

The Holy Catholic Church

Every week we declare that we believe in "the holy catholic church" (Apostles' Creed), or "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church" (Nicene Creed). What do we mean by this? In our day, many people have surrendered the term "catholic" to the Roman church, but there is no need for this. Should we surrender "Pentecost" or "baptism" because the Pentecostals or Baptists use it in their name? This had better be a Pentecostal church, because if it is not, then we don't have the Holy Spirit! This is a Baptist church, because we affirm that there is only one baptism.

But some might say, "well, the term 'catholic' isn't used in Scripture, so why bother? Let Rome have it!" I could as easily surrender the term "catholic" as I could surrender the term "Trinity." It goes back a long way in the history of the church, and communicates something that has always been at the very heart of the gospel. "Trinity" communicates the fact that the threeness of God and the oneness of God are equally ultimate. "Catholic" communicates the fact that Jesus Christ has only one church.

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6)

The apostles everywhere assume the unity of the church. (Ephesians 4:11-16; Revelation 7:9; etc.)

Catholicity does not require organizational unity.

There is no evidence of any sort of organizational unity in the first century church. The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 is not a "General Assembly" or Ecumenical Council calling together representatives of all the churches in the world. Throughout the first three centuries, this lack of organizational unity remained, as each regional church developed its own liturgy, church order, and creed.

But, Catholicity does require fellowship.

While the early church did not have any unifying organization, they did stress the importance of remaining in fellowship with each other. In the first century, the apostles were the point of contact, and for the next 200 years, the apostolic churches remained in fellowship with each other based on their common source in the apostles' teaching and fellowship. So while there was regional diversity in liturgy, church order and creed, there was also a common pattern. All of the creeds follow something of the Trinitarian order of the Apostles' Creed (which was considered a summary of the Apostles' teaching--and so is justly named). All of the liturgies have a common pattern, and the church orders have similar features. Catholicity was maintained by recognizing that these sister churches preached the same faith, had the same worship--in short, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism."

Rome and Catholicity

The quest for organizational unity is a particularly Roman trait. The Bishop of Rome (who has arrogated the title Pope to himself--"papa" used to be used of all leading bishops) has tried to establish himself as the center of Christian unity. In the fourth and fifth centuries, it became established that Rome (as the place where Peter and Paul were thought to have been martyred, and the center of the Roman empire) should be the perpetual moderator of ecumenical councils. Of course, even the ecumenical councils, it should be noted, were generally attended only by churches inside of the Roman empire. Persian, Ethiopian, and Indian Christians were not included. But in the western, Latin-speaking half of the Roman Empire, the Bishop of Rome gradually became the supreme ruler. We tend to assume that it was always that way.

But in fact, other western bishops were not always subservient to Rome. The bishop of Carthage was the leader of the Northern African church into the 5th century, and the Celtic church followed the bishop of Armagh long into the middle ages. The history of the medieval papacy is the history of the pope's attempt to bring the whole west into organizational unity. And indeed, it was only after the Reformation that he truly succeeded!

The Reformation and Catholicity

The Reformers, after all, were not rejecting the idea of catholicity. They simply claimed that the Pope was a usurper, who was trying to take over the various regional churches. Both Luther and Calvin acknowledged that if the Pope would content himself with being the Bishop of Rome, then they would cheerfully acknowledge him as the first among equals (something the Eastern churches had been trying to get the Pope to do for nearly a thousand years!). But they insisted that each regional church should be allowed to establish its own creed, church order, and liturgy. The Reformers desired to be like the early church in maintaining fellowship between regional churches, without requiring organizational unity.

This fellowship was not merely a matter of "hanging out" with each other, or even simply of partaking of the Lord's Supper together. The Marburg Colloquy between Luther and Zwingli might seem remarkable to us today. In order for the German and Swiss rulers to work together, they needed theological agreement between their churches! And while Luther and Zwingli agreed in every other major point of doctrine, they could not agree on the nature of the Lord's Supper, and so fellowship between the churches of Switzerland and Germany was broken. For the next thirty years, the Reformed and the Lutheran churches worked hard to resolve their differences. Calvin's doctrine of the Supper was proposed originally as a *via media* to bring the two sides together. The Heidelberg Catechism was written carefully to harmonize the two and hopefully unify the Church of the Palatinate.

The Reformed confessions and catechisms, church orders, and liturgies of the 16th and 17th centuries again exhibit similar structures, patterns and doctrines. When the Dutch church faced a crisis over the teaching of Jacob Arminius, they called for all the other Reformed churches to send delegates to the Synod of Dordt. When the Long Parliament sought to unite the British Isles, they called for an Assembly of Divines (ministers) to unify the churches in doctrine, government, worship and discipline. The churches of Ireland, Scotland and England would remain separate in structure, but would have common standards.

At least through the seventeenth century, the principle of catholicity remained theoretically intact. The ideal was to have one orthodox church in any given region. But cracks were growing in the practice of catholicity. The Lutherans and the Reformed were only partly in fellowship with each other, and in many places in Germany they co-existed in the same area. In England a group of Independents had split off from the Church of England, and while most Puritans remained within the Anglican Church, there was a growing divide between Episcopalians and Presbyterians. The claims of conscience had been relatively easy to press when the opponent was Rome. One could simply identify Rome as the Babylon of Revelation and call for all true believers to "Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins!" But it became more difficult when the opponent was the Church of England, whose Thirty-Nine Articles were orthodox, and whose liturgy was formally similar to those of the continental Reformed churches. But the Church of England had retained a few Popish ceremonies, and there were some in the Anglican church who plainly preferred certain Roman practices over those of the Reformed. While the vast majority of English Puritans were faithful Anglicans, desirous merely of reforming the church, not a few moved in a more radical direction. The Congregationalists and Independents emphasized the purity of the local congregation and rejected the concept of the regional church. Baptists went a step further and rejected infant baptism as a relic of the papacy. From there it was only another step to the Quakers who rejected ministers and sacraments entirely, or to the Seekers who felt that the church had been entirely destroyed and waited for God to send new apostles to reorganize the church!

It was in this context that the Westminster Assembly declared in Chapter 25 of their Confession:

I. The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all.[1]

1. Eph. 1:10, 22-23; 5:23, 27, 32; Col. 1:18

II. The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion;[2] and of their children:[3] and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ,[4] the house and family of God,[5] out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.[6]

2. I Cor. 1:2; 12:12-13; Psa. 2:8; Rev. 7:9; Rom. 15:9-12

3. I Cor. 7:14; Acts 2:39; Gen. 17:7-12; Ezek. 16:20-21; Rom. 11:16; see Gal. 3:7, 9, 14; Rom. 4:12, 16, 24

4. Matt. 13:47; Isa. 9:7; Luke 1:32-33; Acts 2:30-36; Col. 1:13

5. Eph. 2:19; 3:15

6. Acts 2:47

III. Unto this catholic visible church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth, by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto. [7]

7. I Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11-13; Matt. 28:19-20; Isa. 59:12

IV. This catholic church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible.[8] And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.[9]

8. Rom. 11:3-5; Acts 2:41, 47; 9:31; 18:8-10

9. Acts 2:41-42; I Cor. 5:6-7; Rev. ch. 2-3

The New "Catholicity"

It was in America that this older understanding of catholicity disintegrated. While Europe was trying to maintain catholicity through established churches that "tolerated" dissent, Americans faced a new challenge. Most of the early settlers of the New World were in favor of church establishment, but only if they were the established church! New England Congregationalists quickly established the Congregational church in New England, while Episcopalians were established in the South, and after the Dutch Reformed Church's brief establishment in New Amsterdam, the Anglican Church took over New York.

The one region where establishments did not take root in the colonial era were the middle colonies. Pennsylvania and New Jersey both had large Quaker populations (which rejected establishments altogether) while Maryland sought toleration for Roman Catholics, which under British rule meant toleration for all dissenters. It was particularly in Pennsylvania where America's religious future was anticipated. In Pennsylvania all of the old established churches of Europe met: the German Reformed from the Church of the Palatine, Lutherans from the Church of Saxony, Presbyterians from the Church of Scotland, Anglicans from the Church of England, together with the dominant Quakers, a few Welsh Baptists and a scattering of Mennonites.

There was some talk of merger. The Dutch and German Reformed nearly merged with the Scottish Presbyterians. But the Lutherans and Episcopalians were not interested in this. Radicals, such as the Baptists, Mennonites and Quakers, argued that denominational pluralism was good, and in general, the old established churches tended to agree. Each denomination tended to attract "its own" people: the Presbyterians were overwhelmingly Scots-Irish, the Lutherans were all German and Scandinavian, the Episcopalians and Baptists were all English (and Welsh). The old idea of catholicity--one church per region--did not work when regional churches all came together in one area.

But American Protestants were not willing to surrender the idea of catholicity. When Roman Catholics accused them of being divided and divisive, Protestants replied that they were still united in doctrine and fellowship. After all, in the early Republic there was a general Reformed consensus in American Protestantism. The Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and Baptists were confessionally similar to the Presbyterians and Reformed. The most significant differences were in polity. Such newspapers as the True Catholic (edited by Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists in the 1840s) emphasized the general consensus among evangelical Protestants against the radical wing, those that were denying the catholicity of the church.

Because by the 1840s the alignment of American Protestants had changed. The Baptists were no longer on the fringe. They had come more into the mainline, as the Disciples of Christ and a whole array of smaller radical groups had emerged (Mormons, Millerites, Swedenborgians, etc). The mainstream of American Protestantism attempted to maintain a sort of catholicity that was not organizational, but based upon a general harmony of doctrine and piety. Especially piety.

Presbyterians sought to remain in fellowship with Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists (as well as the German and Dutch Reformed). If you look at their official standards, the Thirty Nine Articles for Methodists and Episcopalians, and various modified versions of the Westminster Confession for Congregationalists and most Baptists, these are churches with whom we should have fellowship.

But problems developed. Methodist preachers were famous for preaching anti-Calvinist sermons, and often accused Presbyterians of all sorts of awful teachings. Some of their most popular hymns were overtly anti-Calvinistic, mocking the doctrine of predestination. How do you maintain fellowship when your sister church is mocking you? Many Baptists refused to accept transfers from Presbyterian churches without rebaptizing people. How do you maintain fellowship when your sister church will not accept your baptism? Doesn't that suggest that they do not think of you as a church? Then the Anglo-Catholic movement hit the Episcopal church, and the Episcopalians (who had generally been closest to the Presbyterians in the early 19th century) started insisting that Presbyterian ministers were not validly ordained because they had not been ordained by a bishop! (As I read the newspapers of the 19th century, this is how it happened. Presbyterians rarely attacked others. They wanted to maintain fellowship in spite of differences. Partly, this is because Presbyterianism is Catholic: we can accept Baptist baptisms, we can accept Episcopal ordination, and while we reject Methodist Arminianism, we don't feel any need to try to raise a popular outcry against them, or write anti-Methodist hymns!)

Catholicity Today

Today we face an even more bewildering situation. With whom should we be in fellowship? Obviously, other PCA churches in the area--La Porte, Valparaiso and Fort Wayne--are the first step. Invite them to join you for a Northern Indiana PCA picnic sometime this summer, and then invite the other Presbyterian churches in the area to join in--the OP church in Walkerton and the RPCNA in Elkhart. With such churches we can have pulpit exchanges, joint worship services, and with them we can work together to plant churches throughout the Michiana area.

But church planting is not the only way to grow. Through fellowship with evangelical churches in the Michiana area, we can seek to help reform the Church of Michiana. You may not be able to see the Church of Michiana very clearly. She is divided into hundreds of splinters. But there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. The Church of Michiana exists, and by the grace of God, she may become more visible through the efforts of this and other congregations in her midst. There are churches in the area that would be willing to have fellowship with us. We could work together with some of the Baptist and Evangelical Free churches at least. Conservative Lutherans are often clannish, but they are our brothers, so we should at least try to reach out! Unfortunately there do not seem to be many orthodox Episcopalians in our area, but perhaps that could change as the ECUSA is likely to be overhauled by the Worldwide Anglican Fellowship. I have not heard of any

ministerial fellowship in the South Bend area, but that could be a useful project--if it is well done. I know one Presbyterian minister in Oregon who has been instrumental in creating a truly catholic ministerial fellowship that works to provide a measure of discipline in the churches in the region. All membership transfers must be dealt with biblically in that town!

Why should we bother? If we really believe what our confession says about the communion of saints, and the catholicity of the visible church, then the following is true not merely of the congregation, but also of the whole visible church in our area (Chapter 26):

I. All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by his Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with him in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory:[1] and, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces,[2] and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.
[3]

1. I John 1:3; Eph. 2:5-6; 3:16-18; John 1:16; Phil. 3:10; Rom. 6:5-6; 8:17; II Tim. 2:12
2. Eph. 4:15-16; I Cor. 3:21-23; 12:7, 12; Col. 2:19
3. I Thess. 5:11, 14; Rom. 1:11-12, 14; I John 3:16-18; Gal. 6:10

II. Saints by profession are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification:[4] as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offereth opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus.[5]

4. Heb. 10:24-25; Acts 2:42, 46; Isa. 2:3; I Cor. 11:20
5. I John 3:17; II Cor. ch. 8-9; Acts 2:44-45; 11:29-30

Organizational unity (being in one denomination) is not the end in and of itself. Rather, being in fellowship with each other is the point. But this means that we cannot think of ourselves (this congregation, this presbytery, this denomination) as a self-contained unit. If we want to make significant changes in our doctrine or practice, we should ask for the advice of those around us. Our General Assemblies should consult with each other (and with other Reformed churches around the world) when faced with significant issues.

In fact, there is a drawback to organizational unity: the resulting denomination would be too unwieldy. Can you imagine the Church of the United States? No, the early church was wise not to try to establish an organizational structure for the whole Roman empire. Regional unity is much more important than national unity. I sometimes think that the various Presbyterian and Reformed presbyteries in the Great Lakes area should simply merge into the Synod of the Great Lakes. It would continue to be in fellowship with the General Assemblies of the PCA, OPC, RPCNA, URC, etc., but it would consist of all the Presbyterian and Reformed churches in the region. But the only way for this to happen, in any region, is for these various presbyteries and classes to get to know each other; which starts with congregations and elders getting to know each other.

[Practical ideas: joint worship services; conferences; camps; seminars; diaconal ministries; schools; etc.]

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