



The Apostles' Creed

Study 6: The Holy Catholic Church (Eph. 3:1-21)

o The universal church manifests itself in the world as local churches made up of those who have experienced the forgiveness of sins and live in expectation of the resurrection and everlasting life.

I. Perennial errors concerning the church.

1. In the first three centuries after the apostles, up to about the time of Constantine (274-337), the church faced problems of wrong teachings, mainly concerning the Trinity and the Person of Christ.
 - The excommunicated heretics and their followers would be regarded as cut off from the true church. There were groups, however, who distanced themselves from the mainline churches because of the perceived spiritual decay in them, with the result that two streams of Christianity developed, viz. “dissenting Christianity” and “establishment Christianity”. The latter, also known as the Catholic Church, must not be confused with the Roman Catholic Church, which was only one of the many churches that were independent of one another.
 - The Catholic Church was characterised by sacralism, i.e. holding to a “territorial church concept” and infant baptism. It was opposed to the various dissenting churches, many of which were teaching errors and heresies of one kind or another. The dissenting churches held to the “gathered church principle” and practised believer’s baptism. They included the Montanists, the Novatians (Cathari), and the Donatists.
 - The Novations of the 3rd century were accused of causing schism by refusing readmission to the church of those who have repented of denying the Lord while under persecution. The Donatists of the 4th and 5th century, in North Africa, were accused of the same thing.
2. Round about AD 450, Pope Leo (390-461) began to assert the supremacy of the church of Rome over all others, calling itself the Roman Catholic Church. The other Orthodox churches opposed the claim of Roman pre-eminence, and came to be known as the Eastern Orthodox Churches.
 - The Great Schism between East and West of the Roman Empire occurred AD 1054, when the Eastern Orthodox Churches excommunicated the Roman Catholic Church while the Roman Catholic Church responded by excommunicating the Eastern churches.
 - The dissenting churches that arose included the Albigenses, the Paulicians, the Bogomils, and the Waldensians. By that time, the establishment churches of the East and the West had declined spiritually to what became known as the Dark (Medieval) Ages.
 - The Catholic Church prior to the claim of Roman supremacy had been the custodian of the truth expressed in the Apostles’ Creed. It has now declined spiritually and morally and departed from the teaching of the Apostles’ Creed, although still professing to uphold it.

3. The Lollards arose in Britain, and the Hussites in Europe, at the dawn of the Reformation, proclaiming truths that were consistent with the Apostles' Creed.
- When the Reformation burst upon the scene, the dissenting churches were represented by the Anabaptists, of which there were several branches, some of which held to extreme views.
- On examination, it will be found that the Reformed churches and the mainline Anabaptist churches upheld teachings that were consistent with the Apostles' Creed. Calvin expounded the Christian faith in his "Institutes of the Christian Religion" based on the Apostles' Creed. Reformed Baptists today would have no difficulty affirming the Apostles' Creed, although it is not so well-known or well-used among them as among other Reformed churches.
- Protestantism has diverged into a broad spectrum of churches, many of which struggle over the definition of the church and the degree of fellowship that is possible between churches. At one end of the spectrum are the more ecumenical-minded churches, at the other end are the more isolationist churches. The teaching of the church in the Apostles' Creed would provide some help in this perplexing issue.

II. The teaching of the Apostles' Creed.

1. The Apostles' Creed links the doctrine of the church with the Holy Spirit, under the third "We believe" statement.
 - We have seen that the Holy Spirit, who inspires the writing of the word of God, is the giver of spiritual life. By the hearing of the word of God, the Spirit regenerates the sinner to new life in Christ (Rom. 10:17; 1 Pet. 1:23). Since the regenerate alone constitute the church, it is understandable that the doctrine of the church is placed together with the Holy Spirit.
 - However, it will be quite appropriate to treat the doctrine of the church under a separate "We believe", as is done in the Nicene Creed.
2. The universal church is referred to in the expression "holy catholic church". The word "holy" shows that only those who are regenerate belong to the catholic, i.e. universal, church.
 - Believing in "the communion of saints" means believing in the local church. The word "communion" means "fellowship" or "a shared life". The word "saints" is used in the Bible to refer to believers.
 - : The universal church manifests itself in the world as local churches, i.e. gatherings of believers bound together by covenant to worship and serve God. Believers are expected to become members of a local church. Fellowship between believers is expressed primarily through the local church (John 17:22-23; 1 Cor. 12:12-31). (Fellowship between churches will be discussed in the next study.)
 - : A true church will possess the basic marks of, (i) the gospel being proclaimed; (ii) the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper being carried out correctly; and (iii) church discipline being rightly administered.
 - The expression "the forgiveness of sins" points us to: (i) the atoning work of Christ; (ii) conversion; (iii) sanctification; and (iv) assurance of salvation.
 - : Atonement for sins and reconciliation with God is achieved by Christ's death and resurrection (Heb. 9:15).
 - : Repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ, together, constitute conversion (Acts 2:38).
 - : The Holy Spirit, who dwells in the believer upon conversion (Gal. 3:2), will give holy desires and the ability to live in obedience to God's will (Rom. 8:9-11). The process of growing holier is sanctification.

: Assurance of salvation to varying degrees is experienced upon conversion (Rom. 8:16). Believers have every reason to be assured of their acceptance before God (John 6:37; 10:28-29; Rom. 8:38-39). Those with problems of assurance should focus on feeding on God's word, living in obedience to the word, and engaging in regular prayer instead of seeking assurance for its own sake.

3. The Creed speaks of "the resurrection of the body" and "the life everlasting".

- Here, perseverance in the faith is involved. True believers will persevere in the faith to the end of their lives, despite the trials and suffering that come to them (Matt. 10:22, 32-33; Rom. 8:16-17). They derive comfort and strength in the Christian hope, i.e. the certainty of resurrection of the body (Matt. 24:29-31; 1 Thess. 4:14-18) and eternal life in heaven (Tit. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:3-4).

- Between the resurrection of the dead and the blessedness of eternal life is the judgement of the last day and the re-creation of the universe (2 Pet. 3:10-13).

: Judgement will mean condemnation to the unrighteous who are not clothed in the righteousness of Christ (Matt. 25:31-34, 41). These will include unbelievers and nominal Christians (Matt. 7:21-23). The eternal suffering, of body and soul, of the unrighteous in hell is also called "the second death" (Rev. 20:13-15).

: Heaven is already qualitatively perfect. However, it is not yet in the final state God intends it to be. The remaking of the universe will result in heaven being on earth, and earth being in heaven, where righteousness dwells (2 Pet. 3:10-13; Rev. 21:1-4). All the elect will be gathered there, to be with the Lord forever.

= The church is made up of those who are submitted to Jesus Christ, who says of them, "the kingdom of God is within you (Luke 17:21)."

Review Questions

1. State the two characteristics of those who make up the local church.
2. In the first three centuries after the apostles, what wrong teachings were faced by the church?
3. Name the two streams of Christianity that developed.
4. What characterised each stream of Christianity?
5. What groups arose in Britain and Europe at the dawn of the Reformation?
6. What dissenting groups were in Europe when the Reformation occurred?
7. What are the three marks of a true church?
8. What four things are pointed to by the expression "the forgiveness of sins"?
9. What is "the Christian hope"?
10. What two events lie between the resurrection of the dead and the blessedness of life in heaven?

Assignment/Discussion

Suffering for the faith is part-and-parcel of the Christian life. Discuss this.

Memory Passage (2 Tim. 2:19)

19 Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity."

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