

Our Mother: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic

Deacon John C. Clark

I. Getting Our Bearings, Going Forward

Jesus Christ is the *focus* and *substance* of all Christian theology (the entirety of our confession), and ecclesiology (our confession of the church) is nothing less or other than applied soteriology (the gospel concretized).

“Through union with Jesus Christ the church shares in his life and in all that he has done for mankind. Through his birth its members have a new birth and are made members of the new humanity. Through his obedient life and death their sins are forgiven and they are clothed with a new righteousness. Through his resurrection and triumph over the powers of darkness they are freed from the dominion of evil and are made one body with him.... Thus the church finds its life and being not in itself but in Jesus Christ alone, for not only is he the head of the church but he includes the church within his own fullness.” ~T. F. Torrance, *Atonement*

“He alone can have God as his Father who first has the church as his mother!” ~Cyprian, *Epistle 74*

“He who leaves the church makes himself responsible for his own death.” ~Origen, *Homilies in Leviticus*

“No one can find a paternal welcome from God if he scorns his mother, the church.” ~Augustine, *Sermon 359*

It’s not uncommon for modern Christians to assume that the church is the body and bride of Christ in a merely figurative, sentimental sense. That it is “as if” the church is Christ’s body and bride. What would we actually be saying here?

- It is “as if” we are united to Christ, and in him to each other—but in actuality we are not.
- It is “as if,” being united to Christ, we participate in his sonship, and are the beneficiaries of all that entails—but in actuality we do not and are not.



- It is “as if,” being united to Christ, we were put to death with him, and are raised and ascended with him—but in actuality we were not and are not.
- It is “as if,” being united to Christ, we participate in his holiness, and are being made new creations by being conformed to him—but in actuality we do not and are not.
- It is “as if,” being united to Christ, we participate in his righteousness, and are delivered from our sin and its consequences—but in actuality we do not and are not.
- How can we not avoid the conclusion that it is “as if,” being united to Christ, we are saved—but in actuality we are not?

II. The Evangelical Faith of the Ancient Church

The *Nicene Creed* teaches us to confess “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.”

The church is ONE as united to Christ; the church is HOLY as sanctified in Christ; the church is CATHOLIC as the universal body of Christ; and the church is APOSTOLIC as grounded in the witness and community of the apostles of Christ.

Moreover, the life and being of the church is deeply **trinitarian**, constituted by the life and being of God the holy Trinity—we belong to the *Father* through union with the *Son* in the power of the *Spirit*.

III. The Church is One

The church is constituted by many believers who are one body and bride in Jesus Christ. Key texts: John 17:20-23; 1 Corinthians 1:10; 12:12, 27; Galatians 3:26-29; Philippians 2:1-3; Ephesians 4:1-6.

When we confess that the church is one, we are confessing that Jesus Christ is intimately and inextricably bound to his people, and that he, in turn, binds us together in himself. Please note that we do not mean all believers necessarily have unity of will, purpose, affection, outlook, and the like—although these things may well exist. Rather, we mean that all those united to Jesus Christ are necessarily united to each other in Christ, for we are “many limbs and organs but ONE body.”

This oneness is real, actual, and true—not mere religious sentimentality. We are actually united to one another just as truly as we are united to Jesus Christ.

“This is the highest honor of the church, that, *until he is united to us, the Son of God reckons himself in some measure imperfect*. What consolation is it for us to learn that, not until we are along with



him, does he possess all his parts, or wish to be regarded as complete.” ~John Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians 1:23*.

“There was, as it were, an eternal society or family in the Godhead, in the Trinity of persons. It seems to be God’s design to admit the church into the divine family as his Son’s wife.... Heaven and earth were created that the Son of God might be complete in a spouse.” ~Jonathan Edwards, *Miscellanies*

- The oneness/unity of the church is made known (concretely) in baptism and the Eucharist.

~Baptism marks our incorporation into Christ, specifically our incorporation into his death and resurrection (Romans 6; Colossians 2:9-12).

~In the partaking of the life-giving flesh and blood of Christ, the identity of the church is made known. The new humanity is constituted by those who receive Christ and live in/through him. The church is **one** because all have partaken of the one Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). Why is Paul upset with the church in Corinth? Living in contradiction of the church’s **one-ness**, which is the gospel!

“Just *because* the unity of the church is rooted and grounded in the incarnate and atoning work of Christ, it can no more be destroyed than the incarnation and atonement can be undone or God go back on upon the death of his dear Son. But for the same reason, for the people of God to live in disunity, for the church to allow the divisions of the world to penetrate back into its life, is to live in disagreement [profound contradiction] with its own existence, to call into question its reconciliation and to act a lie against the atonement.” ~T. F. Torrance, *Atonement*

- The church is not purpose driven!

~Like modern Americans, modern Christians tend to be pragmatic, utilitarian, and activist. Thus they routinely ask how something “works” or what something “looks like” well before they understand what something means, or even if they truly believe it.

~How could the church know what to *do* before it knows who she *is*? The *nature* of the church must shape and fund the *practice* of the church.

~Notice that Paul is not particularly interested in method and technique, though these are often our preoccupations. His consistent concern is one of identity/realism (“don’t you know who you are?!”).

“A church that begins with a missional purpose before it begins with its identity as communal reality in relation to God [in Christ] is problematic. This orientation is very American but is not biblical.”

~Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology*



IV. The Church is Holy

- The church neither does nor can derive holiness from herself, but only and ever from Christ.

~The church is “sanctified *in* Christ Jesus” (1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:2).

~By participation in Christ the church is holy, and so her members are individually “saints.”

~In the RCC sainthood/canonization is reserved to the Holy See (Vatican/Episcopal Jurisdiction) and occurs at the conclusion of a long process requiring extensive proof that the person proposed for canonization lived and died in such an exemplary and holy way that he or she is worthy to be recognized as a saint.

~The holiness of which we are now speaking is *passive* and *positional*, which results from being incorporated into the Holy One. In other words, the sanctity of the church is never achieved, but always and ever received.

- Having been sanctified in Christ, the church is commanded to manifest her holiness.

~The church is time and again called to holiness of life, to reflect the radiance that results from her union with the bridegroom (Ephesians 4:17-32; Philippians 2:1-16; Colossians 3:1-17).

~The holiness of which we are now speaking is *active* and *progressive*, the holiness that is forged in the church as she ever more clearly radiates the image of Christ. This type of holiness involves our conscious, willing pursuit; it does not come about unintentionally.

~The church is called to *be* the eschatological manifestation of the new humanity, which reflects the holiness of the new man: Jesus Christ and his living members. Note well: this is the end for which we were chosen in Christ in eternity past (Ephesians 1:3-4; Hebrews 12:10, 14).

"The church is the church in her worship. Worship is not an optional extra, but is of the very life and essence of the church.... Man is never more truly man than when he worships God. He rises to all the heights of human dignity when he worships God, and all God's purpose in creation and redemption are fulfilled in us as together in worship we are renewed in and through Christ, and in the name of Christ we glorify God." ~J. B. Torrance, *The Place of Jesus Christ in Worship*

V. The Church is Catholic

~The Greek roots of the term “Catholic” mean “according to” (*kata*) and “whole” (*holos*). Thus “Catholic” means “according to the whole,” or “universal.” We find in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 117 A.D.) the first use of the term “Catholic” in reference to the church.



~The term conveys the notion that the Catholic church is the true church, as opposed to the heretical/schismatic sects in its midst. Accordingly, the term "Catholic" is found in the Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds.

~Historic Protestants/Evangelicals should not be at all wary of using this term to describe themselves. On the contrary, we can and should confess our catholicity with great joy and conviction.

~Please Note: To say one is Catholic is not necessarily to say that he/she is Roman Catholic! In fact, the Protestant Reformers were fond of pointing out that the problem with Rome was not that it was too Catholic, but that it was not Catholic enough!

~By the "catholicity" of the church, then, we mean that the body of Christ incorporates all believers in all places and at all times. In other words, the church is "universal" or "according to the whole" historically, geographically, and apostolically. "[A]nd with your [Christ's] blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation." (Revelation 5:9)

~The **local church** is the gathering of believers in distinct locales (1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; Philemon 1-2), whereas the **universal church** is the church throughout the entire world (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 5:25). Please Note: Every local/individual church is a localized/concrete expression of the whole church, because it is one with the whole Christ, as opposed to merely a fraction/fragment of Christ.

VI. The Church is Apostolic

~Jesus Christ does not wish to be known apart from his apostles—that is, the apostolic witness and the apostolic community.

- John 1: As soon as Jesus is identified as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world" he begins calling his apostles to himself.
- John 15:26-27: "But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning."
- 1 John 1:1-4: Apostolic witness and apostolic fellowship (koinonia) are inseparable, as neither is an abstraction.

~The church finds her calling, purpose, and identity in the apostolic words about the Word—that is, in the propositional truth which describes, commends, and mediates the personal Truth. Thus the church is both the creature and custodian of Scripture.

~Through word and Spirit, the church knows Christ, proclaims Christ, worships Christ, and is nourished by Christ's holy presence (John 14:16-31; 16:12-15).



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~Apostolicity thus governs the unity, holiness, and catholicity of the church, in that all of these are subject to apostolic/scriptural definition.

“Any church that fails to conform to the truth of the apostolic scriptures, which refuses to be reformed and cleansed and purged by the word of truth mediated through the apostles, thereby declares that it is not the one holy catholic church. It calls in question its own apostolicity and therefore its catholicity, for it loosens its moorings in the foundation of the church laid in Christ Jesus.”

~T. F. Torrance, *Atonement*, 399.

~See 2 John 9-11.