

We Believe: One Holy Catholic Apostolic Church
Acts 1:6-8, I Corinthians 3:10-17
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
June 10, 2007
Pastor Dave Carver

Maybe you've seen the news – Presbyterians have been showing up on TV, and in the paper, and on the radio in recent weeks. Several congregations are talking about leaving the denomination and affiliating with another body of Christians. Lots of folks want to know – what is the essence of the church? What do you believe, anyway?

That, in turn, has led to a lot of conversation about the denomination, and denominations in general. Why bother? Aren't all the denominations just human inventions, anyway (yes)? Aren't they just schismatic (too often they are)? Can't we just be the church?

Last week, we considered one of the core beliefs of the church of Jesus Christ – that God is known by us as a trinity – Father, Son, and Spirit. Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Whatever language we use to describe it – and all language is insufficient – the reality is that we celebrate the fact that God is always in relationship with God's self and with the creation, and as creatures made in God's image, we can be in relationship with God and each other, too.

The reality of that affirmation leads us into a doctrine of the church. How else can God's people be in relationship with God and with each other if not in some body? And the New Testament teaches us that it's not just any body, but it is The Body. The Church is the Body of Christ, sustained and empowered by the Spirit, serving God in the world. The church, in its essence, is a declaration of the Trinity?

What about our denomination? The Presbyterians? Are we claiming to be the "true" church – everyone else has got it wrong?

No. Here is what we have said about ourselves. I'm reading from our Constitution, also called *The Book of Order*: "the Presbyterian Church (USA) gives witness to the faith of the Church catholic. The confessions express the faith of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church in the recognition of the canonical Scriptures and the formulation and adoption of the ecumenical creeds, notably the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds." (G-20300)

In other words, when we come here and attempt to be the church, we do so in recognition of the fact that the church existed before us and will exist after us. And we have joined with believers of every age in affirming that the church is one, the church is holy, the church is catholic, and the church is apostolic. I'd like to talk about that in the hopes that it will help you as you see Presbyterians in the news and, more importantly, as you go about the business of *being* the church Monday – Saturday.

The church is ONE. My friend Andrew Purves would say that the unity of the church is *ontological*. I like that word. It means that by definition, in its very

being, there is only one church. You cannot speak of two or three churches, because the church is the church. Christ has ONE body, just as I have one body.

Later on today, we'll be baptizing little Hailey. The day she was born, I had the chance to hold her, and I talked a little with Brittany about something that doesn't cease to amaze me. I hold this little baby, and I am fascinated by the fact that one cell – made of a sperm and an egg – one perfect little cell grows and develops and turns into billions of cells. And here is the beautiful child...and she is bone, and eyeball, and tongue, and fingernail – all such different substances to my sight and touch – but all from the one cell. All forming one body.

With the Church of Jesus Christ, we do not have the luxury of standing 30,000 feet in the air and looking down and seeing just how the various parts of the body fit together. We are on the ground – we are in the middle of things – and we can either moan and groan about how THEY are not like US, or we can celebrate the varied forms of God's presence on earth.

Remember, the church is here because it is a gift of God's Holy Spirit. The church is the sign of God's Holy Spirit active on earth. And Jesus says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst." So if the work of the Holy Spirit, or if the fruit of Jesus Christ is evident at all in my congregation – then I am linked to every other Christian – because we are connected in the same Holy Spirit. There is ONE church. And you are a part of it.

The Church is HOLY. I remember years ago when I overheard a couple of youth group kids talking as they prepared to enter their final year of High School. One of the guys said, "So, what do you think you're going to do?"

His friend answered, "I kind of thought I'd like to be a minister or something."

The first guy started to laugh and said, "You can't be a minister! You're not holy enough to be a minister!"

Not knowing that I was listening, the second kid said, "You don't have to be that holy. After all – look at Dave!"

In our culture, when we hear the word "holy", we think that it means "super-religious" or "no sin at all". That is totally incorrect. The word itself comes from an old English word, "hAlig", which means "whole" – as in "total" or "complete". When we say that the church is HOLY, we are saying that the church is wholly and totally dedicated to serving God in the world. It is sacred – it belongs to God and to no one else. And because it is by nature set apart for serving God, God has the right to say where and how that service belongs. We're going to talk more about this next week.

Now, our *Book of Order* says that the church is ONE, HOLY, and CATHOLIC. Open up your hymnals to page 137 and take a look at the Apostles'

creed as it is presented there. Look at the third paragraph: according to that version, we believe in the Holy Spirit, in the holy Christian church..." What's up with that?

First, let me say that I don't have any trouble in saying that the church is Christian. Of course the church is Christian. That's like saying that steel is metal or largemouth bass are fish. What gets me is that the editors of our hymnal are not saying anything intentional – they are trying to make a statement by what they are not saying. The Creed, in its original Latin, talks about the *ecclesia catholica* – the catholic church. And some folks can't use the word catholic without thinking of the Roman Catholic church – and so here we have the editors of our hymnal saying, "God forbid we be confused with THOSE guys. We're Christian, not Catholic." Give me a break. The whole point of the creed is to affirm what we can agree on about the Christian life – and somebody is afraid to be confused with the Roman Catholic church?

The word CATHOLIC means "universal". When we say that the church is catholic, we are saying that throughout the whole of its history, there has only ever been one Body of Christ. The church appears in different forms; different aspects of the body may have particular strengths or weaknesses; there may be errors that are more pronounced over here than they are over there – but we claim the truth that when we baptize Hailey this morning, we are baptizing her into the universal church of Jesus Christ. She is a member of the body of Christ. She cannot be baptized into a different body, because Christ has only one. The Church.

And the final adjective with which we define the church this morning is that it is APOSTOLIC. There are two ways that we understand this word – and both are important. Many of our brothers and sisters hold that the primary meaning of this word is pointing backwards in history. The church traces its heritage to the original followers of Christ – the apostles. Jesus told Peter that he was building the church on the foundation of the apostles, and he did. And so we look back and say that the teachings of the church over the years have some relevance to our lives, because the church comes from that one foundation. We read the letters of Paul as authoritative because Paul was himself commissioned by Jesus to be an Apostle. We are connected with the past. We are apostolic.

But I would say that the more important understanding of the word "apostolic" is forward-looking. The word itself means "one who is sent." And just as Jesus, in Acts 1 and elsewhere, commissions his followers and says "GO, be my witnesses", the church through the ages has said, "WE are sent. We are apostolic because we are behaving like apostles behave."

Karl Barth was one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century. He wrote volumes upon volumes of theological works that expounded on just about every aspect of the Christian life. But he was not solely a scholar, hiding in an academic tower. He was a parish pastor. He preached to a congregation in Switzerland as his native Germany was trying to beat the living daylights out of the rest of Europe. He knew that theology had to make sense in our daily lives. I like what Barth said about the church:

I believe that the congregation to which I belong, in which I have been called to faith and am responsible for my faith, in which I have my service, is the one, holy, universal church. If I do not believe this here, I do not believe it at all. No lack of beauty, no 'wrinkles and spots' in this congregation may lead me astray...There is no sense, when seeking after the 'true' congregation, in abandoning one's concrete congregation...In faith I attest that the concrete congregation to which I belong and for the life of which I am responsible, is appointed to the task of making in this place, in this form, the one, holy, universal church visible.¹

This is the point – if you haven't heard anything else, then wake up now.

Earlier this week, Penny Zeisloft was filling out some paperwork and she sent me an e-mail. She said, "Dave, I need to know the name of the architect who designed the original church building." OK, I'll give \$1000 right now to anyone besides Penny or Dani who can tell me that name. OK, it's Thomas Hannah. The point is, you are not concerned right now – probably never in your life have you been concerned with who designed or built this building. You want to know, "Can I worship here? Can I learn here? Will God meet me here?"

This is the truth: the people on this street don't give a rip who designed or who built this building. The folks outside have a more pressing question: is Jesus in here, or is he not?

Paul, writing to his friends in Corinth, says, "You are the church. You! Can you believe it? You are included in the thing that God is doing in the person of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit lives in you!"

Virtually no one on Stratmore Street cares to hear your doctrine of ecclesiology – that is, your theories about the church. Not very many people are interested in arguing about the appropriate forms and structures of the church government and administration ("What, you have eleven elders? Forget it. I can't be a follower of Jesus if you have eleven elders. What are you, crazy?"). Our arguments about the form and structure of the church will not change much.

But. And this is a big but. A huge but. If God's people can stop talking about playing church and and remember to BE the church – then the world will be changed.

Beloved: Paul said it to the Corinthians, and now I want to remind you of this: You are the temple of the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit dwells in You! You are the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Will you bear witness to that fact today and in the week to come? Thanks be to God for the Church of Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹ *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Row 1959) p. 144-145.