

We Believe in One Holy, Catholic Apostolic Church

By Dr. Dave Neale, Ph.D.

As we come to the last message in our series on the Nicene Creed I'd like to do three things this morning. First, let's consider what the church is (and is not). Second let's look at the specific language of the Creed as it speaks about the church. And third, I'd like to look back over the series and do a Top Five Take-Aways for what it means to believe in days like these.

Well what is the church really?

One author had these images that come to mind for what people *think* the church is.¹

- Country Club. Nice place. Well organized. Laudable charitable work. Good music. Good people. A good place to be seen. Respectable.
- Fortress. A place where we keep the world at bay and protect ourselves from its evil forces.
- Waterbed. "...warm, fuzzy, therapeutic community that provides rest and acts as support group."
- Museum. A place where people who think they are holy and no one else is gather to admire one another, condemn the world and tell each other how right we are.

As with all caricatures, each of these has its own grain of truth. Even here I suppose. But our intent is far more noble as we gather.

We refer to ourselves as a "community of faith" – a modest term. Ordinary people who come together around their profession of their faith in Christ and endeavour, by the power of the Holy Spirit and through the exercise of our various gifts, to serve our members and our world for the common good – in the name of Jesus Christ. As our website puts it:

As a church we desire to be the visible hand print of God, encountering God, experiencing community, engaging in mission.

We believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic Church

You know... in a way, this is the most difficult subject matter in the Creed, precisely because the church is the most human of all the topics it covers. On the one hand, it just seems like such a flawed idea to entrust the sacred church to, well, human beings. And if we were all saints it would have been fine. But in the church we also find every human failing, sometimes horrifically so, as any student of church history knows.

But let's start from the pure idea as it is expressed in Paul.

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified (perfect passive participle, *hagiazō*, dedicated to God, set apart of a special purpose, holy) ***in Christ Jesus, called to be saints*** (from the same root word, *hagios*, those who are dedicated to God and set apart), ***together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*** (1 Corinthians 1:2)

One – The Church **is not** one organizationally. The existence of rival versions of the church is our reality. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, there are 41,000 Christian denominations and organizations.

The church **is one** in this sense: **...all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...**

This is the essence of the Pentecost story read to us this morning. **Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem** (2:5). And then there is a list of about 15 different nations or ethnicities in verses 7-11.

So the point is very much that “everywhere people ‘call on the name of the Lord’ (1 Cor 1:2; Ro 10:13) with faith and love” is the one church.² This is the reality of the one church.

There are about 2.5 billion Christians in the world.

Holy – The church **is not** holy in the sense of free from sin or ‘holier than thou.’ That isn’t what the word holy means. It means, as it says in 1 Cor 1:2 above, “sanctified, set apart, made sanctified.” From residential schools to sex abuse scandals to profiteering on the name of Jesus, the church has been guilty on every account at one time or another.³ In hindsight I wonder if God questions whether it was wise to have a church with *people* in it.⁴

The church **is** holy in its origin, in its aims and in its conduct.⁵ **...to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.**

I believe that in spite of the sins of the church at points in her life, the good of the church is a story that will, in the end at the Parousia, show her to have been the greatest force for good in the history of the world.

Catholic – This **does not** mean Roman Catholic. It **does mean** the church is universal. That is, it is one holy church everywhere, including all Christians, all who confess Jesus as Lord.

Apostolic – This means that the tap root of our faith reaches all the way back to the first followers of Jesus. And here we think of the chain of tradition that connects us, generation by generation with those who have gone before us in the faith.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

Baptism is the outward sign of our inward confession of Jesus as Lord. Baptism is a sacrament of the church, “signifying participation by faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and incorporation into His Body, the Church. It is a means of grace proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour” (Nazarene Manual, p. 264).⁶

The important point is this. Baptism is a **public** declaration of faith.

In the ceremony of baptism the one baptized recites the Creed (Apostolic) and is asked this all-important question:

Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, and do you believe that He saves you now? Response: I do by faith.

This is the important part of that sentence is **for the forgiveness of sins**. This is how the journey begins and it is how the journey continues. We never outgrow the need for God’s forgiveness.

We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen

Now let me say with great conviction and all sincerity, I really have no conception of what this means.⁷ I believe that “he will come again to judge the living and the dead,” that is, the Arrival of the end of history will God will right every wrong and set everything aright. We believe it, it is all we need to know, and we have to believe it or we will surely go mad.

Listen to how Paul put it: ***When Christ who is your life is revealed, the you also will be revealed with him in glory*** (Colossians 3:4).

The Top Five of the We Believe Series (keyed to the date and message)

By way of concluding this series I want to review some of the things that are important take-aways:

1. The Creed is the tap root of our faith

We need the Creed. *There is and has been a standard form of expression of the faith for 1700 years since the Creed was written. That expression was based on 300 years of Christian life, suffering, teaching and evangelism following the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. There is a chain of tradition 2000 years old. It is a “we” tradition. And when we say it together, that is the true meaning of the Creed.* (May 15, 2022 *We Believe in God the Son, Part 1*)

2. Faith is easier in a community

Life is tough. We need each other.⁸



And faith is easier in a setting with others who believe, and yes, struggle to live life well, just like you.

If we want to be a Spirit-filled church, we must tend to the core of the truth and attend to the exercise of the gifts, worship/word/table, and service to others. And God will come out. (May 29, 2022 *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*)

3. Attend to the space after the period about Jesus’ death under Pontius Pilate (getting from the crucifixion to the resurrection)

Would that it were a mechanistic, tick-the-boxes process! Say this, think this, “believe” this and you are saved. Come to the altar. We don’t need slogans or snappy phrases.

But it isn’t mechanistic. And journey of belief is, in its nature, a mystical journey. So here we owe it to ourselves to speak with care, and honesty and discernment. We wish to attend to this space between the period and the capital letter in humility. Because in this space we encounter the mystery of salvation. (May 22, 2022 *God the Son, Part II*)

4. Faith is a journey

The goal of the journey isn’t about bridging the gap between uncertainty and certainty. The goal is to dwell in Christ, a never-ending adventure of life.

While we don't understand everything about the Bible and we are conflicted about church tradition, and yes, we have intellectual convictions as well as doubt when it comes to the faith journey.

*But in reciting the Creed we are just agreeing to enter in on an honest journey of belief that encompasses our whole being. Scripture, tradition, reason, experience. Sometimes we think it is an impossible journey. We don't have to be convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt to enter belief. We just have to have open hearts and minds to God. (May 1, 2022 *We Need the Creed*)*

5. You have to choose in life

*It points to the reality that, as we search for meaning in this secular age, we find an "explosion of different options," made fragile "competing options" for life, and, as Jordan Peterson says, "we find ourselves in perpetual unease."⁹ (May 1, 2022 *We Need the Creed*)*

What I would like to say is that you have to choose in life. This is the most wonderful thing about being a human being. Life is a series of choices for better or worse. But there is **always** hope to find our way back onto the right path.

But if you don't choose this path of meaning... what is the alternative? A vague sense of authenticity? The glorification of self? The hopelessness of a life with no transcendence? No Parousia to make it all right? (We Believe in the Son of God Part II, May 22, 2022)

Having said these and many other things in the course of this series, my hope is that you feel a bit more connected to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit by learning about and reflecting on the core truths of the Creed.

I hope that you have gained a clearer sense that believing in Christ is possible in this day and age of innumerable narratives before us.

I hope that your heart is calmed, made peaceful by the knowledge that you aren't alone, not in this day and that you are connected to a very great cloud of witnesses down through the generations. All of whom were asked by God to live lives, often very difficult lives, and yet do so by walking in the Holy Spirit.

And I hope that you are clearer in your mind about what your salvation means and how to walk in it.

And it is a perfect time to celebrate this Pentecost Sunday by coming to the Lord's Table together. Amen.

¹ William J. Abraham, "I Believe in One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church" in *Nicene Christianity: The Future of a New Ecumenism*. Pp.177ff.

² Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters*, p. 263.

³ "The Southern Baptist Convention is already grappling with declining membership, sharp divisions over politics and culture, and a high-stakes leadership change that is weeks away (NYT, *Southern Baptist Sex Abuse Report Stuns, From Pulpit to Pews*, May 24, 2022).

⁴ Just last week we now read the Southern Baptists, the US's largest protestant denomination (14 million members in 47,000 congregations), are dealing with the publication of a report on the sexual abuse within the church. It isn't just one denomination. As a denomination we have our own skeletons in the closet in the Church of the Nazarene (not here at Vic Naz let me emphasize).

⁵ David P. Gushee, *Changing our Minds*, pp. 15-16.

⁶ Do you see how the word “acknowledge” not “believe” is used (or “confess” as you find in some versions of the Creed). This is because our acknowledgement is important, but it is not at the level of “believe” in the same sense as the cardinal doctrine of the Trinity. There are many different ways baptism is practiced among various Christians (as babies, as adults, by immersion, by sprinkling, adults who were baptized as babies choosing to be re-baptized as adults). By the way, the Nazarene Church baptizes children and adult believers, by both immersion and sprinkling, and we also will baptize infants if the parents so desire. The notion at a person baptized at birth who wishes to be baptized again as a sign of an adult conversion would be allowed to do so at the discretion of the pastor/elder presiding in a Nazarene Church.

⁷ I have studied all of the apocalyptic material in the Bible, I’ve read extensively in the literature of the Ancient Near Eastern apocalyptic. I’m not uninformed on the topic. The moment you begin to ask about the ‘how’ of all this happens is the moment you have begun to lose sight of the meaning of this language.

*The largest aspen grove in the world, in Utah, is name Pando: Latin for “I spread out.” It sprouted 80,000 years ago from a seed the size of a pepper grain and now supports almost 50,000 trunks, making it the heaviest living thing in the world – and one of the oldest.⁸ It is a single root system. This is a pretty good metaphor for the power of a shared system of thought. (May 22, 2022 *We Believe in God the Son, Part II*)*

⁹ *Myth and Meaning in Jordan Peterson*, p. 16, ed. Ron Dart.