there be a family if the brothers and sisters never meet? Can the members of the body -- the eyes, the hands, the ears -- live independently of one another? Can there be a temple if the stones are scattered?

Christ Jesus loves his bride, the church; he gave himself for her to sanctify and cleanse her. One day the bride will be gloriously presented to him, and they will be united as a man and his wife in marriage. The church is blessed in Christ; he finds his fulfillment in her just as a husband in entirely happy with his wife.