

I Believe in the Holy Catholic Church

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

The Apostles' Creed

Dr. Thomas A. Erickson

Sunday, May 25, 2003

When I spoke about the Holy Spirit two weeks ago, I did not tell the whole truth. In that sermon I described the Holy Spirit as God at work making us individually receptive to Jesus, shaping us individually into the likeness of Jesus, and equipping us individually to serve as Christ served. That's all true, but it's not the whole truth.

Here is the whole truth: "I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic church." It is imperative that we think of those two statements as joined at the hip, because the Holy Spirit does not create individual believers who may or may not be part of the church. The Holy Spirit creates the church in which individual believers are nourished in their faith through worship and nurture, and through which individual believers are equipped for service in the world. Just as babies are born into a family, believers are born into the church. Babies would not survive without the nurture of loving parents; believers will not flourish outside the care of the Christian family. The whole truth is that the Holy Spirit ministers to each of us individually through the holy, catholic church. Let's visit each of those words in turn, starting with the noun.

I believe in the CHURCH. When a friend called recently and asked how to get to The National Presbyterian Church, I did as you would do. I gave him directions to 4101 Nebraska Avenue NW. Where is The National Presbyterian Church? At the corner of Nebraska and Van Ness in northwest Washington, D.C. Once again, that's true, but it's not the whole truth. For the church is not these walls; the church is the people who worship within these walls. When Paul addressed his letter "to the church of God that is in Corinth," he was not referring to a gothic building on the corner of Julius Avenue and Caesar Street in downtown Corinth. The church in Corinth owned no property and built no buildings. The church in Corinth was the congregation in Corinth. The church was the people who together confessed their faith in God the Father almighty, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord.

Moreover, the church does not shut down when the last worshiper leaves this building sometime around 1:30 this afternoon. The Presbyterian Confession of 1967 says, "The church disperses to serve God wherever its members are, at work or play, in private or in the life of society." So when my friend asked where to find National Presbyterian I could have answered, "You'll find this church in kitchens and offices in a thirty mile radius of this campus. You'll find our church in school rooms and operating rooms, on the golf course and in sales meetings, attending a Bible study or packing a food box for a hungry family." National Presbyterian is twenty-five hundred believers, baptized in the name of the Triune God, and called to serve Jesus Christ "wherever its members are," Sunday through Saturday, 24/7. Because the church is not primarily buildings, budgets and bylaws. You and I together are the church, at worship on Sunday and at work the rest of the week.

Now let's tackle the adjectives. I believe in the CATHOLIC church. One of my sons-in-law is a devout member of the Roman church. I am a dedicated member of the Presbyterian church. Both he and I are members of the catholic church, because in the Creed the term "catholic" simply means "universal." So when Paul reminds his Corinthian readers that they are "called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours," he is describing the catholicity of the church, its universality, its inclusiveness, its global reach. He is reminding his readers that the church extends far beyond the Corinth city limits and the boundaries of Greece. And he is reminding us that the church extends far beyond the Presbyterian denomination and the borders of the U.S.A.

And that's not all. The church then and now has been marked by a vast diversity of languages, beliefs and traditions. We still have family squabbles over baptism and bishops, the Lord's Supper and speaking in tongues. But I, for one, choose to focus not on what separates us but on what unites us, namely, God's saving love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Acknowledging with sorrow our divisions, I believe with hope in our catholicity. And I look forward to that moment when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess, not that we are Baptists or Roman Catholics, Methodists or Presbyterians, but that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Finally, I believe in the HOLY catholic church. So did Paul, for he addressed this letter "to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints." J. B. Philips translates that, "called to be holy." "Sanctified," "saints," and "holy:" all three come from the same Greek word and mean exactly the same thing, namely, that we in the church are called to be holy.

Not, I hasten to add, "holier than thou!" We are nothing if not sinners who are trusting in the grace of God made known in the cross of Jesus. Those who refuse to worship with us because they think us hypocrites haven't talked to us lately. We do not claim to be perfect; only forgiven.

Then what does it mean to be holy? "Holy" refers to something or someone that is set apart for a special purpose. Many of you own two sets of dishes. One is for everyday use, the other for special occasions—Christmas dinner, for example. The latter set, the Christmas set, is "holy" in the Biblical sense, because it is set apart for special use.

The church is holy, not because we are theologically faultless or morally perfect, but because we have been set apart by God to serve Jesus Christ in the world. We know how imperfect we are. But we have also heard the good news of God's love for imperfect people, and we sense God calling us to share that news with people who don't know it and can't quite believe it. We believe God is calling us to open our buildings to hurting people, prompting us to invest our money in caring ministries, equipping us to spread the gospel among our neighbors. We are set apart, not as the Teacher's pet, but as the Lord's servants in the world.

In 1988, Carol and I together with forty friends from Valley Presbyterian Church in Arizona stood inside a large gothic church

building in Shanghai, listening to three Chinese pastors talk about the Cultural Revolution when all Christian churches were shut down. Between 1966 and 1976 the building in which we were standing was used as a warehouse. The leaders of the Cultural Revolution imagined that if they took away the church's buildings, Christianity in China would wither and die. You know what happened. Believers went underground. They met for worship in homes, back yards, and open fields. When the government banned the printing of Bibles they painstakingly made new copies by hand. And when the sanctions were lifted ten years later, it was found that the church had grown, nay multiplied, by at least ten times. Before the Cultural Revolution, one of the pastors in that Shanghai church had been a Methodist and two had been Episcopalians. Now they were all members of the Three Self Church of China: self-propagating, self-administering, and self-supporting. And I shall never forget standing in a circle and holding hands with those pastors while we sang "The Church's One Foundation is Jesus Christ Her Lord."

Yes, and if the church's foundation is Jesus Christ, the church's architect and builder is the Holy Spirit who, during a decade of repression, kept the Chinese church alive, strong, and growing. I believe in the Holy Spirit who creates and sustains the holy catholic church, and not only in times of political repression, but in times of pastoral transition. For over two hundred years the Spirit has been doing something very special here at The National Presbyterian Church. And the Spirit is not through with us yet. After serving for nine months as your Interim Pastor I am absolutely convinced: the best is yet to be!