
I Believe in the Church, God's Community

DAVE BAST

In our series on the Apostles' Creed, we have covered all three Persons of the Trinity. That is pretty standard; if you are a Christian, of course you believe in God, the Father Almighty, and in Jesus as Lord and Savior, and in the Spirit—the presence and power of the Father and the Son with us. Now we are saying that if you are a Christian, you also believe in something far less obviously glorious. You believe in the Church. Really? We believe in that often discreditable institution? Yes, really. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, now we are in the third and last of our three sections in this 12-part series on the Apostles' Creed. So, we are covering the Holy Spirit, and we did that directly last week with: I believe in the Holy Spirit; but now we are moving on to some of these other things that also are connected with the Spirit, aren't they?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and if you are keeping score at home, this is our tenth program in the overall 12 programs. So, we have this one, and then we will have two more. The next program will be on the forgiveness of sins, and the final one will be on the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting; but here, we are at the part of the Creed where we say that we believe in the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints. We are going to take both of those phrases in this. As you were saying, Dave, we believe *in the Church*?! What does that mean? Some people say they are Christians *despite* the Church...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or despite the failures of the Church. So, what does it mean to say: I believe in the Church? We will also want to wonder...*holy*, what does that mean? And then that word *catholic* that trips people up sometimes. We will get to that, but what does it mean to say: I believe in the Church? Don't we believe in Jesus?

DAVE BAST

Yes; as you say, Scott, this has become kind of a roadblock for a lot of people. Do you know anyone who has turned away from the church because they are turned off by the church? I certainly do. There is a phrase going about that a lot of people have tapped into. They say: I am spiritual but not religious...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Or, I like Jesus but I cannot stand the church; or I believe in God, but I am not interested in organized religion. All of those different formulas are different ways of saying: I *don't* believe in the Church. So, there is an attraction maybe to spiritual ideas or thoughts about God; but this messy, sort of conglomeration of sinful people with corrupt leaders sometimes...you think of the scandals that have overtaken the Catholic Church, certainly, in our time; or other situations of child abuse with youth leaders or workers. I mean, it is just a mess; and you can understand why some people are turned off by the Church.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And yet, in the New Testament it is clear that the Church is really, really important; and so what is it supposed to be at its best? That is what we want to talk about; and maybe in the one of the standard confessions of the Reformed tradition, the Heidelberg Catechism, in the section of the Catechism that is taking apart the Apostles' Creed line by line, here is question-and-answer 54 from the Catechism on this very line from the Apostles' Creed: What do you believe concerning the holy catholic Church? Here is the answer: I believe that the Son of God, through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life, and united in true faith; and of this community I am and always will be a living member. So, the Church is important because Jesus is the one who is building it...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Jesus is the one calling it together.

DAVE BAST

In fact, that is what he said to Peter, isn't it, when Peter said: You are the Christ, the Son of the living God; you are the Messiah. Jesus said: You are right, Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church. We believe in the Church because Jesus believes in the Church, and this is what he is about. He is not just plucking brands from the burning, you know, individual souls here and there to come and belong to him in this precious one-on-one relationship...not to deny a precious relationship...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes.

DAVE BAST

Between Christ and the believer...but no, he is building a community. That is the key word, and we will look at that in the course of this program, too...a community of faith, gathered from the beginning of the world to its end. I mean, this didn't start at Pentecost. We talked about Pentecost in the last program, and that was the burst of fire and energy that gave power to the Church to reach out with the Gospel, but Jesus has been about this...the Word...the eternal Word...has been about this since Adam and Eve, and he will continue until the end; and frankly, I think one of the reasons the end hasn't come yet is because Jesus isn't done building his Church.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; the New Testament word in Greek is *ekklesia*. We get ecclesiastical from that word, in English; but *ekklesia* literally means to be called out; and Jesus talks about this. Here is one of the famous I AM sayings from John 10. Jesus says: ¹⁴"I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me— ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that are not of this pen. I must bring them also. They, too, will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd."

DAVE BAST

And here is another key passage. Let's listen to this and then draw a couple of implications from what Jesus says about the Church. This is from Paul, from Colossians 1, beginning at verse 15: The Son (S-O-N-son) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For in him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the Church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, that in everything he might have preeminence.

That is a real wow paragraph, but notice this...what Jesus says and what Paul says: There is a head and a body; and there is a shepherd and a flock; and you cannot belong to the shepherd if you don't belong to the flock, and you are not united to the head if you are not part of the body. It is essential for Christians. That is why John Wesley, the great 18th Century evangelist, said the New Testament knows nothing of solitary Christians; and I think this is an important truth for people who are tempted to kind of dispense with the Church and just say: Well, I have a relationship with Christ. It is my personal thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It has been pointed out that from the beginning God's love affair with the human race has been a family affair. God always calls groups...not just one-on-one people who never get connected to each other. It started with the family of Abraham, it built into the nation of Israel, and now it is the new Israel, that is, the Church. God's love affair with the human race has always been a family affair; and we are called into that community. We cannot exist on the periphery by ourselves. We are called into a family; and yes, church can be a tough place, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is sort of like in your actual family; you cannot choose who your sisters and brothers are, you just get them, right? And the same thing in the church. You cannot choose; and not everybody in the church is your kind of person, but you are called to love them because that is what God does. He brings us together in community.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, when we talk about *the* Church, we always have to bring it down and make it real. We have to incarnate it in *a* church somewhere...some local gathering or congregation filled with sometimes broken, imperfect people, and you take the good with the bad...the wonderfully kind with the difficult and grumpy; but that is what it means to belong to Christ. We have to be part of that kind of fellowship—that kind of gathering.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we will think about a few implications of that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and we have been discussing, Dave, the Church and the importance of belonging to a church. You quoted John Wesley: God knows nothing of solitary Christians. You know, sometimes at the seminary where I teach, and at the time we are making this program, they are all getting ready for their big oral comprehensive exams, and a sample question I had them practice on the other day was: What would you say to a man who says, "I love Jesus, but I don't want to belong to a church." How would you address that?

That was what they had to wrestle with; and we do meet people like that, actually, who say: Yeah, me and Jesus, we're close, but I like sleeping in on Sundays, and I don't really like crowds and I don't like...some people are disagreeable, so I will just be a Lone Ranger Christian. The Gospel doesn't know about that. The Spirit always connects us to each other.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes, you know, that is a sign...I would say that is a symptom of a spiritual problem that that person has; certainly immaturity at the very least. So yes, the Church is God's plan for the human race. I think of a commentary by John Stott on the book of Ephesians: *God's New Society* is what he subtitles that, and that is a wonderful picture for the Church; but in the Creed, we say that I believe in *the* holy catholic Church. So, that really gives rise to three characteristics of the Church: It's oneness; we don't say: I believe in *a* holy catholic Church, I believe in *the*...meaning there is only one Church, really, and it is holy and it is catholic with a small c, or universal. So, we need to unpack each of those, I think, a little bit, because they are not all quite obvious.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; Paul wrote in Ephesians 4: ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope that belongs to your call; ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

And if you didn't catch it, Paul repeats the word *one* a lot right there.

DAVE BAST

Seven times.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One, one, one...

DAVE BAST

Yes, seven times.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We are one. That is the unity of the Church, which I think we would all say is harder to see today. When I used to teach catechism classes when I was a pastor, I would say to my students—my high-schoolers—I would say, you know, for over 1,500 of the last 2,000 years, there was basically one church. It was called the Catholic Church. There was also a split around the year 1054 that led to the Eastern Orthodox Church. But I would say, can you imagine that? Then I hauled out the Yellow Pages...remember phone books?

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I would turn to the church section for just our city of Grand Rapids and there are pages after pages after pages of churches; but not just of churches, pages after pages after pages of different *denominations* and then different churches. There are now...what...about 30,000 different denominations in the world? Anglicans and Catholics and Reformed, and Christian Reformed, and Protestant Reformed, and Baptists...I mean, 30,000 different...

DAVE BAST

Yes, at least.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is a little hard to see unity in that.

DAVE BAST

Nobody knows how many really. I mean, you mentioned our city, Grand Rapids. You can drive around town and see a half a dozen different *Reformed* denominations, let alone all the others. So, what is this oneness? What is this unity? And frankly, we have to confess, a lot of this dividedness is due to sin...is due to our...we have already talked about the Church being imperfect; and sometimes we can argue about the littlest things, and it just seems like, oh, my goodness...to take one big example, you mentioned, Scott, the great schism between the western and the eastern branches of Christianity; and one of the big issues that revolved around that was how to define the nature of the Holy Spirit. Did he come from the Father *and* the Son, or just from the Father? And you think: Really? That makes a big enough difference that you have to divide? So, some of it is our human frailty, our human sinfulness. Some of it, though, points to the fact that the unity of the Church is actually invisible. We don't see it in practice, but it is nevertheless real, and it is what Jesus prayed for. In his last prayer before the crucifixion, on his last night on earth, Jesus says this: John 17:21 paraphrased Father, that they may be one so that the world may believe that you have sent me—that they may be one as we are one, so that the world may believe. Frankly, I think that part of the dividedness of the Church is the work of the enemy—it is the work of the devil—to prevent...because if we were united, we would have reached the world...the world would believe long since, and now we are in this sorry state.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and yet, I think the Bible gives every indication that despite our brokenness, God still sees his true people as one Church across all those denominational lines and some of the crazy reasons why we divide up into different groups, God still sees us as one; and at the end of history, we will be one. There will be one holy people, and that leads to that other word, Dave. We not only believe in *the*, but we believe in the *holy* catholic Church. We are supposed to be holy...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Be holy as I am holy. Peter said it: You are a royal priesthood—a holy nation—a people for God's own possession. That is 1 Peter 2. So, we are supposed to be distinct. What was holiness in Israel? It was being set apart from the nations. You didn't do the things sexually...you didn't do the things ritually...you didn't act like the rest of the world, you acted like people who were taking their marching orders from a holy God, and trying to imitate that holy God in love, in faithfulness, in promise keeping, in worship. We are supposed to be distinct; and there, too, alas, the Church does not always look as distinct from the surrounding community as we might wish it were.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; I know it; and to our shame. So, holy...not holier than thou...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

But holy in the sense of moral beauty; and there is a kind of beauty about goodness and holiness when it is real...when it is not, you know, some sort of judgmentalism...that is attractive to people; and Paul has a little verse in Philippians 2, where he says of the Church: verse 15 paraphrased You shine as lights (or stars) in a dark and twisted world; and that is what the holiness of the Church is meant to be; that is what we need to strive for, that like light in the darkness, it will attract people...it will draw people ultimately to the Lord.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And at our best, that is exactly what we do. Thanks be to God that he forgives our failures; but the Spirit...we said in the previous program about the Holy Spirit...the Spirit is incessantly busy, always, always, always on the move; and one of the things the Holy Spirit is doing is forgiving the Church's failures and helping us to get back up on our feet and try again; and very often by the Spirit's power, we do manage to have a bit of holiness; and then, before we close out this part of the program, Dave, one little thing on that: One holy catholic Church...and because there is such a thing as the Roman Catholic Church, most times if you see the Apostles' Creed in print, there is a little asterisk reminding you that this is the small c catholic, meaning universal...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is a universal Church. When the Catholic Church for, you know, a long time, *was* the only church, catholic could mean both...the church centered in Rome with the Pope *and* the universal Church. Now, of course, we need to distinguish it because of the Protestant Reformation and the break that happened there. So, when we say it is a catholic Church, we mean it is universal. In God's eyes, there is just one Church...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is the saints living and dead, which we are going to talk about in just a moment when we talk about the communion of the saints...that is not just the Christians who are alive today and go to your church or to a true church anywhere; that is the Church, living and dead, in heaven and on earth. We also believe in the communion of the saints; and we will ponder that in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are talking about the holy catholic Church; and we have unpacked those words, Scott, in this program on the Creed; and we add now the phrase: The communion of the saints. So, let's talk a little bit about that, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; in our popular imagination, we think of a church as maybe a building: Let's go to church; you know, that means we are going to go to the building at the corner of 1st and 3rd Street, you know, or whatever. Sometimes we also think of a church as a congregation: Oh, here are all the members of our church; young and old, people who have been members for sixty years and those who have been members for six days...yes; but in God's sight, the Church is...as we just said, there is only one Church and God sees the Church as made up of all the *true* believers, because...we are not going to talk about this, but there has been traditionally talk of the visible and invisible Church...the invisible Church is the one only God sees—the true believers. Because in every church there are people who just show up, but they don't really believe...they are not really saved...they don't really care. They look like all the other Christians, but God sees. No; they are not part of the invisible Church. They are part of the visible church that shows up on a Sunday, but not part of the invisible Church; but also, Dave, in God's eyes, there is this communion of saints that goes all through history. You know, it starts with the earliest people in the Bible and it is everybody since, and it is everybody yet to come in the future. There is one communion—one fellowship—of the true believers, past and present, living and dead.

DAVE BAST

Right; and so, the communion of the saints...that is a reference back to the holiness of the Church. A saint in popular thinking is a particularly holy person, but holy in the sense of set apart for God, all the members of the true Church are saints. They have all been called by God, they have all been set apart to belong to him; and it is they who are involved in this communion, which is a great, great New Testament word. The word is *koinonia*. We see it in particular in Acts 2 in this description of the early Church in Jerusalem:

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship (or the communion or the *koinonia*), to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the Temple courts...and then finally it says...Luke says: ^{47b}The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

So, this is a beautiful picture of the worship and life, and the fellowship or the communion, of those early Christians in Jerusalem.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Koinonia is one of a relatively few number of Greek words that a lot of people know. Some churches are named *koinonia*, or they have their *koinonia* hour after church—their fellowship hour. So, this is a word that has made it into the parlance of many languages, including English; but right, it is the church as it should be...a gathering of the true saints...a gathering of the true people of God, who are, as we saw in that passage from Acts, Dave...they are together. The earliest Church kind of owned everything together; they kind of pooled their resources to minister to each other and to the poor. They really were sort of that one body that Paul will talk about particularly in 1 Corinthians; but it is a communion...it is a community. You have things in common; and Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit again...we are in the Holy Spirit section of the Apostles' Creed here...what is the glue that holds otherwise very diverse people together? It is the Holy Spirit.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, that is the root of that word *koinonia*...common, or community, or even communism. You know, in theory communism was a wonderful thing. The idea was nobody had too much, nobody had too little, everybody shared. Now, given the reality of sinful human nature, that doesn't really work in practice. Even in Jerusalem in the early Church we know that it fell apart pretty quickly. It was a voluntary thing. It seems as though in the initial burst of enthusiasm, when there were only a few hundred, or perhaps a few thousand Christians, this sort of communal living worked; but eventually it kind of went south, and we have done a series, actually, on the book of Acts, and we saw the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Which is sort of the serpent comes into the garden and this life didn't last; but, the ideal is there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and as we close the program, Dave, I think we want to highlight one thing that the communion of the saints means, and that is that we are one with sisters and brothers all around the world, and are we sensitive to that? Do we pray for the persecuted Church? Do we suffer when people in other parts of the world suffer? We are part of one communion with these people. They are our sisters and brothers in Christ; and we need to be sensitive to that. That should get into the prayer life of the church, too. Too often prayers in churches are just about what is in the church bulletin or local things going on in your little community. The Holy Spirit calls us to have a bigger vision of all of our sisters and brothers, and to pray for those, wherever they may be, however different they may seem from us, who are in trouble.

DAVE BAST

I also love the idea, Scott...you touched on this...that the communion of the saints stretches backwards in time...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And forward into eternity. There is a wonderful phrase from the great communion prayer of thanksgiving: With your whole company on earth and with all the saints in heaven, we worship and adore your glorious name. That is an idea I like to think of when I think of the communion of the saints...this wonderful gathering, in heaven and on earth...of those who love and worship God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We believe in the holy catholic Church and the communion of saints. Thanks be to God.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast. Join us next time. We are going to continue our study of the Apostles' Creed by discussing the forgiveness of sins.

Connect with us at groundworkonline.com, our website. Tell us what *Groundwork* means to you. Make some suggestions for future *Groundwork* programs.

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