

Nicene Creed

This morning we continue with our sermon series on the Nicene Creed and we're nearing the end of this Creed. The concluding paragraph of this creed is:

And I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen

The Christian faith is something so much larger than ourselves and the Church is the manifestation of that faith. Focussing on the enormity and importance of the church, the body of Christ, the Nicene Fathers endeavoured to describe the reality of the Church. They provided a description by answering two basic questions – what does the church look like and what does it do.

This concluding paragraph gives us four earmarks of the church 'oneness', 'holiness' 'catholicity' and 'apostolicity'. It then goes on to tell us that the Church believes in one baptism, the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

This morning we're looking at the first phrase of this paragraph:

And I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church

This short phrase gives us four essential attributes of the church that we noted a few moments ago: 'oneness', 'holiness' 'catholicity' and 'apostolicity'.

Oneness is the bedrock characteristic of the church. There is a similarity between the belief in "one God" and "in one Lord Jesus Christ," and the belief in the oneness of the church. Christ's prayer for his disciples and the followers after them recorded in chapter 17 of John's gospel was that they might be one as he and the Father are one: "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you 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 17:20-21 NIV)

Unity and oneness are the most basic characteristics of the church as they are derived from the very essence of the God we serve. It is not our organizational structure but our belief in the ONE God of the universe and the ONE Lord Jesus Christ and the unique salvation by faith in Him that unites us as one.

Sadly, in our times, we see a church that is far from united. I’m sure that is a source of great sadness to our God. We need to pray that the church might be truly united in our belief in the basic gospel message rather than emphasising our disagreement about other lesser issues. Of course we cannot agree with and be one with those who ignore or reject clear biblical teaching – as parts of our Anglican church are moving towards. That is to reject one of the earmarks of the church – ‘apostolic’ – that this phrase of the creed is giving us.

Let’s move on to look at the next earmark of the church – holiness. “Holiness” and the adjective “holy” occur more than 900 times in the Bible. The primary OT word for holiness means “to cut” or “to separate.” Fundamentally, holiness is a cutting off or separation from what is unclean, and consecration to what is pure. I believe the words “set apart” provide the best working definition for holiness. God has set the church apart as his possession, sanctifying it and making it clean for the purposes of his own glory, filling it with his holiness. God gives his people the command to “be holy,” but he does not give this command in a vacuum. He commands them to be holy as HE is holy. As the apostle Peter says in his first letter: “As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”” (1 Peter 1:14-16 NIV)

God is holy in that he is utterly distinct from his creation and exercises sovereign majesty and power over it. His holiness is

especially prominent in the Psalms (47:8) and the prophets (Ez 39:7). For example Psalm 47:

“God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne.” (Ps 47:8 NIV)

and Ezekiel 39:7

““I will make known my holy name among my people Israel. I will no longer let my holy name be profaned, and the nations will know that I the LORD am the Holy One in Israel.” (Eze 39:7 NIV)

Just as the oneness of the church comes from God’s own unity, the holiness of the church comes from the holiness of God.

The next earmark of the church is “catholic”. This is catholic with a small “c”. If it were a capital C, then the reference would be to the Roman Catholic church. I think it’s useful to always use the term “Roman Catholic” when we’re referring to that denomination and then it’s clear when we speak of the ‘catholic church’ that we’re using the term catholic in relation to the church as a whole. The word ‘catholic’ in association with the church as it is used in the Nicene Creed, means universal. The church is a reality that is pertinent to everyone universally. There is no one to whom the church cannot minister and to whom its message cannot reach. Blocked for none, the church’s roles are full of sinners of all kinds, their admission secured by the stripes that Jesus Christ bore. By Christ’s wounds we are forgiven our sins and reconciled to God.

Of course this earmark ‘catholic’ has to be read in conjunction with the earlier statement that the church is ‘one’. We must recover the reality of a single unified church, united in its teaching and ministry.

Finally, the church is to be “apostolic”. Apostolic simply means that the church is to be rooted in the historic teachings of the apostles. It is to be founded in the apostolic testimony. Essentially, this is an admonishment to the church to be founded in the Word of Scripture written by the apostles, which conveys the faith once for all handed down by them. In reality this is made clear by the biblical allusions throughout the words of the Nicene Creed.

In chapter 2 of his letter to the Ephesians the apostle Paul wrote: “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:19-22 NIV)

The church condemned any teaching which did not reflect the gospel message as taught by the apostles. Hear what Paul says in chapter 1 of his letter to the Galatians:

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!” (Ga 1:6-9 NIV)

Essentially, the apostolicity of the church is the belief that the church receives, defends, and hands down the gospel of Jesus Christ as testified by his apostles. The doctrine does not suggest a pure organizational succession in the church’s leadership but rather an adherence to apostolic teaching. Peter’s famous confession that Jesus Christ is Lord expresses the essence of the apostolic testimony; it is after Peter makes this confession that Jesus proclaims him the rock upon which the church is built. This is recorded in chapter 16 of Matthew’s gospel:

“When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ,

the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:13-19 NIV)

But it is not Peter alone who forms this foundation; it includes all "the apostles and prophets," with Christ himself being the chief cornerstone as Paul tells us in chapter 2 of his letter to the Ephesians: "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord." (Ephesians 2:20-21 NIV)

The apostles received a mission from Jesus himself to go proclaim the gospel and make disciples of all nations as Matthew tells in chapter 28 of his gospel:

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20 NIV)

As the church began to grow, the earliest Christian communities devoted themselves to the apostolic teaching as Luke tells us in chapter 2 of the book of Acts:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles." (Acts 2:42-43 NIV)

As members of the church – the body of Christ - we must all heed this message from the early apostles and go out and preach and teach the gospel message as the opportunity arises. Furthermore we must oppose any teaching which does not correspond to the gospel message

taught by the apostles. Indeed we must oppose any message which does not fully reflect and agree with God's word given to us in the Bible. We are not at liberty to change or ignore God's word to us. When the teachings of our culture do not correspond to what the Bible teaches we are not at liberty to change or ignore what God's word tells us. We must not allow ourselves to be led astray and must vigorously oppose and denounce any and all teachings which are not in accordance with Biblical truth in order that others might not be lead astray. Being familiar with the Nicene Creed helps us to remember the important basic message of our Christian faith, so each time we recite it or read it we should reflect on what it's words mean rather than saying them without a seconds thought.