

PASTOR'S NOTES. One Holy Catholic (universal) and Apostolic Church, part 1.

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

(Galatians 2:11-14, NRSV)

In the passage above, Paul is speaking about a confrontation between himself and Peter (he calls him by his Aramaic name Cephas). There were many disputes among the leaders of the early Church, and Paul was as vocal a critic as any. At the same time, Paul had a deep respect for the "traditions" (1 Corinthians 11:2, 23; 15:3; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 3:6) of the Church and never assumed that he had the authority to change Church doctrine. Almost all Church leaders of the time thought the same.

The Nicene Creed is fundamental statement of doctrine believed by the majority of Christian Churches (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and most non-denominational – but not by Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and some Pentecostals): It was mostly completed by the year 381, though the ideas in it go back more than a hundred years earlier.

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light. true God from true God,
begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father;
through Him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation He came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
and became truly human.
For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
He suffered death and was buried.
On the third day He rose again in accordance with the Scriptures;
He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and His kingdom will have no end.
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
Who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
Who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,
Who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in the one holy catholic and apostolic church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

(Nicene Creed, as translated #880, United Methodist Hymnal)

You will notice that though the creed is a bit lengthy to memorize (though for centuries you were expected to memorize it), it follows a simple pattern: God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and a few other major doctrines. This includes the line: ONE HOLY CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC CHURCH.

Throughout history, this statement has been called “the four marks of the church.”

ONE: united in Christ;
HOLY: set apart as sacred, devoted to God and doing God’s work;
CATHOLIC (universal): Christ is universally present, and the church everywhere is directed to all people;
APOSTOLIC: keeping with the traditions of the apostles; in most oldline churches, this also means that when one is ordained, at least one elder of the worldwide church lays hands on them, and that elder had hands laid on them, and so forth, all the way back to the original apostles.

This idea of one holy catholic and apostolic church is reflected in several scripture passages:

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

(Romans 15:5, NRSV)

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, Who is above all and through all and in all.

(Ephesians 4:1-6, NRSV)

After Jesus had spoken these words, He looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son so that the Son may glorify You...

I have made Your name known to those whom You gave me from the world. They were Yours, and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word...

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one. As You, Father, are in Me and I am in You, may they also be in Us, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me.”

(John 17:1, 6, 20-21, NRSV)

It might surprise us as Americans that in spite of major differences of opinion, the leaders of the early Church never considered it an option to separate from other Christians. They would likely have been shocked to see thousands of different denominations and assume this is the result of a failure of the Christian church. But in the next article, I will retrace some of the steps that have taken us to where we are, and what that might mean for us today.

Yours in Christ,

