



I believe in the Holy Catholic Church

The Reformed Church in the United States confesses that it is necessary for a Christian to believe *all that is promised us in the gospel, which the articles of our catholic undoubted Christian faith teach us in sum.* (Heidelberg Catechism Q22). One of the articles necessary for a Christian to believe is: *I believe in the ... Holy Catholic Church* (HC Q22). This article is, of course, one of many articles that comprise the Apostles' Creed. The RCUS is not alone in stating the necessity of believing the article concerning the *Holy Catholic Church*. This article is confessed by all churches holding to the Apostles' Creed as a summary statement of belief. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, from its earliest beginnings has made use of the Apostles' Creed to express its belief in the *Holy Catholic Church*.

But the use of the creed by various churches does not necessarily mean these churches agree as to what is actually to be believed concerning the *Holy Catholic Church*. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, stated in the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215: *"Indeed, there is but one universal Church of the faithful, outside which no one at all is saved..."*¹ So far so good. But then the Church then went on to declare at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274:

*"The same Roman Church also has supreme and full primacy and jurisdiction over the whole Catholic Church. This it truly and humbly recognizes as received from the Lord himself in the person of St. Peter, the Prince or Head of the Apostles, whose successor in the fullness of power is the Roman Pontiff."*²

These conciliar statements serve to affirm the truth of the *Holy Catholic Church* but then limit that *Holy Catholic Church* to those who acknowledge that the Roman Church localized and headquartered in Rome, Italy, *has supreme and full primacy and jurisdiction* over it. That is what the Roman Catholic Church believed concerning the *Holy Catholic Church* in the 13th century and what it continues to believe in the 21st century. Anthony Wilhelm writes: *"If one comes to know and believe in the Catholic Church, he should become a catholic."*³

In contrast to what Roman Catholicism believes concerning the article of the Apostles' Creed, the *Holy Catholic Church*, our Heidelberg Catechism at Q54 states what it is we believe concerning this article:

"That out of the whole human race, from the beginning to the end of the world, the Son of God, by His Spirit and Word, gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself unto everlasting life a chosen communion in the unity of true faith; and that I am and forever shall remain a living member of the same."

While Rome circumscribes the article the *Holy Catholic Church* and limits it to those under its jurisdiction, our Heidelberg Catechism states that the *Holy Catholic Church* *"...embraces all that the Son of God has chosen and gathered by His Word and Spirit, out of the entirety of the human race, in whatever place they have been or will be, and in whatever time they have lived from the beginning, or will live to the end of the world, inclusive of the living and the dead."* It then goes on to state that *"...I am and forever shall remain a living member of the same."* In other words, every true believer who is part of this Son of God gathered, defended, preserved, chosen communion is now and ever shall remain a member of this *Holy Catholic Church*.

Thus what we believe is diametrically opposed to what Rome believes, though we claim to believe the same article concerning the *Holy Catholic Church*.

Now, in order to understand why we believe what we believe concerning this article of the Apostles' Creed, let me break the article down into the three heads of belief explicit in it, in the light of scripture.

I believe ... in the church

In confessing *I believe in the ... Church*, what does the scripture mean by the use of the word “church” or as it is in the original *ekklesia*? The word *ekklesia* is comprised of two words in the original, which, when combined, mean *a calling out of*. In Greek usage, as exemplified in the New Testament, the word was used of the calling out of a group of citizens to an assembly to discuss some affair of state. It may be a riotous spontaneous assembly such as in Acts 19:32⁴ (comp. 19:41) or an official civil gathering as in Acts 19:39. In both of these cases the word translated assembly (KJV) is the word *ekklesia*.

The word *ekklesia* is also used to speak of an assembly of professed believers gathered in a local setting such as Ephesus (Acts 20:28) or Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:2), etc. And it is used in the New Testament in the plural to speak of several assemblies of professing believers in a region or regions (Acts 19:31; 1 Thessalonians 2:14; Revelation 1:11, etc.). In these cases, as it is used of assemblies of believers, it is translated by the English word *church*.

As the Apostles’ Creed uses the word *church* in the article before us, it is not using it of a civil gathering, or of a local church, or of churches in terms of regional location, though both local and regional churches are included. The scope of the article is much larger. It is using the word in the way Christ employed it in Matthew 16:18, when he said: “*I will build my Church.*” This church is further described in Ephesians 1:22–23 and 5:23, as synonymous with the redeemed efficaciously called out of a state of sin, redeemed from sin, and united by grace through faith to Christ as His body, Christ Himself being the Head. In other words, the church we believe in is the full, total, or complete company of the redeemed united to Christ by true faith, “*that the Son of God by His Spirit and Word gathers, defends and preserves for Himself*” and who are “*a chosen communion in the unity of the true faith.*” The church we are confessing to believe in is the full company of the redeemed in all ages from the beginning to the end of the world who hold to and are united in the bonds of the *true faith*. This would automatically exclude any organization who might call itself a church but who does not hold to the *true faith* (Comp. John 17:17; Romans 16:25–27; Galatians 2:16; Philippians 3:9) which would include Roman Catholicism and all sects and cults.⁵

Now it is important to note here the authorship and agency of this church as stated by the catechism, as it explains what we believe concerning the *Holy Catholic Church*. This church is not designed or built by men or councils of men. This church is gathered by the Son of God. He is its author. He is the one who builds the church (Matthew 16:18). He calls it “*my church.*” The church is wholly conceived in the counsel of the Triune Godhead with Christ as its Head (Ephesians 1:22) and cornerstone (i.e., from which the whole building takes its alignment) (Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:6).

In building this church, He does so through the agency of His Spirit and Word (Romans 1:16; 10:11–17c).

We therefore believe, as John Gerstner put it, “*Ubi Spiritus ibi ecclesia* — Where the Spirit is, there is the Church.” Rome holds just the opposite view: “*Ubi ecclesia ibi Spiritus* — Where the church is, there is the Spirit.”⁶

Therefore, when we confess “*I believe ... in the church,*” we mean we believe that all those who will or have, by the agency of the Spirit and Word, believed and received the Gospel of Jesus Christ and trusted in Christ alone as their Saviour and Redeemer as He is revealed in the Word of God, in whatever age that church existed or shall exist, and whether that church is visible or invisible, that all these comprise the church of whom Christ alone is, and ever shall remain, the Head and cornerstone.

I believe in the ...catholic church⁷

Although a direct line of connection cannot be made from the creed to the scriptures, particularly in reference to the Church, there is somewhat of a connection. The Greek word, from which our English word *catholic* comes from, is found in the Bible. In Acts 4:18 in the context of the Jewish

authorities commanding Peter and John not to “*speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus,*” the words *at all* (KJV) are the translation of a form of the Greek word *katholikos*. Its meaning as used here in Scripture is that of *at all, wholly, entirely, totally*. Under no circumstances, in any way, shape, or form were the apostles to preach or teach in the name of Jesus. They were to be wholly, entirely, totally quiet. In other words, they were to be *universally* quiet. A universal muzzle was placed on the Apostles, which of course they ignored out of obedience to God. But it is here that we are first introduced to the word we now know in English as *catholic*.

Eusebius, the Church historian, introduces this same word *katholikos* a little later in church history when recording the martyrdom of James the brother of Jesus. He uses the word in reference to the epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude and calls them “*catholic epistles.*” By this he meant they were not written to any one church alone, but to *all, the whole, the entirety* of the churches. They were thus *general* or *universal* epistles as opposed to local or regional epistles.⁸

The word *katholikos* was also used in connection with the church of Jesus Christ very early in the church’s history. In the account of the death of Polycarp, a disciple of John, recorded in the *Encyclical Epistle of the Church at Smyrna*, we read the following in the introduction:

“The Church of God which sojourns at Smyrna, to the Church of God sojourning in Philomelium (a city in Phrygia), and to all the congregations of the Holy and Catholic Church in every place: Mercy, peace and love from God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ be multiplied.”⁹

This is one of the early records of the word “catholic” being used with reference to the Church having as its meaning *universal*.

To cite one other reference (and there are many), Ignatius, also a disciple of John in his *Epistle to the Smyrneans* writes in chapter 9: “*Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude (of the people) also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.*”¹⁰

Very early the word *katholikos* came to carry the more permanent meaning of *universal* which is to be found in most modern dictionaries. As it applied to the church, the word *catholic* was used in speaking of the church of Christ as universal rather than local or particular. By contrast, under the Old Covenant, the church or assembly of God’s people (Heb. *Kahal YHWH*) was limited to the Hebrew nation (Acts 7:38). And under the New Covenant, at the time of the incarnation of our Lord, the church was very localized and visible in Jerusalem. It was, nevertheless, the Lord’s intention in building His church to send His gospel into the world (Acts 1:8) and, where that gospel was received, to establish local churches as the book of Acts clearly shows did take place. Acts is the record of the development of Christ building the *Catholic Church*. It is, in fact, the catholic nature of the church that made and continues to make missions possible.

As Christian assemblies formed in various places far removed from one another, having never seen one another and without any hope of ever seeing one another, the narrow limits of the church, confined to the Hebrew nation and later to a few disciples gathered at the Lord’s last Supper, rapidly expanded. The preaching of the Word that began at Jerusalem by the Apostles on the day of Pentecost, preaching accompanied by a mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1–2), was destined by the Lord who gathers his chosen, to go out into all the world universally. The church He would gather, defend, and preserve by His Word and Spirit “in the unity of the true faith” would be a Catholic Church, a universal Church.

Thus the church would be built by Christ of redeemed men and women from every kindred, tribe, tongue, and nation (Revelation 5:9). It would have a universal complexion. Whereas the church under the Old Covenant was centralized, under the New Covenant it would be decentralized (John 4:20–21). There would be no central organization or holy place to which the people of God would turn to worship God. As James Bannerman put it:

Wherever on the wide earth there is a true worshipper, there is a true temple of Jehovah, and there He may be worshipped in Spirit and truth ... There is now no national membership in the Church of Christ, limited to one hereditary family or favored race; but in

*the fellowship of one sort, all, of whatever tribe or tongue or nation, are one with Christ and one with each other. The narrow barriers of a former economy have been thrown down; and in the gift of the Spirit to all believers, and in the fellowship of the Spirit coextensive with all, there is laid the foundation of a Church, no longer confined to one nation as before under the law, but world-wide and universal.*¹¹

While Rome cannot conceive of the church beyond her own localizing limits, believing that the universality of the church does not extend beyond her authority and jurisdiction, we “*believe in the ... Catholic Church.*” As Gerstner put it: “*We cherish the word because we cherish the concept.*”¹²

I believe in the *holy* catholic church

While more will be said on the subject of holiness (sanctification), as the next article in the Apostles Creed is taken up in this series, it is important here to briefly stress that the Scripture, in referring to the people of God, that Christ has gathered and is gathering as His church, calls them a “*holy nation*” (1 Peter 2:9); “*holy brethren*” (Hebrew 3:1); a “*holy temple*” (Ephesians 2:21); and “*saints*” (i.e. holy ones) (1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 2:1). Holiness is very clearly an attribute of the Catholic Church of Jesus Christ; it is something that constitutes its very essence.

The church is holy, **first**, because God has determined to *separate* for Himself a people from the world of sinful men. Anything that God separates or consecrates to Himself is considered holy. In fact the basic definition of “holy” is *separation*. Thus, His people are *separated* unto Him and thus holy (Leviticus 20:26; Deuteronomy 7:8; 1 Peter 2:9).

Second, the Church is holy because it is judicially cleansed from its pollution by the blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:30; Hebrews 2:11).

Third, the Church is holy because Christ labors to continually cleanse it from its defilement (Ephesians 5:25–27).

Fourth, the Church is holy because of its calling to be holy as He is holy (Leviticus 19:2; Matthew 5:48; 1 Peter 1:5)

Fifth, the church is called holy because of the holy image of the One into whom it is renewed and to be conformed (Ephesians 4:24)

Sixth, the Church is holy because it is called to actively and continually progress in holiness (Hebrews 12:14).

Ursinus, in his commentary on the Heidelberg, well states the essential understanding we ought to have when we confess “*I believe in the Holy Catholic Church*”:

*It is called holy because it is sanctified of God by the blood and Spirit of Christ, that it may be conformable to him, not in perfection, but by the imputation of Christ's righteousness, or obedience; and by having the principle of holiness; because the Holy Spirit renews and delivers the church from the dregs of sins by degrees, in order that all who belong to it may commence and practice all the parts of obedience. It is also called holy, because it is consecrated to a holy and divine use, and is separated from the ungodly who are without its pale.*¹³

Conclusion

Part of the glory of Christ's Church is its *holy catholic* nature which we confess when we say with the Apostles Creed, “*I believe in the Holy Catholic Church.*”

In his introduction to *The Glorious Body of Christ* wherein he treats the holy, catholic nature of the Church, among other attributes, R.B. Kuiper writes:

*The Word of God tells us that Christ's church is glorious. Not only does history ascribe to it a past that is in many respects glorious and does prophesy or predict for it a glorious future, it is essentially glorious. The Christian Church is glorious in its very nature.*¹⁴

To this we are constrained to reply, in the light of our study: “Amen, brother Kuiper, Amen.”

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¹ *What The Church Teaches, Documents of the Church in English Translation*, Jesuit Fathers of St. Mary's College, St. Mary's (Kansas: Tan Books, 1973), 72.

² Ibid.

³ *Christ Among Us: A Modern Presentation of The Catholic Faith* (Paulist Press, 1975), 380.

⁴ Note: This text finds its way every few years into RCUS Synod meetings at strategic moments through the agency of a wit who shall here remain unnamed.

⁵ For more on this distinction, see Belgic Confession of Faith article 29.

⁶ *The Gospel According To Rome*, cited in *Roman Catholicism*, Loraine Boettner (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1981), 22.

⁷ For additional helpful reading, see *The Church is Catholic*, a two-part essay by Dr. J.W. Maris appearing in *Lux Mundi*, vol. 24, no. 1–2 (March and June 2005) a publication of the Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated) and recently reprinted in *The Clarion*, a publication of the Canadian Reformed Churches.

⁸ *The Church History of Eusebius*, Book 2, Chapter 23:25; 25 (and note 48), *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Eerdmans, 1982), 128.

⁹ *The Ante Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1 (Eerdmans, 1981), 39.

¹⁰ Ibid, 90.

¹¹ *The Church of Christ*, Vol. 1 (Still Waters Revival, 1991), 43.

¹² *The Gospel According to Rome*, op. cit.

¹³ *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, reproduction of the 1852 American edition (P&R Publishing, n.d.), 289.

¹⁴ (Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 13.