



We've been examining the Apostles' Creed for several weeks now. Today we come to the part of the Creed that's hardest for some of us to say: *I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints*. This is hard for us to say for several reasons.

First of all, it's hard to say *I believe in the church* in the same way we believe in God or in Jesus. The church isn't the object of our faith in the same way Jesus is. The church may be the place or the context within which we believe and through which we believe, but it's not what we put our faith in.

Second, it's hard to say the church is *holy*. When we say *holy* we usually think of something perfect, like God. But you don't have to be in church long to see it's far from perfect. But there's another meaning for the term *holy*: to be set apart. It's like the Holy Land. We don't call it that because it's perfect. There's war, hatred and all kinds of unholy things there. But we still call it that because we know it's a land set apart. It's where God led Abraham; the land where God led His people after delivering them from slavery. It's the land where Jesus lived and died and rose again.

It's also hard to say the church is *catholic*. It's hard for some of us to say that because we immediately think of the Roman Catholic church, but that's not what this means. If you look up the word *catholic* in your dictionary you'll find it means "universal in extent" or "pertaining to the whole." The idea is the church includes people from every tongue and tribe and nation.

Finally, it might even be hard for you to say the *communion of saints*. The idea of *communion* means fellowship, sharing. You look around and see Christians divided into hundreds of denominations over pet doctrines and rules. What kind of *communion* is that? Even within churches there are factions and people who've declared a war of silence on each other. It's been said the church is the only group that shoots its wounded and sometimes that's been true.

If it's hard for you to say this part of the Creed it might help to go back to the beginning. Sometimes you have to go back to the founding documents of our nation like the Bill of Rights to remember who you are and what you're supposed to be about. Well, let's do that with the church.

### **What the church IS.**

Let's go all the way back to the start. Do you know who first coined that term *the church*? Not Paul or Peter, but Jesus. Turn

to Matthew 16. Jesus has just taken His disciples north into a region called Caesarea Philippi, populated mostly by Gentiles. While there, Jesus asked a question.

**When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (verses 13–14).**

Everyone seemed to agree He was a great man, but that's all. So Jesus asks what they think.

**"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (verses 15–16).**

Peter voices a different opinion. And he nailed it! So Jesus takes a moment to commend Peter and build on what he said.

**Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it (verses 17–18).**

Notice in commending Peter for his God-given insight, Jesus revealed even more truth about His plan. He says to Peter, "Your words about me are true, they're like a rock, and on that rock-like foundation I'll build my church and not even the gates of hades will overpower it." There it is. That's the first time the word *church* is used in the New Testament. This tells us several things about the church.

### **The church is built on the truth of who Jesus is**

He's the Messiah, the Son of God. Apart from that the church is nothing; it crumbles; it doesn't exist. If you find a church denying that, it's not a church. We live in a time where truth isn't viewed as all that important. Some even say being a Christian isn't about believing certain truths, but it's all about experiencing God. Here we see the church is built on a truth: Jesus is the Son of God. And experiencing God, which is important too, comes from embracing that truth. Experience is always built on truth, not vice versa.

It's funny the church is built on a truth no one can figure out on their own! Jesus says, "If you can say I'm the Son of God, you didn't get that from flesh and blood, you got it from the Father!" The church is a supernatural institution. Apart from the Father's

work, no one can even get the basic insight needed to participate. Thankfully, we have a Father who loves to share His truth with us.

### **The church is being built by Jesus Christ**

He said, "I will build it." Do you ever wonder, "What's Jesus up to in the world?" Here's the answer. He's building His church. We build by gradually bringing materials together into a composite whole. It's a process. That's what our Lord is doing. Years later Peter wrote, "*you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood...*" (1 Pet. 2:5). Each time someone comes to Christ, a new stone is added. One by one, living stones are added and this will continue until He returns.

I love this because it means I have the easiest job in the world. I'm like a guy who runs a business with an absolute guarantee of success. Jesus says, "I will build my church." So it's not up to me. It's not up to us. We get to participate in what He's doing, but ultimately it's up to Him. We should never operate as a church as if it's all up to us. We should operate out of the conviction He'll fulfill His promise; He'll build His church.

### **The church belongs to Jesus Christ**

He calls it "my church." It doesn't belong to a pastor or elders or even the congregation. It belongs to Him. Because it belongs to Him He doesn't have to clear His decisions with Rome, London, Colorado Springs or some denomination. If we're a body, He's the head. He's the final authority. When a church loses a sense of this, it ceases to function as the church. When decisions are viewed merely as the decisions of man, or a board of directors with all their limitations and prejudices, then it's all about power, or how to get my own agenda enforced; then the church succumbs to politics and lobbying. The question isn't what **we** want. It's what **Jesus** wants.

The word Jesus uses here—church—that bears looking at is the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means "to call out from among." In Jesus' day this was a familiar term. To the Jews, the word referred to them as those called out from among all the nations to be God's people. To the Greeks, it meant something different. The *ekklesia* was an assembly of citizens at a town meeting. Jesus adopts this word and uses it to describe the assembling of His people. The church is made up of those called out from the pool of humanity to be God's assembled people. It's a wonderful thought. Since the beginning, Jesus has been reaching into the ranks of humanity and calling out people to Himself: men, women, boys, girls, all different colors and cultures. He calls us out and puts us in His church.

### **The church is empowered by Jesus Christ**

He says, "*the gates of hades will not overpower it.*" Some say this refers to the fact that the church will survive attack from the world. But that sounds like we're playing defense. When

you think about it, this isn't about defense; it's about offense. What are gates used for? They're used to keep people from getting in or out. The mission of the church is to bust through the gates of hades to set people free. The gates of hades refers to death. Death holds people captive. Scripture says death is the last enemy to be abolished. When Jesus rose from the dead, He conquered death. Now, as people put their trust in Christ, the gates of hades fly open and folks are set free. But to free them, the church has to bust in.

The problem with the church is we live in a kind of Magic Kingdom. Like going to Disneyland, you buy your ticket, and once you're inside the gates, everything is controlled. The rides, the food, the shows are all there to entertain you. All you have to do is be there and observe. But just beyond the walls of Disneyland is the rest of L.A., including places like Compton. This is the real world: pollution and congestion, drugs and violence. Inside the Magic Kingdom, the outside world is almost inconceivable. Inside the church, were tempted to see our world that way. We think our job is to invite a few fortunate others into the theme park, away from the troubles outside. But our job isn't to increase the attendance at Disneyland; it's to tear down the walls and transform the world outside.

So based on what Jesus says here about the church, it's not a building. Many churches meet in a building, but they also meet in fields and family rooms. It's not a business with a CEO and a cross stuck on top. It's not a country club that exists for the benefit of the members. It's not a political machine that tries to pass laws and get its officials elected. Rather, the church is a worldwide fellowship of believers in Jesus who've been called by God and empowered to free people from the tyranny of death.

But what does that look like? Jesus was describing the universal church, but somehow that has to take shape in local congregations like ours throughout the world. Let's look at what the church does.

### **What the church DOES.**

Fast forward about a year. We're no longer in Caesarea Philippi but now we're in Jerusalem. Jesus has been crucified, but just as He promised He rose from the dead. Days later, just before He ascended into heaven, He told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit. There were about 120 disciples at the time. On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit fell and the church was born. Immediately, they were empowered and became courageous witnesses in Jerusalem and beyond. The building project begins!

It was on that day of Pentecost that Peter, the same Peter who'd denied Jesus three times weeks earlier, stood and delivered a powerful message to the multitudes. Look what happened in Acts 2.

**Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day (Acts 2:41).**

See how people enter the church? It says they *“accepted his message and were baptized.”* The church is made up of people who accept the message about Jesus and show that through the outward symbol of baptism. Here we see 3,000 people did that! Can you imagine baptizing 3,000 people in one day? That's the biggest sheep dip in history! CPC grew at a rate of about 8% last year. We're having a hard time keeping up with it. But that day the early church multiplied 26 times from 120 to 3,120. Try keeping up with that! All of a sudden there are 3,000 new lambs in God's flock.

I love this because at this time in the history of the church there were no traditions, no church by-laws, no programs, no senior pastor, no board, no marketing plan, no annual budgets. It's the church in the raw. It's simple church. And Luke gives us a privileged peek into the early church and what it did and how it went about its business. Look closely.

**They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (verses 42–47).**

You can see here that they didn't "go to church" but rather they lived in continual devotion to certain things. Instead of being a weekly snack to boost their spiritual energy, church was the intravenous flow of spiritual life. They didn't go home that day after receiving salvation and then decide whether or not to join the church. It like a package deal: you get saved and you're plugged into the church.

This reminds me of something I read about 17-year-old pop star Justin Bieber. He says he's a Christian but focuses more on his own personal relationship with God. He says "a lot of people who are religious, I think they get lost. They go to church just to go to church. I focus more on praying and talking to Him. I don't have to go to church." That would have never occurred to a first century believer. Being a Christ-follower meant you were devoted to several things that you did together with other believers.

### **They learned together**

They were devoted to the apostles' teaching. You might say the Spirit opened a school that day. The teachers were the apostles. The students were 3,000 newly enrolled kindergartners. When

the Spirit came to dwell in these 3,000 they became learners. They sat at the apostle's feet, hungry for instruction. When the Spirit invades our lives, that's what He does. He makes us hungry for God's truth.

Today we have the apostles teaching right here in what we call the New Testament. This is why when you look at CPC's core values you see the Bible is at the top of the list. This is the inspired word of God; our final authority. When you become a Christ-follower the first thing to do is begin to learn the word of God. You begin as a baby Christian and all you can handle is milk. You learn the basics of the faith and how to live it out. As you begin to grow, you add to your diet. You start to be able to digest meat. And pretty soon you even begin to feed yourself. That means you don't just wait until Sunday to open your Bible. You're not always dependent on others to feed you. You develop a habit in your life of reading and studying the Bible on your own. You even begin to share that with others. At some level, we should all grow into people who can encourage and instruct others from the Bible.

### **They shared together**

Luke says they were devoted to "fellowship." That word is over-used in Christian circles, like soggy toast. The original word in the Greek was *koinonia*, which means to hold something in common, or to share something. As believers, the most precious thing we share IN together is our fellowship with God. When we share together in Him, all other differences melt away. That's why the church was the first institution in history to bring together on equal footing Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slave and free. Today there ought to be the same kind of diversity. This has always been a great hallmark of this church.

Church ought to look like the DMV. You go to the DMV and you're immediately confronted with a wide cross section of people. Where else can you go and find the owner of new BMW renewing his registration right along side a disheveled guy who hasn't used deodorant for a week? Sometimes church is like that. And sometimes we're not sure we like it, but when people with every reason to divide end up loving one another you know that there's something powerful at work.

There's a practical outworking of this. Luke says they were selling their stuff and using the proceeds to help those in need. This wasn't mandatory; it was voluntary. When the Spirit of God enters a person's life, this is the kind of thing that happens. Money and possessions don't define you. We're all called to share with those in need, particularly our brothers and sisters in Christ. Galatians 6:10 says, *“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”*

### **They worshipped together**

They were devoted to the breaking of bread and to prayer (literally "the prayers"). "The breaking of bread" is what we call

Communion or the Lord's Supper, which they celebrated in the context of a meal they called a love feast. When he talks about "the prayers" he's not talking about private prayer but corporate prayer; the prayers of God's people together. These two things defined their worship.

Notice in v. 46 there was a balance in how they did this. There was this formal time they met together in the temple as a large group, like we meet here on Sundays. But there was also informal, smaller meetings in homes. If you do nothing else at CPC, do that. Come to worship on Sunday here in Foster City or in San Bruno and go to a small group during the week.

There's nothing like being in a home with other believers and having a meal together—laughing, praying, crying, talking, sharing. If this kind of thing isn't a part of your church experience, you're missing out. If all you do is come to church but you're not meeting with a small group, your church experience is like a couple who gets married but never moves in together! You're missing out on some real good stuff! That's why we hammer away at the need for you to be in a small group.

### They grew together

It says in v. 47 they were *"enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."* It didn't stop there. Look at what happened in the days and months ahead.

**But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand (Acts 4:4).**

**Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number (Acts 5:14).**

**So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).**

Sometimes we say numbers don't matter and sometimes they don't tell the whole story. But the church is a living organism and if it doesn't grow, it dies.

How does a church grow? Luke says they were *"enjoying favor with all the people."* That means we rub shoulders with people in our community. We don't sever all relationships with

unbelievers. We try to meet needs outside of the church fellowship. That's why we do things like Love Works. That's why we open this building up to the community. That's why we try to be sensitive to our neighbors—to earn favor.

But notice there's something else at work. Luke is careful to say *"the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."* Ultimately, it's the Lord's job to save people, and He's at work among us to do exactly that. Two Sundays ago I invited people to raise their hands to show they wanted to trust Christ as Savior. We had 40–50 people raise their hands. Why did they do that? Because of my preaching or the music or the great coffee? No! Because the Lord was at work in their hearts, drawing them near. He may have used some of those other things, but without Him no one would believe. What's great about this is that it takes all the pressure off of us. We just show up and try to be sensitive to what God is doing in people's hearts and how He wants us to participate in that. It's not all up to us. He's always there before we are.

So we've seen first what the church is: the church is a worldwide fellowship of believers in Jesus who've been called by God and empowered to free people from the tyranny of death.

- » it's built on the foundation of Jesus Christ
- » it's built by Jesus Christ
- » it belongs to Jesus Christ
- » it's empowered by Jesus Christ

We've also seen what the church does:

- » a learning community
- » a sharing community
- » a worshipping community
- » a growing community

With all that in mind, let me ask you—can you now say, *I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints?*

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*