

I Believe in the Holy Local Church

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One of the most ancient and widely-held Christian creeds confesses,

“I believe in the holy catholic church.”

This is an important doctrine, but it is only half of the story. If we would follow the Scriptures, we must be rightly related not only to the holy catholic (that is, universal) church, but also to the holy local church.

Let's start by clarifying some of the words in the creed.

- Contrary to modern usage, the word “church” does not refer to a building. The Greek word translated “church” in the New Testament means an assembly, a gathering of people. The ancient creed is talking about a group of people.
- “Holy” means “set apart.” The church is holy because God has set it apart from the rest of society. It is saved; they are lost. They are ruled by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life; it is being continually purified by God's Spirit and God's Word.
- “Catholic” is not a reference to the Roman Catholic denomination, but rather means “universal.” The creed recognizes that there is an entity consisting of all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, past and present, wherever they may be on earth.

This “holy catholic church” is the object of our Lord's love and redemption (Eph 5:25). It is his body (Eph 1:22,23), the means of revealing God's wisdom to the principalities and powers in heavenly places (Eph 3:10), seeking to bring glory to God (Eph 3:21), and as a result the object of persecution by the servants of the wicked one (1 Cor 15:9). Every time we are encouraged by a hymn written hundreds of years ago and thousands of miles away, or recall the example of an ancient martyr, or gain insight from a commentary, we are profiting from the holy catholic church. Every time we send relief to believers in another city who have suffered misfortune, we are functioning as part of the holy catholic church

The universal church is precious and powerful, and some believers behave as though it were all that there is to the church. They have no regular affiliation with any local gathering of believers. They are not accountable to any single assembly. They seek fellowship broadly, from individuals in many places, visiting one group one week, another the following week. Like the ancient confessors, they believe in the holy catholic church. But by their conduct, they are denying an equally important and equally biblical doctrine: the holy local church.

The Local Church in the New Testament

The New Testament has much to say about the local church. We can organize the evidence under four categories: grammar, distinctions, participation, and discipline.

Grammar.--Let's start with a simple grammatical observation. Thirty-six times in the New Testament we read of “churches” (plural). The inspired writers recognized the existence of distinct local

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gatherings. Paul planted local churches in different places, and sought to strengthen them by his ministry. “He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the **churches**” (Acts 15:41). As a result of the ministry of Paul, Silas, and Timothy, “so were the **churches** established in the faith” (Acts 16:5).

Distinctions.--Not only were there multiple churches, but they differed greatly in their strengths, opportunities, and challenges. We see this in two collections of letters addressed to individual churches. The first consists of nine letters by Paul, addressed to seven distinct churches (in the cities of Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessalonica). The other collection is seven letters from the Lord to the churches of Asia Minor (in the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea), recorded in Revelation 2-3. The writers of these letters praise or censure each church individually, as a unit with its own identity and autonomy, responsible to represent the Lord in the place where it exists. One does not write a letter to an accidental gathering of whoever happens to be together on a given Lord’s Day. Paul, and the risen Lord, clearly think of individual churches as having persistence and identity.

Participation.--Several Scriptures assume that believers in a local meeting recognize and know one another.

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul rebukes the church in Corinth for abuses in their meetings. He criticizes them for the disorderly nature of a common meal that they shared, which they presumed to call “the Lord’s Supper.” In fact, those who came early were greedily gobbling up the best dishes, leaving the scraps to those who came late. Paul tells them to “tarry one for another” (v. 33). He assumes that each person knows who else will be coming to the meeting, so that if a brother or sister is detained, the rest of the group can wait for them. The command to wait for one another implies that those who gather do so regularly and faithfully, so that everybody knows who is expected to be there.

Another line of evidence that each believer participates regularly and faithfully in a single local church concerns leadership. The leadership of each church is vested in the older brothers, and these differ from church to church. Acts 14:23 tells us that Paul and Barnabas “ordained ... elders in every church.” Paul instructs Titus to “ordain elders in every city” (Titus 1:5). We read in Acts 20:17 of the elders of the church at Ephesus, and in Phil 1:1 of the bishops of the church in Philippi. (“Bishop” is another title for the elder, emphasizing the responsibility of watching over the flock). The position of elder or bishop is tied to a single local church. There is no evidence that elders carried this status with them from one church to another. The elders, at least, were persistently associated with individual churches.

But we can say more. Paul writes to the Thessalonians,

1Th 5:12-13 we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; 13 And to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake.

Each participant in a meeting is expected to know those who have responsibility for that meeting. And the elders are expected to know those in the meeting, for the Lord will call on them to give an account for those under their care:

Heb 13:17 Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that *is* unprofitable for you.

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Believers cannot know and respect the elders in a local meeting if they attend only sporadically, and elders cannot be held accountable for people who only drift through occasionally. The early believers were regular and faithful in their participation in the affairs of a local group.

Discipline.--Why is it important for people to participate regularly and faithfully in a single local church? People do not become mature, spiritual believers the moment they are born again. They require the support, encouragement, and sometimes the correction of their brothers and sisters. The New Testament assumes that there will be friction among believers. The flesh seeks to avoid such friction. Sometimes a fear of confrontation may lead a person to avoid regular participation in a local gathering. But our Lord's instructions for dealing with friction push us together, not apart. To those who realize that they may have offended a brother or sister, he says,

Mat 5:23-24 Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; 24 Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.

And to those who have been offended, he says,

Mat 18:15-17 Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. 16 But if he will not hear *thee*, *then* take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. 17 And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell *it* unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

In neither case are the parties to avoid one another. In Matthew 18, the church mediates their dispute, which presumes that they both recognize the church's authority and are accountable to it.

We see the same dynamic in 1 Corinthians 5. One brother in the church in Corinth has been overtaken by gross sin, entering into a marriage with his father's wife. The church has been tolerating this condition, but Paul instructs them to correct it.

1Co 5:2 And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. ... 11 But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. 12 For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? 13 But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.

This scenario assumes regular, persistent fellowship among a group of believers. They know one another well enough to know the intimate details of one another's lives, and treasure that association enough that the threat of being put away from the group is a real incentive to godliness. If everybody meets only occasionally, they would not know the details of each other's experiences, and the threat of exclusion would have no impact. The Lord expects his people to be accountable to one another. The framework he has established for that accountability is the local gathering of believers. In fact, this dynamic of accountability lies at the heart of the most commonly-cited exhortation to believers to gather together:

Heb 10:24-25 And let us consider one another **to provoke unto love and to good works**: 25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some *is*; but exhorting *one*

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another.

When I titled this essay, “The Holy Local Church,” my initial motive for including “Holy” in the title was to recall the phrase in the creed about the Holy Catholic Church. But the biblical evidence for the role of the local church in discipline and personal sanctification shows that the title is, if anything, more appropriate to the local church than to the universal church. It is at the level of the local church that the Word of God is taught. Believers must interact regularly with one another to develop the commitment that supports mutual exhortation, rebuke, and encouragement, and the local church is the means that God has provided for that regular, intimate interaction. The mechanisms by which God produces individual holiness, through which he sets apart the church as a whole as holy, are most strongly active at the level of the local church. In God’s plan, the local church is indeed holy.

What about the Evangelist?

The New Testament describes a group of people who move about from one church to another. The clearest example is Paul and his associates (Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Titus), who travel from one local meeting to another. Are they evidence that at least some believers do not need to be accountable to a single local meeting? Let’s notice two things about them.

First, they are not traveling around to existing meetings with which they have no prior relationship. Our Lord commanded his disciples to

Mat 28:19-20 Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: 20 Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you:

In obedience to this command, the early believers go to places with no churches and preach the gospel. That’s why one of the biblical titles for such a person is “evangelist.” They help the new believers organize into local churches. Then they revisit these groups from time to time to encourage and help them (Acts 14:21-22; 15:36). They are not casual visitors, making the rounds of a different church each week. They know these groups intimately, and the groups know them.

A second observation is that these evangelists carry out their work, not on their own authority, but under the oversight of a home assembly. Philip, the earliest evangelist, was set apart by the church in Jerusalem (Acts 6). Paul and Barnabas were sent out by the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1-3), and at the end of their first journey they returned to give an account to that gathering (Acts 14:26-28). When Paul took on Silas as an associate, Silas was sent by the church at Jerusalem (Acts 15:22), and when Timothy joined the team in Derbe, it was with the approval of the elders of that church (Acts 16:2; 1 Tim 4:14). Each believer is to be accountable to a local assembly, and an evangelist is no exception.

Conclusion

The Lord continues his work on earth through the church, which is his body. This church operates at two levels, and believers are expected to be engaged faithfully at both levels. The “holy catholic church” is the universal body of all believers everywhere and throughout the history of the church. We participate in that church by showing love and offering charity to believers everywhere, and by valuing

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what God has done through those who have gone before. Local churches are persistent, identifiable gatherings of believers in different places. The New Testament expects each believer to associate regularly and faithfully with such a local body. We are to know those with whom we meet, recognize those whom God has placed over the group, and be accountable to the group as we grow, individually and corporately, into the likeness of the Lord Jesus.