

## 18) The Church, Part 1

In our Theology 101 series so far, we have reflected on how we come to faith in God, knowledge about God and the experience of God (under the traditional heading: epistemology). We also reflected on God, Jesus Christ, The Holy Spirit, Creation and Humanity. Now we come to another topical head: The Church. There will be several parts under this heading as there is much to cover and much diversity within Christianity in this area of faith.

From the earliest days of the church as it began to grow throughout the world, there developed what have been called four “marks” of the church all churches embraced. The church is: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

**One:** Whatever differences there have been and continue to be between Christian churches throughout the world, the affirmation that the church is “one” recognizes that our unity is greater than our differences. We all believe in one God who is creator and Abba (Father/Mother). We all believe Jesus is the Christ who is God’s Word made flesh, crucified in a world of injustice yet embodying a forgiving and liberating love so powerful that he was raised from the dead to reign eternally. We all believe in the Holy Spirit of God which flowed through the human Jesus and continues to flow through him into all those who open their hearts to his resurrecting and unconquerable love. The church is the body of Christ through the enlivening energy and power called Holy Spirit.

**Holy:** From the earliest days, the church was the “called out” (*ek-klesia* in Greek) people, called out of the world to be purified and bathed in divine love, and then, sent back into the world to build community through which such love could be spread out into the world as healing compassion and justice toward wholeness (salvation) in body and spirit. To be holy is to be called out, to be set apart for a purpose and to be commissioned as disciples of Jesus to embody his love as his hands, feet, voice and heart.

**Catholic:** This word is often misunderstood. It is a Latin word which means: universal. The church is universal, meaning it is everywhere and all Christians and churches of Christ belong. To be “Roman” Catholic is to belong to one part of the universal church. To be catholic is simply to be universal and that includes us Protestants and us Presbyterians within the Protestant family of churches.

**Apostolic:** We believe that we as Christians in churches are following in the footsteps of the first apostles and the communities they were instrumental in forming through the Holy Spirit, beginning at Pentecost. They were commissioned by Christ (to be an apostle means to be sent out). We are part of that succession two thousand years later. While Roman Catholic & Orthodox Christians believe the apostolic succession flows through the hierarchy (pope,

bishops, clergy), we protestants believe in what reformers called: “The priesthood of all believers.” The apostolic succession flows through the whole church, not just ordained clergy.

Also as Protestants, we would assert that the church is a human institution where fear, leading to sin, has shaped its behaviour in the world. Even as we have been called out to be filled with the Spirit of Christ so we can become his body on earth, we are also broken in some ways in need of healing ourselves. We need to repent and we need forgiveness from all those we have hurt within our walls and in the world.

And here there is a range of perspectives across the church. Some churches (Roman Catholic & Orthodox) would be less inclined to admit sin within its decision making and actions, and yet, scandals and abuses cannot just be laid at the feet of bad actors within the church. From the top down greed, power, wealth and the need to control people have corrupted the church systemically. Just think about the imperialistic thinking of the church that supported colonization by nations who also established residential schools under that vision, and the schools churches ran providing a theological justification for such colonization. Civilization and evangelization went hand in hand. As Protestants and as Presbyterians our motto has always been: The church reformed is always in need of fresh reforming, and this begins with repentance in search of healing and reconciliation with God and those we have wounded.

Moreover, the church is vulnerable to fear just like any other institution in the world. In the early days of the church after severe persecution, a conflict arose between a group of Christians called: “Donatist” and another group led by the great St. Augustine. While the Donatists wanted to refuse membership to those Christians who had recanted their faith under persecution, Augustine declared that the church is not a “society of saints,” if by saints is meant some kind of super-human spirituality that is immune to fear and sin. Rather, the church is “a school for sinners.” Or, the church is a hospital for those who come for healing because they know they need it. While the church as a whole sided with Augustine’s understanding at the time, as Protestants we side even more strongly with Augustine’s understanding.

Finally, over against the medieval church’s temptation toward asserting the infallibility of the papal office and the church as the kingdom of God on earth, Protestants emphasized that the visible church is very different than the invisible church that lives before God. Once again there was an appeal to Augustine who claimed that there are some in the church who are not of God and some outside the church who are of God. The invisible church is the company of God’s people beyond and outside any human institution including the church. The kingdom of God is not the church, but when the church truly serves as the hands, feet, voice and heart of Christ for each other and in the world it can become here and there a “parable” (as theologian Karl Barth coined it) of the kingdom.

Such humility and honesty about the church along with the claim to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic are very much our Protestant and Presbyterian way.

What do you think?