

Redeemer OPC, Hawaii

Adult Sunday School

The Apostles' Creed (11)

“Ninth Article - the Church”

- I. Introduction. Review: The last couple of lessons made the transition to the third section of the creed that deals with the Holy Spirit and His ministry. In the simple statement that heads the section, belief in the Holy Spirit is confessed without any additional statement about Him, which differs from the form of the previous two sections. The second, for example, said, “I believe in Jesus Christ, *His only Son our Lord*. We find no such additional identifying or explanatory information in the statement confessing faith in the Spirit. Perhaps the authors thought that His title conveyed all that needed to be said to understand and summarize what Scripture says about who He is. Perhaps, however, it also had something to do with the truth that His ministry is a self-effacing ministry. That He is not here primarily to garner attention for Himself, but to put the spotlight, as it were, on Jesus Christ the Son of God and Savior, might also have something to do with it. His ministry is designed to accomplish that task and has it at its center. We won't know for certain until we reach glory whether that actually figured into their thinking, but it is at least a possibility. At any rate, we can take note of this as we study His ministry. In the study of the 8th article, we considered the identity of the Holy Spirit by means of the two questions, What and Who He is. We proved from Scripture that He is not an impersonal force or less than divine. He is God Himself and the Third Person of the Godhead. We also considered some general matters about His ministry, that He is the Sanctifier of God's people, the Author and Enlightener of Scripture, and the Paraclete who carries out a self-effacing ministry to set His people's eyes on Christ. Now, we proceed to the ninth article of the Apostles' Creed and begin to see some of the more specific elements produced by what we have seen of the

Spirit's ministry already: "I believe in the holy catholic church: the communion of saints."

- II. The Role of the Church. If we were to leave out the description of the nature of the church for a moment, that would leave the creed saying, "I believe in the...church." I imagine that this, together with the word "catholic," is one of the main points of the creed that offend many evangelical Christians and convince them that the creed is unbiblical, thoroughly Roman Catholic, and to be rejected. But that is a misunderstanding of the biblical truth that the authors of the creed wanted to convey. They weren't saying that we must place faith in the church in order to be saved. They weren't saying that a church that claims magisterial and legislative authority is to be trusted with implicit faith, so that by simply agreeing that the church is right, no matter what it says, results in salvation; or more accurately, just by joining ourselves to the membership of such a church guarantees salvation. That *is* Roman Catholicism, and is how Rome would interpret this article of the creed. But because it follows the statement of belief in the Holy Spirit, it helps us to understand that it refers to a doctrine that is connected to His ministry. What they meant for us to understand is that by His work, the Holy Spirit has constituted the church, but also that He uses the church. He has constituted the church as the body of Christ by joining us to Christ and to one another. We'll talk more about that in the second part of this article. But He also uses the church, and that is what involves our believing in its role. Our confession captures this when it teaches the biblical truth that God has committed to the church the ministry, oracles, and ordinances for the gathering of the elect and the perfecting of the saints. The Holy Spirit uses the church to administer the means of grace—the Word, sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and prayer, within the context of the fellowship of the body—by which He saves people by regenerating their hearts and bringing them to Christ. If God is our Father, then He uses the church for our mother. And that is what even the early church fathers recognized. Cyprian said, "No one can have God for his Father who does not have the church for his mother."

He meant that it is the ministry of the church through which the Spirit causes one to be born again. In joining one to Christ by faith in the effectual calling, the ministry of the church is essential because the Holy Spirit uses the Word of God, sacraments, and prayer that God has placed in the church as His repository for them. Furthermore, it is the church to which He joins those whom He baptizes into Christ by regeneration and faith when He joins them to Christ at the same time. So, when we say we believe in the church, we're saying we believe in the church's existence and its essential role in the salvation and sanctification of God's people in the Holy Spirit's accomplishment of His ministry. We're not saying what Rome claims; we don't believe that salvation is by implicit faith that simply takes the church to be right about everything and says "I agree" when it doesn't even know what the church affirms and teaches or what doctrines that affirmation and teaching includes. This all plays into the unity of the church as well, and that is taken up in the next part of the article that deals with...

III. The Nature of the Church. The church is: "holy," "catholic," and "the communion of saints."

A. The Holy Church. We have been addressing this whole idea a lot lately in connection with the individual Christian, in that he is, first and foremost, set apart unto God. But he is also increasing in purity over the time that the Spirit progressively sanctifies him. The same is true of the church as a whole body. It is set apart unto God for His special purposes and uses. The highest purpose is to be a body that glorifies God in worshiping Him. It is also the organization and organism that He uses as His instrument to accomplish His work on earth. As our confession puts it, the church has been given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances for the gathering of the elect and perfecting the saints until the last one is called and Christ returns. In connection with both of these purposes, it is the body that expresses, manifests, and glorifies Christ because we are joined to our Head, and we are the fulness of Him who fills all in all. The church presents Christ to the world, and by our love for one another, we show

the world that we are His disciples. We do this by our worship of Him whom our soul loves because He first loved us. He shows His love for His bride in the way that He takes especial care of us by His providence and has set us apart from the domain of darkness into His kingdom that is not of this world even while it is in the world. It transcends the boundaries of earthly kingdoms, cultures, ethnicities, generations, languages, etc. It is also holy in the matter of purity, a purity that is increasing. Here, we aren't just referring to moral purity, though we have used that term often enough. But the fact is, that both individual Christians and the church as a whole body are concerned with doctrinal purity as well as moral purity. Over the course of the centuries, from the time that Christ ascended into heaven until He returns, the church will be increasing in the extent of doctrinal understanding and in doctrinal purity. The church as a whole continues to study the Bible and delve more deeply into the understanding of what it teaches. So, we understand more of what the Bible teaches: the extent of our doctrinal understanding. As we do, we purify our doctrine—sharpen and refine it—so that it becomes more accurate a statement of what the Bible teaches. That doesn't mean that the doctrine we have drawn from Scripture already is necessarily wrong. We know that the true church's doctrine of the gospel cannot be wrong; God preserves it. The church has many other doctrines right, too. But we are building on it to add more to what we already know, and refining our understanding of the many secondary doctrines that Scripture teaches. We know that we still have many differences on those secondary doctrines within the church-at-large; that is why there are various denominations. And denominations are not a bad thing as long as we live in a fallen world and have remaining sin and do not understand the Bible perfectly. Denominations allow for people of like mind on the secondary doctrines to gather comfortably together without strife to worship God.

But we should be working toward greater unity through greater harmony of correct Scriptural doctrine. But this aspect of the church's holiness allows us to recognize and distinguish true churches from false churches in the doctrinal area. A true church has three marks: the right preaching of God's Word; the right administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper; the right exercise of church discipline. The other aspect of the church's holiness is moral purity. It begins with faith in Jesus Christ. Where that is present in the individual Christian, there will also be hope and love. And there will also be obedience to the Lord flowing from holy character. Where there is a body of these people as a true church, even when some unbelievers are mixed in, those same marks of moral purity will also be evident. And over the course of time, all of this that belongs under purity will increase. All of this, both in being set apart and in purity, is encompassed within the church's holiness.

- B. The Catholic Church. It isn't Roman Catholic. We have made mention of this many times, and gave simple explanation that "catholic" means "universal," and refers to the one gospel that ties all Christians together into the church-at-large and that defines the boundaries of the church. What makes this different from what Roman Catholicism considers the catholicity that is uniquely Roman Catholic? Augustine, great hero of the faith that he was for his defense of what later became known as Reformed soteriology, was also the progenitor of the idea that led to the Roman Catholic concept of catholicity. So, we could have hoped that he had been more accurate. But his idea that took hold in the church that led to Rome's conception was a geographical universal expression of the church. Wherever you found bishops and the visible body geographically, carrying out the sacraments, there was the church. That came to be a defining element in determining their belief that the church, because it is the church, is right; thus, it is right because it is the church, not that it

is the church because it is right. True catholicity of the church, however, necessarily requires the opposite approach: it is the church when it has right doctrine; namely, the gospel. That body, local, regional, national, or global, is the church when it is defined by its consistent belief in and confession of the Bible's gospel of Jesus Christ. That is what defines its borders and marks its membership. So the church, even though it has divided into many denominations, etc., is united in that one biblical gospel. The Roman Catholic church claims that it alone is truly catholic just because it is a single worldwide institution without the denominational distinctions. But it doesn't confess the Bible's gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone; so, it isn't the church at all, let alone a church with catholicity. The true church is catholic. Third,

- C. The Communion of Saints. In the Westminster Confession of Faith, in the midst of the area that deals with the church, including the sacraments, is an entire chapter that deals with the communion of the saints. Chapter 26 has three paragraphs that deal with this doctrine from the aspects of both the invisible and visible church, and what are the basis, duties, benefits, and limitations of the communion of Christ's people. The mere fact that there is a whole chapter on this tells us that the Westminster divines recognized what the authors of the Apostles' Creed did, that the communion of saints is an important element of the nature of the church and our understanding of the body of Christ and the effects our union with Christ is to have on us as Christ's people. We can do little better than to read that chapter in the later confession because it fills out the statement the early creed introduced to the church. It wasn't new to the church; it simply gave the members of the body a way to express concisely and hang onto the Scripture doctrine that taught what they had been experiencing in great joy even in the OT and now much more fully in the NT. (READ WCF ch. 26.)