

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

I Believe in the Holy Catholic Church

EARLY in the second century A.D.—at the most within two or three generations of the time of the Apostles—an unknown catechist put together as a baptismal confession the main clauses that make up the so-called Apostles' Creed. Whatever its place of origin—whether Antioch, or somewhere in Asia Minor, or Rome, it was soon carried to other Christian centres and gladly adopted. Its detailed history is obscure, but there is no doubt that it was one of the very earliest creeds. It has since become the one most widely known, accepted and used. When we recite its phrases, whether we do so frequently or rarely, we are united with the Christians of nearly 2,000 years, the Christians of many generations, races and nations, Christians of many different traditions and denominations, and Christians bearing their testimony in the most varied scenes and circumstances.

The creed is in three parts, the first affirming belief in God, Creator and Father; the second setting out the facts about Jesus Christ in terse, bold sentences, which sound—as Emil Brunner once said—almost like a police report. The third part brings together a number of beliefs. They sometimes appear almost hastily assembled, but are in truth closely related, indeed inseparable. They are not so much an appendix to what has gone before as its consequence, climax and crown.

"I believe in the Holy Ghost; the Holy Catholick Church; the Communion of Saints; the Forgiveness of Sins; the Resurrection of the body; and the Life Everlasting."

Though I am immediately concerned with only one of these great affirmations, it should be remembered that none can be rightly understood in isolation from the others or from the earlier parts of the creed.

"I believe in the Holy Catholick Church." The phrase used by those first candidates making their profession of faith before baptism may have been simply "I believe in the Holy Church." The word "Catholic" was probably added a little later, though long before the word gained its present ambiguous associations. Early in the fourth century A.D. more than 300 bishops gathered in Nicaea from many different parts of the Mediterranean world and together declared their belief in "One Catholic and Apostolic Church." Four great adjectives have continued to be linked with

* An Address to the Annual Conference of the Baptist Men's Movement at Swanwick, 17th March, 1963.

the noun "Church" in the confession of countless Christians. The Church is One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic.

But as soon as one seeks the further definition of these words, one wishes for the return of the time when, as the book of *Genesis* has it, "the whole earth had one language and few words" (11¹). Yet the ceasing of work on the Tower of Babel and the scattering of mankind abroad over the face of the earth, with all its strange consequences including even the confusion of tongues, has no doubt prepared the way for a richer consummation of the human story, a fuller manifestation of the manifold wisdom of God, and a deeper understanding of His grace. There is, however, now no alternative for us but to "gird up the loins of our mind" (1 *Peter* 1 : 13)—"to brace up our minds" as Moffatt's translation has it—when we are confronted with clauses like those in the historic Christian creeds. Words remain, as Dr. Johnson said, "the daughters of earth." "Things are the sons of heaven."

Let us start with the word "Church"—a blind, obscure, misleading word, as Luther pointed out. He was thinking of the German word *Kirche*, which has a similar derivation to our word "Church." *Kirche* and Church may perhaps be related to a Greek word meaning "belonging to the Lord"; there is no direct etymological connection with the word in the New Testament which they usually translate. What we have there is *ἐκκλησία*, which was given an exact Latin equivalent, but which we have debased into the adjective "ecclesiastical," now usually ill-sounding, or the even more ill-favoured noun "ecclesiastic."

In the New Testament the *ἐκκλησία* meant the company called together, the new society brought into existence to inherit the promises and succeed to the privileges of the special People of God, whose earlier fortunes are set out in the Old Testament." The Church is . . . primarily the company or brotherhood of all who accepted Jesus as their Master and Lord, and shared a common life and rites of worship, recognizing their common responsibility and obligations; and this company or brotherhood was one and the same society or Church although existing in separate local organizations." (Bethune-Baker, *Early History of Christian Doctrine*, p. 22.) "The New Testament Ekklesia," as Emil Brunner has said, "is the true visible brotherhood of the reconciled." It is, moreover, focused in each particular unit or "outcrop," to use P. T. Forsyth's word. Luther was surely right in urging that we should avoid many misunderstandings and misjudgements if, instead of 'I believe in the Holy Catholic Church,' we said "I believe that there is a holy Christian people, not only in the time of the apostles, who are long since dead, but clear to the end of the world, so that there is always living on earth a Christian, holy people in which Christ lives, works and reigns" (*On the Councils and the Church*, 1539).

And Luther preferred—as do our German Baptist brethren—to use the word *Gemeinde*, congregation or community, rather than the word *Kirche*.

The People of God are known, according to Luther, by seven outward signs—and I turn to Luther because he presents us with basic Reformation teaching, and teaching which I believe can be directly related to the New Testament.

First, the ecclesia, the Church, is guardian of God's Word, the Gospel, the central message of God's love in Christ and this it constantly proclaims. *Second*, the Church is known by its practice of Christ's ordinance of baptism. We differ from Luther—and most of our fellow Christians—as to the subject, mode and interpretation of baptism, but not that it is one of the marks of the New Testament Church. Luther, like Zwingli, very nearly committed himself to the restoration of believers' baptism and might have done so but for the rather extreme and revolutionary views of our Anabaptist kinsmen on certain other matters! The *third* public mark is the Lord's Supper, where again there may be differences regarding the manner of observance and the doctrinal interpretation, but not as to its authoritative position in the life of the Church. The *fourth* mark is discipline. Christ decrees, says Luther, that if a Christian sins, he shall be rebuked; if he amends, he shall be forgiven and set free. This is "the power of the keys." Involved here is the search for and maintenance of a Christian way of life, both private and public. *Fifthly*, the Church is known outwardly by the fact that it calls ministers and commits to them certain special tasks. In the working out of this we have a different pattern from the Lutheran—and from those of a number of other Protestant Churches. We certainly take a more favourable view of the place that may be occupied by women than Luther did. But we share with him, and with our fellow Christians generally, the belief that a ministry in the technical sense of the word is a gift of God to His Church and one to be carefully guarded. The *sixth* mark is the regular public worship of God through prayer, praise and Christian instruction. *Seventh*, and not least important, the holy Christian Church is outwardly known by being marked with the Cross. "It must endure all hardship and persecution," says Luther, "all kinds of temptation and evil from devil, world and flesh . . . They must be righteous, quiet, obedient, ready to serve their rulers and every one else with body and wealth, doing no one any harm. But no people on earth must endure such bitter hatred." A modern writer has put the same thought in these words: "If the Church does not continue the atonement, it does not continue the incarnation."

Challenging and searching teaching this, but in line surely with the New Testament, and with its truth proven again and again in Christian history.

"I believe in the holy *Catholic* People of God." "Catholic"—yet another word with unfortunate associations, yet with rich treasure in it, if rightly understood and used. In the fourth century Cyril of Jerusalem, in the addresses he gave to candidates for baptism, set forth the meaning under four heads. *First*, "Catholic" implies the extension of the Church throughout the world, geographical extension with ever widening frontiers. *Second*, it signifies the wholeness of the Christian Faith, what is indispensable and essential to the fullness of the Gospel. This does not mean the sum total of beliefs held by all Christians everywhere and always (a glorious rag-bag that would be!) or the least common measure, or anything like that. What is meant is the central and universal elements in the faith, which give it everywhere and at all times its redemptive truth and power. *Third*, the word "catholic" expresses the inclusive character of the Church, which is set to embrace and unify "all sorts and conditions of men." "One aspect of the Church's holiness upon earth," said the late Canon Quick, "consists precisely in the fact that it exists primarily for the sake of those who do not yet belong to it." This is, of course, but another way of asserting the essentially missionary character of the Church. In the *fourth* and last place, the Church is catholic, according to Cyril of Jerusalem, because it is "the universal physician," with the secret of healing for every ill and sin, whether of soul or body.

No Christian dare surrender this word "catholic." We, with all others, believe in the catholicity of the Church.

And in its *holiness*. This English word has an Anglo-Saxon root, which means, sound, whole, healthy, but that was not what was chiefly in mind when in the early centuries Christians professed belief in the holy catholic Church. The Greek word and its Hebrew antecedents refer to things set apart for sacred use and cleansed for that purpose. In the New Testament the members of the little congregations to whom Paul wrote are called *οἱ ἅγιοι*, the holy ones, not with the sickly sentimental or hypocritical flavour which the phrase unfortunately now carries, but meaning those separated by God in order to fulfil His purpose for the world, the new People of God. Our A.V. and R.V., and even the R.S.V., translate the word as "saints," yet another word which has acquired unpleasant overtones (with Christians themselves to blame). The N.E.B. boldly drops the word "saints" and speaks simply of "God's People." But that fails to bring out the obligation to mission which *ἅγιος* contains. What we are at this point saying is "I believe in the separated, cleansed and commissioned People of God."

Much of what I have so far said may be illustrated by comparing the familiar translation of 1 *Corinthians* 1 : 2 with the version in the N.E.B.

Paul writes :

A.V.

“Unto the Church (ἐκκλησία) of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified (ἡγιασμένοις) in Christ Jesus called to be saints (ἅγιοις) with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both their’s and our’s.”

N.E.B.

“To the congregation of God’s people at Corinth, dedicated to him, in Christ Jesus, claimed by him as his own, along with all men everywhere who invoke the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord as well as ours.”

With this in mind, we need not fear to make our own the confession: “I believe in the holy catholic Church,” nor the parallel confession of the Nicene Creed: “One Catholic and Apostolic Church,” for the purpose of God is one, and the People of God are one. There is one flock and one Shepherd (*John* 10 : 16), “one head over all things to the Church, which is His Body” (*Ephesians* 1 : 22.Cf., *Colossians* 1 : 18).

The great Reformers of the 16th century had at this point no more difficulty than at others in acknowledging the Apostles’ Creed, as a historic, memorable and true declaration of basic Christian belief. Luther commanded and used the Apostles’ Creed. Calvin wrote around it his great book *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The Anabaptists not only expounded the Apostles’ Creed; they put it into verse for congregational singing. In more than one of their Confessions our Baptist forefathers of the 17th century recorded their acceptance of this creed and the Nicene Creed. The General Baptist Confession of 1678 urges that they are “necessary to be understood of all Christians . . . these Creeds containing all things in a brief manner, that are necessary to be known, fundamentally, in order to our Salvation.” (McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, p. 153.) When in 1905, at the opening session of the first Baptist World Congress the aged Dr. Alexander Maclaren led the company in the recitation of the Apostles’ Creed, it was no doubt something of this he had in mind, as well as a desire to make clear that Baptists claim a place among the one People of God.

A later generation of Baptists had to reply officially to the “Appeal to all Christian People” sent out in 1920 by the Anglican bishops, and they said :

“We believe in the Catholic Church as the holy Society of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, which He founded, of which He is the only Head, and in which He dwells by His Spirit, so that though made up of many Communions, organ-

ized in various modes, and scattered throughout the world, it is yet one in Him."

And when, in 1948, the Baptist Union Council was called upon—in preparation for the Lund Faith and Order Conference—to make a statement about "The Baptist Doctrine of the Church," those words were repeated and this sentence was added :

"In the worship, fellowship and witness of the one Church we know ourselves to be united in the communion of saints, not only with all believers upon earth, but also with those who have entered into life everlasting."

I want to speak a little more about the visible unity of the People of God here upon earth. Concern for that has of recent decades taken possession of an increasing number of Christians, both individually and corporately. This one holy catholic Church, in which we profess belief, is now divided into so many different communions, denominations and groups, often engaged in controversy with one another and at certain important points denying full recognition and fellowship to one another. The unity of the People of God is no longer manifest to the world outside the Church. It has also receded from the consciousness of large numbers of Christians who yet claim to be within the Church. There is clearly something wrong here. The task laid upon the People of God—the actual situation of Christians in all parts of the world in this 20th century, as well as biblical and theological requirements—all point to the need to face this issue of the nature of the unity given to and willed by God for His Church. The differences in theology and practice that have arisen are deep and serious. The Church is made up of sinful men and women and at the best we see in a glass darkly. The schisms and divisions of Church history, regrettable as they are, were not all unnecessary nor to be repudiated. The true unity and catholicity of the People of God have sometimes required separation and may do so again. To say anything else would be to deny our own past : it would indeed be near blasphemy.

But when that has been said, we cannot remain content with things as they are. Nor can we escape our problems by talking glibly about the Church invisible or about spiritual unity. The New Testament knows no distinction between a Church visible and a Church invisible; nor would its writers have understood talk about a unity which has no clear material expression. Christians are increasingly conscious that they must face this problem—all of them must. The strange unfolding drama of Christian history has given us those in all parts of the world who call upon the name of Jesus Christ, but are yet "organized in various modes" which are more and more confusing and embarrassing to themselves as well as to

the uncommitted and the hostile. Nor can we any longer say of our differences regarding Church Order, as Streeter did: "All have won and all have the prizes," and remain therewith content. Must not all the Churches, if they are honest, our own and equally the Anglican, Lutheran, Orthodox, Roman and the rest—confess: "All have turned aside, they are together become unprofitable"?

This is what the Ecumenical Movement is about. The name is probably unfortunate, for it gives us another difficult and even loaded word. It is, of course, a New Testament word. There it means "the whole inhabited earth." It is a word with a long Christian history as applied to Councils of the whole Church in contrast to regional councils. There is, that is to say, a spaciousness and inclusiveness about it. The Ecumenical Movement, says Mr. Daniel Jenkins, "can be most generally described as a movement for the renewal and reintegration of the divided parts of Christ's Church on earth, in the light of a fresh vision of the Church as a single reality given by Christ as part of His Gospel" (*Congregationalism*, 1954, p. 11). The movement aims at the mutual confrontation of the various Christian bodies that they may better understand one another and the blessing of God vouchsafed to them "with undistinguishing regard." It challenges them to discover fresh and united ways of better fulfilling their common tasks. No more and no less than that.

It all began, as we well know, with an increasing realization that the missionary agencies of the various Churches must co-operate. But before that process had got very far, it was clear that questions of faith and order, and the diverse views about these things, must be thought about. And Christians have become growingly aware of the challenges to their way of life in industrial societies, in lands dominated by materialistic ideologies, in parts of the world where ancient non-Christian religions are showing fresh vitality—in a world which is being swiftly unified by new means of travel and communication, a world not only more and more impatient of ancient Christian controversies, but a world in which they clearly have less relevance, if the central truths of the Gospel are to be manifest and if the compassion of Christ is to be shown. Nor can we ignore the strangely mixed origins of the membership of any local congregation in any part of the world.

What the final issue of this will or should be, we do not know. But there is a constraint upon an increasing number of Christians, both as individuals and in their corporately organized life. Churches which were strangers and even enemies have in the last fifty years moved with some kind of dialogue and fellowship with one another in an effort to become clearer as to the mind of Christ.

The World Council of Churches is one of the expressions, the creations, of this movement; not the only one and but a limited one,

though perhaps the most spectacular. There are now some two hundred Churches from fifty or sixty lands, and from all the main Christian traditions save the Roman, in membership with the Council. It is a fellowship of Churches for certain specific purposes. The Constitution sets it out :

“The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of Churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

“The functions of the World Council shall be :

- (i) To carry on the work of the world movements for Faith and Order and Life and Work and of the International Missionary Council.
- (ii) To facilitate common action by the churches.
- (iii) To promote co-operation in study.
- (iv) To promote the growth of ecumenical and missionary consciousness in the members of all churches.
- (v) To support the churches in their world-wide missionary and evangelistic task.
- (vi) To establish and maintain relations with national and regional councils, world confessional bodies and other ecumenical organizations.
- (vii) To call world conferences on specific subjects as occasion may require . . .”

It is no more than a Council, a forum for discussion, an agency for such joint action as the members are prepared to agree to—whether in the field of study or of Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service, or—now that the International Missionary Council is integrated with it—in the field of World Mission and Evangelism.

But what is the relation of the World Council of Churches to the Holy Catholic Church in which we profess belief when we repeat the Apostles' Creed? The question is an important one, but so, of course, is the question: What is the relation of our Baptist Churches or the Baptist Union or the Church of England or the Church of Rome, to the Holy Catholic Church? In 1950 the World Council of Churches adopted a highly significant statement which is still one of its most authoritative documents.¹ The ecclesiological significance of the World Council is set forth in thirteen clauses,

¹It is entitled *The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches*, but is often spoken of as *The Toronto Statement*.

five of them negative and eight positive with brief comments on each. I give them in their barest form :

1. The World Council of Churches is not and must never become a Super-Church.
2. The purpose of the World Council of Churches is not to negotiate unions between Churches, which can only be done by the Churches themselves acting on their own initiative but to bring the Churches into living contact with each other and to promote the study and discussion of the issues of Church unity.
3. The World Council of Churches cannot and should not be based on any particular conception of the Church. It does not prejudice the ecclesiological problem.
4. Membership in the World Council of Churches does not imply that a Church treats its own conception of the Church as merely relative.
5. Membership in the World Council of Churches does not imply the acceptance of a specific doctrine concerning the nature of Church unity.

Those are the negative ones. These are the positive :

1. The member Churches of the Council believe that conversation, co-operation and common witness of the Churches must be based on the common recognition that Christ is the Divine Head of the Body.
2. The member Churches of the World Council believe on the basis of the New Testament that the Church of Christ is one.
3. The member Churches recognise that the membership of the Church of Christ is more inclusive than the membership of their own Church body . . .
4. The member Churches of the World Council consider the relationship of other Churches to the Holy Catholic Church which the Creeds profess as a subject for mutual consideration. Nevertheless, membership does not imply that each Church must regard the other member Churches as Churches in the true and full sense of the word.
5. The member Churches of the World Council recognise in other Churches, elements of the true Church . . .
6. The member Churches of the Council are willing to consult together in seeking to learn of the Lord Jesus Christ what witness He would have them bear in the world in His name.
7. A further practical implication of common membership in the World Council is that the member Churches should recognize

their solidarity with each other, render assistance to each other in case of need, and refrain from such actions as are incompatible with brotherly relationships.

8. The member Churches enter into spiritual relationships through which they seek to learn from each other and to give help to each other in order that the Body of Christ may be built up and that the life of the Churches may be renewed.

All that has happened, all that has been done in the last fifteen years, has been within the framework of these unequivocal declarations. Far from making any Church surrender or compromise, they rightly provide safeguards and "freedom for tender consciences." They indicate that the member Churches are together on a quest that they may each and all be more loyal to the purposes of God and may better understand the nature of the unity He wills for His People. It is a difficult quest, with much uncertainty hanging over it and many pitfalls and culs-de-sac, but an exciting and rewarding quest which provides many unexpected discoveries. As Scott Lidgett once said: "Say what we will, and take what position we may, we belong together."

Some hesitate in their attitude to the World Council of Churches because they misconceive what is going on, either from ignorance or because they have been misled. To stand aside from the World Council of Churches—or indeed from the Ecumenical Movement as a whole—would seem to imply either self-distrust and paralysing fear or self-complacency and a very ill-founded self-assurance. Individuals and Churches which adopt this attitude need to remember the message of the Spirit to the Laodiceans:

"You say how rich I am! And how well I have done! I have everything I want in the world. In fact, though you do not know it, you are the most pitiful wretch, poor, blind and naked. So I advise you to buy from me gold refined in the fire . . . white clothes . . . and ointment for your eyes so that you may see." (*Revelation 3: 17-18*, New English Bible.)

For it may be said that the Ecumenical Movement is at its deepest level "a movement toward the Lord of the Church, in whom alone is the Church's unity and catholicity," (J. H. Nichols, *Church History*, September 1954, p. 275).

If we say we believe in the Holy Catholic Church, the one holy and apostolic Church, the commissioned People of God, the Church triumphant and the Church militant, of which the Lord Jesus Christ is Head—then we must surely rejoice in the ecumenical developments of the past few decades. What was it the Apostle Paul said?

“Can you not see that while there is jealousy and strife among you, you are living on the purely human level of your lower nature? When one says, ‘I am Paul’s man’, and another, ‘I am for Apollos’, are you not all too human? . . . Never make mere men a cause for pride. For though everything belongs to you, Paul, Apollos and Cephas, the world, life and death, the present and the future, all of them belong to you—yet you belong to Christ, and Christ to God.” (1 *Corinthians* 3 : 3-4; 21-23, New English Bible.)

This is what is implied when we declare our belief in the Holy Catholic Church. As a youth, Nathan Söderblom, later the Lutheran Archbishop of Uppsala, set down in his diary this prayer : “O God, give me the wisdom and humility to serve the great cause of the free unity of Thy Church.” It is a prayer we may well make our own.

There is this further truth to be remembered. I give it you in the words used by the Baptist Union Council in 1948, but there is nothing exclusively Baptist about the point that is being made :

“It is in membership of a local Church in one place that the fellowship of the one holy catholic Church becomes significant. Indeed, such gathered companies of believers are the local manifestation of the one Church of God on earth and in heaven . . . The vital relationship to Christ which is implied in full communicant membership in a local Church carries with it membership in the Church which is both in time and in eternity, both militant and triumphant.”

ERNEST A. PAYNE

THE BAPTIST SCENE TODAY IN THE U.S.A.

(Concluded from p. 175)

An awareness of the necessity of a better-educated ministry and of more effective ways in which to present the essential gospel message is being impressed upon Baptists by the vast panorama of a complex nation whose society is populated by such extremes as the “organization man” and the “beatnik.” The outlook for the future, then, is one concerned with the propagation of the gospel and the growth of the Church of Christ by the patient witnessing and work of believers empowered by the Holy Spirit—of proclaiming the message that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, in terms intelligible and meaningful to a world caring little for its eternal destiny.

RICHARD L. GREAVES