

The Apostles' Creed Week 7

(I believe in) the holy catholic Church

The word “church” is a difficult one because modern usage applies it to buildings. In the New Testament it can refer to two different things.

1) It is used in referring to the body of Christian believers meeting together in a specific place; e.g. “*the church of the Thessalonians*” Thessalonians 1, verse 1 or the churches named in Revelation chapters 2 and 3.

In his translation of the New Testament in 1526, William Tyndale deliberately used the word “*congregation*” and not “*church*” when translating the Greek word “*ekklesia*” when it referred to the assembly of believers in a specific place as in these examples.

Article 19, one of the 39 Articles of the Anglican Church states that “*The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly administered according to Christ’s ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same*”.

2) More important is the meaning when used as in the Creed. Here it refers to “*the body of Christ*”-

1 Corinthians 12 verse 27. So we “*are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God . . .*” read Ephesians 2 verses 8 – 22, and Ephesians 4, verses 7 – 16. This “*oneness*” in the Lord Jesus Christ is an underlying theme in all of Paul’s epistles. e.g. in the rules for sharing the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 11, verses 23 – 29 and the use of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12.

In Colossians 1, verse 18, Paul again refers to Christ as “*the head of the body, the church*”. This is of course the meaning of the word “*church*” when used by the Lord in Matthew 16, verse 18.

The “*church*” is also pictured as the “*bride*” of Christ – 2 Corinthians 11, verse 2: Paul says “*I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband*”. This picture is also used by Paul in Ephesians 5, verse 25 – 27 and 30 – 32.

There are two adjectives in the Creed describing the “*church*” -

Firstly, we affirm that the church of Christ is “*holy*”; that is “*set apart for a specific purpose*”. My Bible Dictionary says that “*it is applied to the separation of a person or thing for divine use.*” One of my favourite texts spells it out very clearly! 1 Peter 2, verses 9 – 10.

The word “*catholic*” does not refer to any single denomination and is not used (or needed?) in the early creeds! The word is used to recognise that all the diverse and faithful congregations throughout the world, belong to the “*One Body*” of Christ. Many churches replace the word “*catholic*” with “*universal*”.

(I believe in) the communion of saints

For me, this is an extension of belief in the “*one, holy, catholic and apostolic church*” (Nicene Creed). The “*church*” is “*one*” because there is “*one body*”, that of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Again a reminder that Paul in Ephesians 2, verse 6 says that God has “*raised us up with Him and made us sit in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus*”. All the saints (believers), living and departed are one, in the One Body of our Lord Jesus Christ.

To close, read Hebrews 12, verses 18 – 29. Note the warning given!

The Service of Holy Communion echoes this:- “*Therefore with Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify thy glorious Name; evermore praising thee and saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts, heaven and earth are full of thy glory: Glory be to thee, O Lord most high. Amen*”

The church's one foundation
is Jesus Christ, her Lord;
she is his new creation
by water and the Word:
from heav'n he came and sought her
to be his holy bride;
with his own blood he bought her,
and for her life he died.

Yet she on earth hath union
with the God the Three in One,
and mystic sweet communion
with those whose rest is won:
O happy ones and holy!
Lord, give us grace that we,
like them, the meek and lowly,
on high may dwell with thee.

S. J. Stone 1866