

## “Holy Sinners”

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Acts 2:36-47 • 1 Corinthians 1:1-10

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We are getting close to the end of our study of the Apostles' Creed where we find this sort of rapid-fire list of beliefs. This section is very different from the long, detailed beliefs about Jesus or even about God the Father. They almost seem like they were tacked on to the end of the Creed: I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins and the life everlasting. Because of the way these statements are written, I suspect that most of us miss the deep meaning behind each one.

Last week we looked at the first of these statements, our belief in the Holy Spirit. What we'll find out over the next few weeks is that each of these statements is about some aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. So this week we want to concentrate on this the holy catholic church and the communion of saints. The first thing we will see is that these are not two separate statements but one. As far back as the fourth century, Saint Augustine wrote that the holy catholic church *is* the communion of saints. So what do we mean by this?

One of the arguments put forth *against* Christianity is to point to all of the terrible things that have been done by the Church or in the name of Christianity. The Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Salem Witch Trials. In 1633 the Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei was convicted of the heresy that the earth was round and revolved around the sun, not the other way around. He was sentenced to house arrest where he remained for the rest of his life.

More recently we have become aware of wide-scale sexual abuse scandals in all kinds of churches, in the US and around the world. When we think of church scandals we think of people like Jim Jones or Jim Bakker or Jimmy Swaggart or Ted Haggard. Even closer to home we probably can all think of churches or Christians who have done terrible things like abuse their spouse or children, or steal huge sums of money or gossip about other people. To make things

worse, the church has long been terribly divided and in many places parts of the church have been at war with each other. So if church history is filled with these kinds of stories, how can we come here and say we believe the church is *holy*?

But that's what Christians have claimed to believe in for nearly two thousand years. Maybe, just maybe, the holiness of the church doesn't depend on its members. In fact, it might help us to remember that in the first church, the original twelve disciples of Jesus, one betrayed him, one denied knowing him, and the rest fled for their own lives, abandoning Jesus in his time of need.

To help us understand what we mean when we say we believe in the “holy catholic church, the communion of saints,” let's break it down by looking at what we mean by “church,” and then what it means to call it holy and catholic and a communion.

The word translated as “church” in the New Testament is the Greek word *ekklesia*, which is the combination of *ek*, meaning “out of” or “from,” and *kaleo*, meaning “to call.” So the church is comprised of those who are “called out.” Called out from what? Called out from ordinary lives to be a part of something extraordinary, something of God, the Church.

Actually, even though *ekklesia* is translated as “church” in the Bible, the English word “church” comes from a different Greek word, *kyrakon*, which means “belonging to the Lord.” This is a great definition because it helps us see that it's not *our* church, it belongs to the Lord. *We* belong to the Lord. First Corinthians 6 says, “you are not your own. You were bought with a price.”

Looking at our passage from 1 Corinthians 1, we see that Paul addressed this letter to “the Church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, *called* to be saints together with those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The Church, therefore, is those people who have been called

out by God and gathered together to worship and serve Him.

That brings us to the second point, that the church is holy. We've already looked at the problem we have from a human perspective calling the church holy. The experience of two thousand years is that the Church is not always so holy. But here's the thing: the church is not holy because the members are holy. The church is holy because it belongs to Jesus. He is the one who calls the Church into being and purifies it.

The word holy means "set apart" or "different," in particular, set apart for God. First Corinthians the Apostle Paul says that the Church is made up of "those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints." In other words, they have been set apart to worship and serve him. They have been sanctified or made holy. Then he goes on to say, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge...so that you are not lacking in any gift." He's talking about Jesus providing for the Church.

The third part of this phrase is that the Church is catholic. Long before the Roman Catholic church took the name, the word catholic meant "universal." The true church is not limited to a particular time or place. Verse 2 of our passage says that the church in Corinth belongs to the universal church, made up of "all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours." And in our reading from Acts 2, which describes the beginning of the Church, we read, "the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." The universal church is made up of everyone that God calls to himself.

Not only does the Church include all Christians in the world today, it also includes all followers of Christ from all time. Traditionally we talk about the Church Militant, that is the Church that is on earth, and the Church Triumphant, which is the Church in Heaven. This is that "great cloud of witnesses" that Hebrews 12 talks about. The cloud of witnesses is made up of all the followers of Christ who have ever lived, together in fellowship with God

the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, and with each other.

Which brings me to the last thing we need to see in this section of the Creed: the communion of saints. The word communion literally means "united together." The Greek word originally used in the Creed is *koinonia*. It's more often translated in the Bible as "fellowship" or "partnership." When we say we believe in the communion of the saints, therefore, we are saying we believe in the fellowship of the holy, the fellowship of people called to follow Christ.

It's sad that we reduce fellowship to punch and cookies after worship. Fellowship is so much more. For example, Aristotle called marriage a *koinonia*, a fellowship or partnership. This, I think, better captures the closeness of true fellowship. In the Church we are supposed to be closely involved in each others' lives, meeting one another's needs and caring deeply for each other.

That's the description we find of the early church in Acts 2. Verse 42 says, "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." In other words, they shared their lives with each other. What was the result of that kind of fellowship? The rest of the passage says that "awe came upon every soul" and that "the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." God created us to be with other people. We deeply desire fellowship, which is why places like Starbucks are so popular. Real Christian fellowship is even more attractive. People want to be a part of it because God is present.

That's the meaning behind our celebration of the Lord's Supper, which we also call communion. We are participating in that fellowship with Jesus Christ our Lord, which brings us into fellowship with all the saints, those now living and those who have gone to be with the Lord. And it brings us into fellowship with each other here. So from this moment on, *we* are to devote ourselves to the Apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the

breaking of bread and to prayer. Because no matter how badly we mess up, the Church belongs to Christ, who is the one who makes it holy because He is holy. As we are united with Him, we become united with each other, becoming the Body of Christ, the fellowship of the holy ones, the communion of saints. Our job is to become the Church God has called us to be, creating opportunities for real fellowship or community.

*Amen.*