

We Believe Part 16

What we believe effects how we live and what is it we believe? **I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy, apostolic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.**

This morning we are focusing on our belief in the church. I believe in the church. Regardless of mistakes and failures of the past and present, I still believe in the church. It is popular today to say “I believe in Jesus and I love Jesus, it’s just his church that I don’t love or trust.” There is a problem with that. If you love Jesus then you should love what he loves and Jesus loves the church. The bible says, **“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy...” Ephesians 5:25.** It’s his church. Jesus said **“I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it.” Matthew 16:18.** The bible describes the church as the body of Christ. **“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” 1 Corinthians 12:27** If you don’t love the church then you are saying you don’t love His body and that sounds like a problem to me!

I believe in the church, but exactly who or what are we talking about when we speak of the church? Often when we talk about the church we are referring to a building or an institution, but this building is not the church, we are the church. The church is the people who belong to Jesus, who have been saved by his grace and are committed to Him and to his purpose.

“But there are all kinds of churches and denominations. What church do we believe in?” **We believe in THE church.** From heaven’s perspective there is only one church. It’s not Assembly of God or Baptist or Anglican, it is the church, God’s redeemed people, united in fellowship with Christ.

We sometimes talk about a distinction between the visible church and the invisible church. The visible church is the church we can see, the physical presence of all of us, all the congregations of all the various groups and denominations, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, etc. Everyone that identifies themselves by the name Christian are part of the visible church on earth. However, not everyone who calls themselves a Christian is truly a Christian. Some have never truly repented and received Christ as Savior and Lord. None of us know what is in the heart of all who call themselves Christians, and that’s

where the invisible church comes in. The invisible church is the church known to heaven. That is all those who have called upon the Lord and been saved and redeemed by his grace and their names are written in the book of life. The invisible church includes all those who are in Christ, those on earth and those already in heaven. Sadly, there are folks in the visible church that aren't in the invisible church. They don't know Jesus as Savior and Lord but Jesus knows who is saved and part of His body, the church. So we believe in one church, THE church, because from heaven's perspective there is one church. He is coming again for THE church. He is the heavenly bridegroom coming for his One Bride, THE church.

We believe in the holy church. What does that mean because once again, we make up the church and we aren't always that holy. **Holy means set apart, distinct, separated from.** The Greek word for church, ekklesia, means "called out ones." **As the church we have been called OUT FROM the world and called TO Christ.** Holy doesn't mean we are perfect, it means we are set apart for Jesus, that we belong uniquely to Him. The church is holy not because we are perfect and we no longer make mistakes, but because the bible says through faith and salvation and baptism we have been united with Christ and he is holy. We are holy because we are united with him, we are part of his body now, new creations, partakers of his holy, divine nature.

As his church we are to live as he called us to live, holy, separated lives. We are to live in the light of his holiness. Sadly it seems much of the church tries to be more like the world. We say the church is to be "in the world but not of it." One author said "Christians today are often 'of the world but not in it.'"(Michael Horton). We create our own celebrities and rock stars and entertainers, trying to be like the world, just not in it. Jesus calls us to be the church, a new community of new creations, unique and set apart, living counter-culturally in this world.

Let's face it, we aren't like the world. The church is unique. **We have a unique founder.** Just before Jesus said "I will build my church," Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." The founder of the church is Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God and it is upon that confession, that foundation, the church is built. He is the Son of the Living God. No other entity in the universe can say that besides the church! **We have a unique purpose** in this world: to proclaim the message of our risen Lord and his salvation, to live as the physical, personal expression of Christ in this world, to be his light in the darkness. **We have a unique destiny** because Jesus said not even the gates of hell could stand against the church. Not even the power of death can stop the church. **We have a unique future** because Jesus said he would go and prepare a place for us and then come and take us to be with him forever. We aren't afraid of death because we know our future lies in him, the one who is the resurrection and the life.

That's who we are: the church, holy, separated, unique in this world! The trouble comes when we try to blur the uniqueness, the distinctiveness. We are salt and light, distinct from the decay and the darkness. I believe in the Church. I believe in the holy Church.

I believe in the holy, catholic church. Some of you have noticed for the past several weeks I inserted the word "apostolic" in place of the word "catholic" in the creed. The Apostle's Creed reads "I believe in the holy, catholic church." Another of the ancient creeds, the Nicene Creed, reads, "**I believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church.**" **The Nicene Creed** I inserted apostolic because of the confusion over the word catholic. Let me explain again, **The word "catholic" simply means "universal."** The Greek word *katholikos* means "according to the whole" or "universal." When we say "I believe in the catholic church", we aren't referring to the Roman Catholic church (although Roman Catholics believe they are). We are saying instead that we believe in the universal church made up of all those that have made Jesus Christ Savior and Lord. Think catholic church (lower case c) rather than Catholic church (capital C). And when we say we believe in the universal church, we aren't in any way referring to the Unitarian Universalist or to Universalism. So what does that mean, that we believe in the universal or catholic church?

We've already said we believe in THE church, the one church made up of all those whom Christ has saved. That one church is spread out in denominations and groups and individuals all over the world. We need to recognize the universal nature of the church. It's not many churches in many different places, it is the universal church, the catholic church, spread out over the world but part of His one holy, church. It is not the American church or the Chinese church, it is the church, one body committed to obeying Jesus Christ, the head of the church. It is made up of people from all kinds of denominations and groups, Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox. It consists of all those redeemed by his grace. The apostle Paul wrote, "**The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free ...**" 1 Corinthians 12:12-13

Part of his church is suffering today. Part of his church is being persecuted and murdered for their faith, for our faith! We identify with them, we affirm our belief that those Christians in Syria, in Egypt, in India, in Niger, wherever the church is suffering, they are part of us and we are part of them, this glorious, holy, universal church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's bear their burdens as we pray for them and remember them.

Believing in the universal or catholic church means we believe the church's message and mission is valid and relevant for every person, everywhere, in every age and time in history. The argument "the

Christian faith or the church was for an ancient time but it isn't relevant today" is simply not true. The church and the gospel message of salvation is the only hope for this world! It always has been universally true and it always will be.

"We believe in the universal or catholic church" means we believe in the church past, present and future. Our belief in the universal church connects us by faith and fellowship with the saints of God around the world. John Stott wrote, "**For his purpose...is not just to save isolated individuals and so perpetuate our loneliness, but rather to build his church, that is, to call out of the world a people for his own glory.**"...John Stott (*The Living Church*). We are part of a universal body of Christ, a body of believers from every tribe and language and nation that stretches from Calvary through eternity. We belong to something, past, present and future! We belong to each other, to the people of God, to the saints of God.

As part of the universal church, we are connected to those saints of God that have gone on to heaven before us. The writer of Hebrews says, "we are surrounded by ...a great cloud of witnesses." Hebrews 12:1, those of whom he said the world was not worthy. I think as we affirm our belief in the church we do well to remember as part of the universal church the saints of God who are cheering us on from the other side. They are still part of the church. They are counting on us to finish the race and keep the faith! We don't want to let them down. We don't want to be the generation that lets faith and righteousness disappear from the earth. We are part of the holy, universal, catholic church. Let us live in a manner worthy of all those who have trusted in his name down through the centuries.

As I said earlier we have included the word "apostolic" in the creed during most of this series. **I believe in the holy, apostolic church.** So what does that mean? **Apostolic means "from the apostles."** We believe the church is apostolic in that it continues in the faith and teaching of Christ's apostles. The church was born on the day of Pentecost as 3,000 people were saved and baptized that day. The bible then says of the new church members, "**They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.**" **Acts 2:42.** We believe in Christ and in his resurrection because we have been told by the apostles who were eyewitnesses to his life, his death and his resurrection.

Jude urges us to "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints." **Jude 3.** We proclaim and contend for the same faith the apostles entrusted to those first century saints. It's what it means for us to be part of this holy, universal, apostolic church! We believe the same gospel, the same truth that has been handed down to us from the apostles!

We also believe the church is apostolic in that it continues to fulfill the commission given by Jesus to his apostles. The word apostle means “one who is sent.” Jesus told the apostles, **“Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Matthew 28:19-20** They were sent on a mission.

We believe the faith and the work of the apostles has been given to us as part of the church. It is now our responsibility, as part of the holy, apostolic church, to contend for the faith that has been entrusted to us, to devote ourselves to the teaching and doctrine of the apostles, and to go into all the world and preach the gospel and make disciples of all nations. This is what it means for us to be the holy and apostolic church. We too have been sent!

We live in a day when the church is under fire and under attack. We deserve some of the criticism yes. We aren't perfect. We never have been and never will be this side of heaven but let me encourage you: We need the church! You need the church. You need to be part of the church. Paul referred to the church as **“God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.” 1 Timothy 3:15.** When everything starts collapsing, you need to be part of the church, the pillar and foundation of the truth. You need to be part of the body of Christ, the holy, apostolic church. How do I become part of the church? You are part of the visible church by being here today. You become part of the visible and invisible church by surrendering your heart and life to Christ. Ask him to save you and be the Lord of your life and then live for him. Serve him. Connect with and become part of the life of this part of the body of Christ or some other part, but you need the church. Devote yourself to Christ and his church!