

I Believe

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
(Genesis 1:1 ESV)

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.
(Hebrews 11:6 ESV)

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God,
that you may know that you have eternal life.
(1 John 5:13 ESV)

The Holy Catholic Church

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Ephesians 4:1-6

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Introduction:

Good Morning Redeemer City Church!

Please open your Bibles with me to Ephesians 4. This morning we are going to be continuing our study of the Apostle's Creed by looking at the line: *I believe in... the holy catholic church.*

Now at first glance this might seem like an interesting topic for a Baptist church to be preaching on. A second glance, however, should clear up any confusion. This line says absolutely nothing about the Roman Catholic Church, but instead refers to the holy, small c, catholic church.

This distinction is of vital importance. The word catholic, as it appears in the Creed, is simply another term for the word "universal." Timothy George, a Baptist theologian, writes:

"Protestants, of course, do not equate "catholic" with "Roman Catholic." To avoid this misunderstanding, some prefer to say, "holy Christian church." While there is nothing wrong with this term, we should not be embarrassed by the older wording. The word catholic simply means "general, universal, concerning the whole."¹

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/september/what-do-protestant-churches-mean-when-they-recite-i.html>

The Creed, therefore, is inviting us this morning into a consideration of the universal church, as it exists throughout the world, in all its various denominations and local congregations.

In just a minute we are going to begin reading Ephesians 4. In this text we will see God's desire for His universal church to be a united body. However, before we begin reading, it must first be acknowledged that we are setting down in the middle of a book that has already laid out for us several foundational truths.

One of these truths that we must first consider is the question of who or what is the church. The term "church" first appears in this letter in Ephesians 1:22. It is there that we read:

"And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:22-23)

The church, therefore, is the collective body of believers who have Christ as their head. It is made up of every individual whose only hope of salvation rests in the life, death, resurrection, and intercession of Christ.

Together, these individuals, no matter their tribe, their tongue, their skin colour, or their denominational affiliation, make up God's holy, catholic church.

With this understanding, it is now appropriate that we turn to Ephesians 4:1-6 and see how God would have us live as His collective people.

'I therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager 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 that belongs to your call- one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.' (Ephesians 4:1-6)

For our purposes this morning, we are going to unpack this text in the reverse order that it is presented. We will begin by considering the nature of our unity and conclude by reflecting on the manner of living these truths call us to.

The Nature of our Unity

The first thing that we must see is that the unity of the church is grounded in the unity of the Godhead.

This seems entirely appropriate, does it not? The Trinity is, after all, THE reality that sets Christianity apart from all other world faiths. Yes, if we worked at it, we could come up with a host of ways that Christianity is unique, but none of these other ways would be as significant as our belief that God is Triune.

So significant is this truth that where the Trinity is denied, there no church is to be found.

The triune nature of God is not only an essential doctrine of the true church, but it is the foundation that informs our fellowship with one another. The church is not simply a social club of like-minded people. It is not a human institution. It is, rather, the collected body of believers united and held together by God the Spirit, God the Son, and God the Father.

Look with me again at verse 4:

*“There is one body and one Spirit- just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call.”
(Ephesians 4:4)*

What we need to see here is that:

1. The Church is United by the Holy Spirit

Isn't it fitting that the Creed had us discussing the Holy Spirit last week? J.I. Packer in his book on the Apostle's Creed helpfully writes:

“It is by strict theological logic that the Creed confesses faith in the Holy Spirit before proceeding to the church and that it speaks of the church before mentioning personal salvation (forgiveness, resurrection, everlasting life). For though the Father and the Son have loved the church and the Son has redeemed it, it is the Holy Spirit who actually creates it, by inducing faith; and it is in the church, through its ministry and fellowship, that personal salvation ordinarily comes to be enjoyed.”²

The truth of this statement would be all the more clear had we read the entirety of Ephesians. In 1:13-14, the Apostle Paul writes:

“In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.” (Ephesians 1:13-14)

² J.I. Packer, *Affirming the Apostle's Creed* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 121.

It is the presence of the Holy Spirit that sets us apart as born-again believers. When someone responds to the Good News of Christ with faith and repentance they are filled with the Holy Spirit and grafted into the body of Christ, the church.

An excellent example of this can be witnessed in the conversion of Cornelius. Acts 10:44-48 tells the story:

“While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, ‘Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.” (Acts 10:44-48)

I have chosen this story because it marks an incredible event in the history of the church. This is the first account we have of the Holy Spirit falling on the Gentiles. This is the first occasion of Gentiles being brought into the church as full-fledged members. Two thousand years have since past and we all take for granted that Gentiles have a place among God’s people (most, maybe all of us, are Gentiles after all), but when this first happened it was mind blowing! The Jews couldn’t believe what they were witnessing.

For so long Jewish culture had been built around making themselves distinct from the Gentile nations, but now God was declaring them to be brothers and sisters in Christ. Confronted with this new reality the church needed to figure out how these two significantly different people groups would live out their newfound unity.

For sake of time, we will not delve further into how that worked itself out (you can read Acts 15 if interested), but there is an important lesson for us in this story. The church of God is far bigger and far more encompassing than many of us regularly think about. I fear that many of us are guilty of narrowing the church down to those who think, and look like us. We are suspicious of those who worship a little more exuberantly than us, or those who spend a little more time talking about matters of social justice. We are not sure what to make of those people, so to play it safe we tend to just avoid them, and at worst we sometimes make lighthearted jabs in their direction. But here the Scriptures are telling us that despite their different preferences and passions, they are nevertheless our brothers and sisters in Christ. Not every follower of Christ is going to agree on everything, but every follower of Christ MUST treat one another in ways befitting their shared status as God’s children.

Now of course this invites the question: "How do we know who our brothers and sisters in Christ are? How can we discern whether someone has the Spirit? Are we just to take their word for it?"

Thankfully, Paul has more to say about the nature of our unity that will help answer those questions. Having stated in verse four that we are united by the Spirit, he continues in verse five to show that we are also united by faith in one Lord.

This is our second point:

2. The Church is United by Faith in God the Son

As a refresher, let us read verses four and five again.

"There is one body and one Spirit- just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call- one Lord, one faith, one baptism." (Ephesians 4:4-5)

That the Apostle Paul grounds our unity in the person of Jesus Christ should come as no surprise in light of what he said earlier about the church being made of all those who have Christ as their head.

This, of course, opens its own bag of worms. Are we united with everyone who calls Jesus Lord?

Was it not Jesus himself who said:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" (Matthew 7:21-23)

Jesus is clearly teaching here that some people who call themselves Christians, are not. I am almost positive that everyone who is listening to this could think of someone who falls into that camp. Perhaps they say they believe in Jesus, but they live their life in complete rejection of his moral teachings. Or perhaps they say they believe in Jesus, but He is just one of their many gods.

Indeed, whole religions have been built on erroneous views of Jesus. Should we consider ourselves brothers and sisters to Jehovah's Witnesses just because they also speak of Jesus Christ as Savior? Absolutely not! Because they also believe that Jesus is a created being like you and I. They deny fundamental gospel truths and they, therefore, deny the one faith that the Apostle Paul is referring to here in verse five.

Brothers and sisters, there are theological issues which we must divide over. Sometimes we need to draw a clear line in the sand that lets people know whether they are in or out. This is one of the reasons that we chose to do this series in the Apostle's Creed. For centuries, this Creed has served as that line in the sand. What we have been talking about for the past several weeks are the very foundations of our faith. When we walk away from the teachings of this Creed we are walking away from historic Christianity.

With that being said, we must recognize that most issues are not worth dividing over. We should be grieved that many churches have split over issues of musical preferences and carpet colour. We should repent of all the times we have considered someone less spiritual than us because they come from a different Christian faith tradition. Our unity is not built on a shared opinion regarding the Common Book of Prayer. Rather our unity is built on Jesus Christ, and on Jesus Christ alone.

Granted, we may choose to gather as smaller congregations, and we may organize those congregations around larger denominations, but this does not mean that a Baptist believer is not united with a Presbyterian believer. The distinction between Baptists and Presbyterians have nothing to do with their belief in Christ, but everything to do with issues of secondary importance. It would be a very weird Sunday if we were dedicating some babies and baptizing others.

But by all means there are numerous ways that we can fellowship with one another, build one another up, and show the world that Christ's church is united. Indeed we must find ways to do this more and more, for Jesus himself identifies it as one of the key ways that we will evangelize the world.

In his High Priestly Prayer, Jesus says:

*"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, **so that the world may believe that you have sent me.** The glory that you have given me I have given them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, **so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.**" (John 17:20-23)*

Are you seeing what I am seeing? One of the best proofs that we can give to this world about the truthfulness of the gospel is a global church that is united with one another.

Brothers and sisters, it is time we begin to act like brothers and sisters. Not just in here with our own people, but also with the various gatherings of God's people across this town, across this country, and across this world.

For as Ephesians 4:6 says, we are all children of the *“one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”* (Ephesians 4:6)

This indeed is the third factor that unites the church.

3. The Church is United by the Fatherhood of God

There is a sense in which we can say that the universal church is one big dysfunctional family. This side of glory, no one person or church has all the answers. This inevitably leads to conflict and some very uncomfortable moments, but at the end of the day, these hardships do not negate the fact that we belong to one another as fellow sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters in Christ.

Now please hear me say that correctly. I am not referring to the church as a dysfunctional family in order to slander Christ's bride in any way, but only to paint a picture that helps us understand some of the disunity we currently see.

Even the Apostle Paul taught that the present state of the church was less than perfect. A few verses later in Ephesians 4 we read him saying:

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.” (Ephesians 4:11-14)

Do you see what I see? There is a glorious future reality that is awaiting the church. One day all of God's people will dwell together in perfect unity and perfect peace. We will all stand together beholding the glory of God, and all our errors and confusions will be corrected. There will no longer be theological disagreements because God will make all things clear.

That is going to be a glorious day, but that day has not yet come. For now, we are called to continue to strive towards the unity of the Spirit and the maturity of faith.

So do not jump out of the family vehicle just because the road ahead is bumpy. Do not be discouraged by the overwhelming number of denominations that you see. Rather, buckle in and prepare yourself for the ride. The destination is worth it. And as much as possible, get along with your brothers and sisters in the backseat. They may not be perfect, but neither are you.

We need to realize that just like every family has their disagreements, so too there will be disagreements in the family of God. What we need to do in these moments is not burn down the house but have a reasonable conversation. We may not come to the same conclusions, but at least we will have conducted ourselves in a way appropriate for sons and daughters of God, and we will have offered to the world a compelling witness of God's love.

Regretfully, I am afraid that we have not been doing a good job at this. And I am not saying we as in "You RCC" but we as in the wider body of believers.

There has been a lot of things I have not enjoyed about the past year, but nothing has grieved me more than the way I have seen brothers and sisters in Christ turn on each other. We have turned on one another for the most heinous reasons. Not because anyone has changed their view on the Lordship of Christ or the goodness of God, but over matters of politics and personal liberties.

I remember at the start of this pandemic I had an unsaved family member praise our church for the way we responded to the crisis. He appreciated that we took seriously the advice of the government while still maintaining the care of our people. At that time, I thought that this pandemic was going to be the moment where the church would shine the brightest.

A little over a year has past and now I am left hoping that most of my family members have few Christians on their social media. I am terrified that they will catch a glimpse of some of the visceral comments that Christians are throwing at one another in the comments section of Facebook.

We have taken what should have been an in-house conversation, and we have turned it into a public spectacle. We have refused to allow our brothers and sisters to come to a different conclusion than our own, and we have called into question the sincerity of their faith when they do. And this is the unfortunate reality that has shown itself on both sides of the spectrum.

This is not the way that any family should conduct itself, let alone the family of God. Nowhere in Scripture will you find a command to belittle your brother and make light of his convictions. Rather, we repeatedly see an emphasis placed on outdoing one another in showing honor.

At the start of this message, I said that we were going to unpack today's Scripture backwards, and that is because Paul begins with the advice that we now need to hear. Look again with me to Ephesians 4:1-3 and observe the ways we are called to conduct ourselves.

"I therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:1-3)

Appropriate Family Conduct

The first thing we see is that we are called to conduct ourselves with:

1. Humility

The first thing we see is a call to conduct ourselves with all humility.

Perhaps the most famous explanation of what humility is comes from C.S. Lewis. He once wrote: *True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.*

I like that explanation because it provides a helpful corrective, while also providing a practical step on how we can pursue humility.

There is a significant difference between self-degradation and humility. We are not called to belittle ourselves or think ourselves useless, we are simply called to think of ourselves less.

Humility is the opposite of pride.

It is the recognition that you are not perfect. That you might sometimes be wrong. And that other people might have something to say worth listening to.

I appreciate the words of John Calvin on this topic:

"Let us remember, therefore, that, in cultivating brotherly kindness, we must begin with humility. Whence come rudeness, pride, disdainful language towards brethren? Whence come quarrels, insults, and

reproaches? Come they not from this, that every one carries his love of himself, and his regard to his own interests, to excess?”³

Calvin hits the nail on the head when he identifies the problem as excess. It is not wrong to love yourself. Nor is it wrong to love your church, and your denominational affiliation. It is only wrong when you allow that love to become the destroyer of those around you.

So by all means you should open up the Scriptures and come to your own conclusions, but you should also be prepared to listen to what other people have to say, and be willing to change your mind if corrected.

The second way that we are called to conduct ourselves is with:

2. Gentleness

Perhaps you are a humble person. Perhaps you have listened to opposing views with charity and openness, and yet you still rest firm in your original convictions. Perhaps you even believe that these convictions are of great importance and would benefit others if they would only adhere to them.

Even if this is your situation, you are never given permission to be anything less than gentle with your fellow brother or sister in Christ.

Over and over again we see the Scriptures commending a spirit of gentleness to us.

*“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, **gentleness**, self-control...” (Galatians 5:22-23)*

“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.” (Galatians 6:1)

“And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness...” (2 Timothy 2:24-25)

We see in these verses that gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit, and that we are to be gentle not only with those who we agree with, but even with our opponents and those who are caught in sin.

³ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries Volume XXI*, 267.

Sometimes we think that the only way to get our point across is to be loud and brash. But that is simply not true. Somewhere along the way we must have learnt this lesson from the world, for the Scriptures have always taught that it is the gentle tongue that turns away wrath, and the gentle tongue that is a tree of life.

If we want to strive for unity than we must be the type of people that others would want to be united to.

The third way that we are to conduct ourselves is with:

3. Patience

Once again, this is no new teaching. Like gentleness, patience is one of the fruits that the Spirit is growing inside every believer.

If you have attended this church for any length of time, you have at some point been exhorted to play the long game. This is one of the recurring themes I have noticed in both Pastor Paul's and Pastor Levi's sermons, and that is because it is a recurring theme in the Scripture.

We live in a society that has become accustomed to instant gratification. We want what we want, and we want it now. But this mindset is antithetical to the teachings of Scripture.

A few moments ago, we read in Ephesians that we are still in the process of growing into the fullness of Christ. That means that I am not yet perfect, and that means that you are not yet perfect. Because this is true, we must be patient with one another.

We must be quick to show grace and quick to provide opportunity for further growth.

Finally, in addition to humility, gentleness, and patience, we must bear with one another in love.

4. Forbearance

This, ultimately, is what it all comes down to. If we want to effectively show Christ to this world, then we **MUST** be committed to bearing with one another and forgiving one another.

We must be committed to looking past our differences, and we must be committed to showing kindness even to those with whom we fundamentally disagree.

Because this is exactly what Christ has done for us.

Despite all our sin and despite our consistent rebellion, Christ came to die for us while we were still sinners.

As our Lord hung from the cross, surrounded by his enemies, he cried out to the Father saying, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”* (Luke 23:24).

If this is the example that Christ gave us for the treatment of our enemies, how much more should we be willing to forgive our brothers and sisters in the faith.

So let us put aside our animosity and suspicion towards those brothers and sister who look, act, and believe differently than us. And let us extend to one another the same kindness and grace that we have received from Christ.

This is the manner of living to which we have been called.

Let us seek the Lord's help to this end.

Let's pray.