

The Holy Catholic Church

Matthew 16:13–18

Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 54

Studies in the Heidelberg Catechism #27

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WHEN we read the Word, we hear the voice of God. And hearing God leads us to confess that we trust, love, and hope in him. So

let's confess our faith using the words of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 54:

Q.54. What do you believe concerning “the holy catholic church”?

A. I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. And of this community I am and always will be a living member.

Who needs the church when you've got a personal relationship with Jesus? Have you heard a friend say this? I'm sure you have! The problem is it's not biblical!

We confess from the Word of God, “I believe *in* God the Father.” “I believe *in* Jesus Christ.” “I believe *in* the Holy Spirit.” When you say these words with Christians in every corner of the world as has been done since the earliest of times in the Christian Church you're saying you believe in the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You believe *in* God because he is the object of your faith. The God who once said from his holy mountain, “I

am the Lord your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt,” is the one you trust as your Creator and Redeemer. As the object of your faith he is the source of your temporal life and eternal life.

We also confess, “I believe...the holy catholic church.” While we don’t believe *in* the church, because it is not an object of faith like God, it is a confession of faith so we say there *is* a church. God saves; the church doesn’t.

One Savior

The Triune God who so loved the world sent the eternal Son to be the one and only Savior. There has always been one Savior. Before the coming of the Son of God he was known as the LORD—the God who entered into covenant with Abram thus creating Israel. But that age of promise has become fulfillment; the age of anticipation has become realization.

On the heels of feeding four thousand men, not including woman and children, from just seven fish and a few loaves of bread (Matt. 15:32–38), the disciples are fretting because they forgot to bring bread on the journey over the Sea of Galilee. So Jesus **asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”** (v. 13) And there were various answers (v. 14). So he asks them again, **“But who do you say that I am?”** (v. 15) **Simon Peter replied** on behalf of the group in audacious faith that Jesus says only God

could give (v. 17): **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”** (v. 16).

The promised Savior anointed by God himself with his Spirit had come! And like Peter, we can say, **I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word** is the Savior of “the holy catholic church!” (HC, 54)

One Society

As the one Savior sent from heaven Jesus says to Peter, the disciples, us, and to all who will hear: **I will build my church** (v. 18). Have you ever heard someone say, “The church didn’t exist in the Old Testament?” How do we answer? Yes and no. While we want to affirm that the one Savior saves people from as far back in human history as Adam and Eve by faith in the promise of a coming Savior, there is something new at the coming of Jesus.

All who ever have, who now, and who will ever believe are saved by Jesus Christ and belong to him. But while this promise of a coming Savior was for all from the time of the Fall and as the world scattered from after the time of the Flood, God particularly chose one man—Abram—through whom to create one people, Israel. The history of the Old Testament is the story of God’s saving grace to a people he chose in his love (Deut. 7). From time to time there would be non-Jews, outsiders, who would join with the people of God such as Ruth, or the Ninevites. But in the Old Testament, salvation was

given to Israel and if you wanted to be saved you had to come into Israel. Jesus speaks in the future tense: **I will build my church** (v. 18). There is something distinct about the church after the coming of the Messiah than there was before his coming. Now the church starts with the Jews in Jerusalem and goes out to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. And we speak of the church being “catholic” because the Greek term, *katholikos*, means “universal.” The church is catholic in at least three ways:

First, it is catholic *ethnically*. It is created **out of the entire human race**. God promised to Abram “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3) and to Isaac “in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 26:4). The heavenly song that is sung tonight to Jesus is, “by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9).

Second, it is catholic *geographically*. It is gathered **out of the entire human race**. In heaven there will be saved sinners from every continent, region, country, state, province, canton, county, city, and village!

Third, it is catholic *chronologically*: **from the beginning of the world to its end**. Of course, from what I just said this means that when we speak of

the “church” before the coming of the Messiah, we’re using it in a non-technical sense of all who believe, while after his coming we’re speaking of it as Jesus speaks of it in our passage tonight.

One Salvation

Our glorious and gracious *Triune God who so loved sent the eternal Son to be the one and only Savior who would **build [his] church** by drawing Jews and Gentiles through the Holy Spirit’s ministry into one communion.* This means there is one salvation. The salvation Jesus promises results in the building of his church “**and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it**” (v. 18). This is why our Catechism says Jesus **gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith.** But I want to focus on the final phrase for a moment: **And of this community I am and always will be a living member.**

It is so important for us as parents to recognize the important of being **living member[s]** in terms of being united to Jesus by faith but also in terms of our commitment and dedication to this local community of believers. To illustrate this, I want to share some info from a 1994 Swiss census that asked parents about their children’s practice or non-practice of their faith. I know this is over 20 years old and in another country, but it illustrates the truth for

us tonight. This census revealed there is one overwhelming factor that determines the future attendance or absence from church by our children: the religious practice of the father of the family.¹

- Father/mother regular: 33% of their children will be regular; 41% irregular; 25% will not practice.
- Father irregular/mother regular: 3% will be regular; 59% irregular; 38% will not practice.
- Father non-practicing/mother regular: 2% regular; 37% irregular; 60% will not practice.
- Father regular/mother irregular or non-practicing? 38% regular with irregular mother; 44% regular with non-practicing mother.
- Father irregular/non-practicing mother: 25% regular in future; 23% irregular. This is 12x higher than where roles were reversed.
- Father/mother non-practicing: 4% regular; 15% irregular; 80% non-practicing.

If a father does not go to church, no matter how faithful his wife is, only 1 in 50 kids will become regular worshippers. If a father does go regularly, regardless of the practice of the mother, between 66%–75% will become churchgoers (regular and irregular). If a father goes irregularly, regardless of his wife, between 50%–66% of kids will find themselves coming to church regularly or occasionally.

You need the church because you have a relationship with Jesus!

¹ Robbie Low, “The Truth About Men & Church.” *Touchstone* 16:5 (June 2003). As found at <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=16-05-024-v> (Accessed July 14, 2017).