

THE NICENE CREED ON THE CHURCH

* We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

[J.S. Bach, a devout Lutheran, wrote a musical setting for the Liturgy known as the B-minor Mass. In his setting for the words printed above, there are two melody lines. One is a traditional Latin plainchant melody, and the other is a traditional Lutheran chorale melody. They are played and sung simultaneously, and they interweave and harmonize perfectly.]

The Creed speaks of (1) the Unity of the Church, (2) the Sanctity of the Church, (3) the Catholicity of the Church, and (4) the Apostolicity of the Church.

[NOTE: Some versions of the Creed omit the word "holy" in describing the Church. When the traditional translation of the Creed into English was made in the 1500's, the oldest available Greek manuscript of the Creed omitted the word "holy", and therefore the translators mistakenly supposed that it was a later addition. In fact it is part of the original Creed, and almost every recent printing of the Creed includes it.]

(1) The Church is One, and the bonds of Unity are Faith and Love. Heresy violates the former, and schism the latter. Heretics violate the unity of the Church by holding to beliefs or practices that are incompatible with the Gospel that the Church has been commissioned to proclaim, so that the Church cannot include them in her fellowship without compromising, diluting, or denying the Gospel message. Schismatics violate the unity of the Church by requiring from others, as a condition of fellowship, assent to doctrines or practices that are not an essential part of the Gospel (though they may be compatible with it). We ought therefore to ask ourselves: "Have I sinned against faith by denying or failing to uphold doctrines essential to the message of the Gospel? Have I sinned against love by requiring as a condition of Christian fellowship agreement with me on matters where Christians may differ and still remain Christians?"

(2) The Church is Holy. Some persons understand this to mean that individual church members are virtuous -- that you can tell which group most truly embodies the church by noting which group has the fewest members who are or ought to be in trouble with the police. This understanding implies that holiness is something that we confer upon the Church -- that by working hard to improve our own personal scores on the Virtue chart we boost the team average. But the older idea is that Holiness is something that the Church confers upon us -- that Our Lord Jesus Christ is Holy, and that He has called us to holiness in Him, and that He brings us into fellowship with Him through the community of believers, by the Sacraments, by the preaching of the Gospel message, by the mutual love and fellowship of the community, by experience of praying and being prayed for, of learning and teaching, of forgiving and being forgiven. We ought therefore to ask ourselves: "Am I opening myself to God's grace as He makes it available to me through the Christian community? Instead of concentrating on my dissatisfaction with those persons in the Church who appear to be unsatisfactory channels of

grace, am I looking for, and taking advantage of, whatever spiritual nourishment is available? Am I, in my turn, being open to being used by God as a channel of grace to others? Am I making it easier for them to grow in Christian faith and love? Am I ready to forgive, and ready to seek forgiveness of others?

(3) The Church is Catholic. The Greek word KATHOLIKOS comes from KATA (a preposition with various meanings depending on the context, often meaning "down" or "negative" as in "catabolic" or "catastrophe" or "cathode," but also often meaning "according to") and HOLOS (meaning "whole" as in "holistic medicine," which claims to treat the whole patient and not just the particular ailment complained of), and thus means, literally, "according to the whole." The meaning of the word as applied to the Church has evolved.

Probably the first Christians to use the term were simply distinguishing the entire Church worldwide from particular congregations. If you said something about the Church, they would ask, "Do you mean the Church in Corinth, or the Church Catholic?"

Around AD 175, Irenaeus of Lyons used it in disputing with the Gnostics. Many Gnostics claimed that their teaching was "the real Gospel." They said that Christ had had two messages. The first message, called "exoteric Christianity," was his message preached to the ordinary man, who was not very "spiritual," and was capable of understanding only a very simple message. The second message, called "esoteric Christianity," was told only to a chosen few who had shown themselves worthy of it, and was concealed from the masses, because they would only misunderstand and pervert it, and would persecute the chosen few who were sufficiently elevated spiritually and intellectually to be able to understand it. For a modern parallel, look for the advertisements of the Rosicrucians (AMORC). They advertise in a large range of magazines, at one time including the National Geographic. Their pitch is that they are a secret society that has existed since ancient times, and that Socrates, Archimedes, Galileo, Isaac Newton, Benjamin Franklin, and other respected men now safely dead were all members. No proof, of course. It is a secret society. They say, "Our message cannot be entrusted to the masses, but only to those who after careful examination are found worthy to learn it. So send us twenty big ones and we will spill our guts."

In replying to the Gnostics, Irenaeus argued that Christians have never had a secret doctrine in the Gnostic sense. He argues that Christ had no secrets from The Twelve (John 15:15), that the Twelve accepted Paul as one of themselves (2 Peter 3:15), and that both Paul (Acts 20:26f) and the original Twelve (Matthew 28:20) were under strict commandment to pass on to their converts all that they had been taught. The Gospel, the whole Gospel, is to be declared to all men. All are called to a saving knowledge of God in Christ. In this sense, the Church is Catholic, in contrast both with pre-Christian Israel and with the Gnostics.

Irenaeus goes on to say: If Christ did have a special message, you would expect him to entrust it to his apostles, and you would expect the apostles to entrust it to the leaders of the congregations they founded. If we look in cities that are mentioned

in the New Testament as places where the Apostles preached, such as Jerusalem, or Antioch, or Corinth, or Ephesus, or Rome, we find that in each of them there is a Christian congregation, headed by a bishop who is part of an unbroken and orderly line of bishops going back to the time when the Church in that city was first established by an apostle. Moreover, we find, if we do a little comparing, that the Church in Ephesus and its bishop teach the same doctrines as the Church in Antioch and its bishop. Thus, we have the Church as a world-wide community, with each local congregation agreeing in doctrine with the other congregations spread throughout the world, and also with its predecessor reaching back in time to the Apostles and through them to Christ Himself.

(4) The Church is Apostolic. That is to say, it is the community that Christ founded with the Apostles as nucleus. We read of the first Christian converts added to the Church at Jerusalem that "the continued steadfast in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and the prayers." (Acts 2:42) In order to be a Christian, it is not enough to be in the Apostles' teaching. You must also be in the Apostles' fellowship. The Church is a group, just as the Scouts are a group. Suppose that someone found a Boy Scout Manual, and read it, and said, "I like this!" Suppose that he then sat down and memorized the Scout Oath and the Scout Law, and learned to tie 21 different kinds of knots blindfolded, and how to pitch a tent, and how to swim 25 yards underwater, and how to read a compass, and all the other things that a Scout is required to know and to do. Suppose that he further made a point of being trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent. Would it be accurate to say that he was a Scout? I think the answer is clearly negative. He might be called Scout-like. He would be someone whom the Scouts would gladly welcome aboard. But until he gets in contact with the Scout organization and joins up, he is not a Scout.

In like fashion, to be a Christian does not mean simply holding a certain set of beliefs, even if accompanied by appropriate behavior. It means belonging to the Christian community, to the Church. When God sent an angel to the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10), the angel did not instruct him in Christian doctrine and tell him, "Now, if you believe what I have just said, that makes you a Christian." Rather, he told him how to get in touch with the Christian community by sending a messenger to Peter in Joppa. When Saul was on the road to Damascus, Christ spoke to him. But He did not instruct Saul in Christian doctrine. Rather, He told him to go into Damascus and wait for instructions, and then He sent Ananias, a Christian, to receive Saul into the Christian community. And one of the marks of that community is its continuity with the community that Christ founded and upon whom the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost.

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