

## CHAPTER 2.

### THE ATTRIBUTES OF THE CHURCH

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According to some estimates, there are more than 41,000 different Christian denominations in the world.<sup>1</sup> To state the obvious, that is a lot of different church groups. Now, some of them are in fact the same church group but only have a different name because they are in a different country. However, the vast majority of those denominations have differences, whether smaller or greater, in doctrine and practice. Yet in Ephesians 4:4 the apostle Paul writes, “There is one body,” and from an earlier section in the same letter we know that this body is the church of Christ (Eph 1:22). How can we explain such a glaring discrepancy between the 41,000 denominations in statistical studies and the one body of Christ in Scripture?

Moreover, the difficulties do not stop there. The Bible also describes the members of the church as a “holy priesthood” and a “holy nation” (1 Pet 2:5, 9). But anyone who has belonged to the church, even for a short time, will realize that things happen within the church that are neither pious nor holy. Also within the church, pride still puffs up too many hearts and heads. Within the church, the love of money remains discouragingly common. Within the church, insulting language is used and disrespectful actions occur. How do we account for this? If the church is holy, how can there be so much unholy conduct within her?

1. This statistic was obtained from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Then there is also the striking picture in Revelation 7:9 describing the great multitude “from all tribes and peoples and languages.” They are all standing together before the throne of God. They are all wearing the same white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. Although this is clearly a vision of the church in final glory, it still speaks volumes of what the catholicity of the church should look like today. In spite of the obvious ethnic diversity, there is unity in Christ and his cleansing blood (Rev 7:13–15). However, on this side of eternal glory, the catholicity of the church does not always work out so beautifully. Barriers of language and culture regularly impede progress in the unity of Christ’s church. Even within a single congregation, those who share a common ethnic background often associate more readily with each other than with the rest of the congregation. Again, the ideal revealed in Scripture seems far from the reality we find in the church.

Is there any way to explain these discrepancies? To begin with, two things need to be emphasized. First, the church of Christ is a work in progress. Spiritually speaking, the church is not a full-grown adult yet. The body of Christ is still growing and maturing “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). Similarly, we “like living stones, *are being built up* as a spiritual house” (1 Pet 2:5). In other words, the building is still under construction. Too often people expect to see the church of final glory already now in this present age; however, we are not that far along yet in redemptive history.

Secondly, things such as the unity, holiness, and catholicity of the church are not only descriptions but also obligations. Within the span of two verses the Holy Spirit describes Christ’s body as “one” (Eph 4:4) and instructs God’s people to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). Thus, if your congregation is not as united as it should be, do not complain about it, much less scoff at it; instead, roll up your sleeves and get to work on the problem. That is your God-given obligation.

With this perspective in mind, let us now turn our attention in more detail to the attributes of the church. The attributes are those things that are particularly characteristic of the church. They are summarized in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds as unity (being "one"), holiness, and catholicity. Some versions of the Apostles' Creed add the word "Christian," while the Nicene Creed concludes the list with "apostolic." We will look at each one of these attributes in turn, also zeroing in on our responsibilities as we do so.

UNITY: "THERE IS ONE BODY" (EPH 4:4)

When speaking about any aspect of Christ's church we must conscientiously "believe with the heart and confess with the mouth," as the Belgic Confession wisely says (Art. 1). Too often people choose the wrong point of departure. When the topic of the church comes up, they are quick to share their opinions and recount their (bad) experiences. However, the creeds and confessions launch their teaching about the church in a different manner. Notice, for example, the Apostles' Creed: "*I believe* a holy catholic Christian church." The Nicene Creed concurs: "*We believe* one holy catholic and apostolic church." Similarly, the Belgic Confession begins each of its six articles on the church with the words "we believe" (Art. 27–32). The Heidelberg Catechism even takes this emphasis to a new level, using the verb *believe* no fewer than three times within Q&A 54 alone. Clearly, the creeds and confessions insist that, also when it comes to the church, we must walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor 5:7). Faith involves accepting "as true all that God has revealed to us in his Word" (LD 7, Q&A 21). Undoubtedly, everyone can tell a story or two about the sad reality of division, rather than unity, within the church. However, we will begin where the creeds direct us: not with what we see, but with what God says.

As we discovered in the previous lesson, the church is not merely a New Testament phenomenon. The assembly of God's people was a reality of divine mercy throughout the Old Testament as well, stretching back to Adam and Eve and their children (Gen 4:26). More specifically, the unity of God's people also finds its roots in the Old Testament,

where the LORD reveals that the *origin* of this unity does not lie in human co-operation but rather in his gracious initiative. For example, human beings soon tried to generate unity through their own collaborative efforts in building the soaring tower of Shinar (Gen 11:1–4). The LORD thought otherwise and created divisions by erecting the barriers of language. This had the net effect of scattering different groups over the face of the earth (Gen 11:6–9). Yet, lest anyone suppose that the LORD’s ultimate goal is to divide rather than unite, the next chapter of the Bible alters that erroneous train of thought in a dramatic fashion. No sooner are people divided by language than the LORD immediately announces a grand plan for re-unification—this time not a man-made endeavour but a divine initiative.

Once again, the LORD chooses one man and his wife, Abram and Sarai, and he declares that he is going to work great blessings for them and their descendants: “I will make of you a great nation” (Gen 12:2). In addition, the LORD informs Abram that “in [him] all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3). Indeed, all these different people, scattered far and wide and speaking many different languages, will one day be united in the blessings that will flow from the LORD through Abram. Clearly this is neither Abram’s idea nor his achievement. The LORD announces it to Abram; Abram does not suggest it to the LORD. Yet, through this divine initiative, the LORD is working toward a grand, global unity among his people.

Furthermore, the LORD again reveals that his covenant of grace is a key component in this grand unification initiative. In Genesis 15 this covenant is cut, literally (vv. 10, 17–18), and in Genesis 17 this same covenant is confirmed to Abram, who is renamed Abraham, and his entire household. At the end of that chapter we read an interesting inspired tidbit: “And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him” (v. 27). Abraham had foreigners—originating from other nations and speaking different mother tongues—in his household. His chief servant, Eliezer of Damascus (Gen 15:2), is an obvious example, but there were hundreds more like him (Gen 14:14). Beginning in Genesis 17, all

these different people are united, not just because they have the same master, Abraham, but because they all belong to the same covenant, signified by the same sacrament, that is, circumcision.

Once more, none of this started with Abraham's creative thinking. The LORD created a unique grace-generated unity within Abraham's household that he could never have fully anticipated, let alone accomplished, as he walked down the road and left Ur of the Chaldeans behind. By Genesis 17 God was already beginning to fulfil the promise he made to Abraham in Genesis 12, as this man's household was bound together by a generation-lasting, yes, everlasting, covenant of grace (Gen 17:7). Who could have ever imagined that?

The LORD continued to work in this same merciful vein throughout the old covenant. Rather than letting his people slowly dissolve among the Egyptians, he liberated them from the land of slavery. As he did so, the LORD was still busy with his promise to Abram in Genesis 12. He brought a significant group of people from other nations into the circle of his redeemed people (Exod 12:38; see also Num 11:4). Some translations call these people "the rabble"; others simply refer to them as "the mixed multitude." Still, here again there was an unnatural, but divinely created, unity.

Later, in the Promised Land, there was tension between the tribes on either side of the Jordan River (Josh 22) and between Israel and Judah, both earlier (2 Sam 3:1–5:5) and later on (1 Kgs 12, esp. v. 16). Yet, it is ultimately the LORD who draws them back together again (Isa 11:12, 13; Jer 3:18, 19; 50:4–5; Ezek 37:16–25; Hos 1:11; Mic 2:12, 13). Moreover, even though there were twelve different tribes, with twelve different inheritances and circumstances, yet the LORD refers to them, in the singular, as his child, his beloved son (Exod 4:22; Jer 31:9; Hos 11:1).

As an integral part of his unifying work, the LORD regularly called his people to assemble in one place, the place where he dwelt in his tabernacle and later in his temple (Deut 12:5–7). In this way the Old Testament church lived out what God had made them to be: an assembly.

Who they were (identity) led to what they did (action). Yet, in doing so, the LORD also kept them focused on the true source of their unity: the ministry of reconciliation through sacrificial blood. When Israel assembled at the temple, that ministry of reconciliation was front and centre in all their feasts, because the bronze altar was right there in the middle of the courtyard for everyone to see. This establishes a fundamental principle of church unity. Ecclesiastical unity is not focused on one particular human being—whether priest, king, pope, or charismatic leader—but on one LORD and his redeeming work. As the Belgic Confession says, “We believe and profess one catholic or universal church, which is a holy congregation and assembly of true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, *are washed by his blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit*” (Art. 27; emphasis added).

In a certain sense, the Lord’s work of uniting his people intensifies in the New Testament. To begin with, the scope and variety of people brought into the church grow dramatically after Pentecost, stretching from Palestine to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Yet this increasingly far-flung group of people is united more closely than ever before. In Christ they are not merely tribes of the same nation but members of the same body (1 Cor 12:14–26). Through his Spirit, Jesus Christ merges two flocks into one flock with one shepherd (John 10:16). He even fuses two archrivals, the Jews and the Gentiles, into “one new man” (Eph 2:15). Yet, perhaps the more powerful expression of the church’s unity is this: that the one heavenly husband, who is Christ, has but one beloved bride (2 Cor 11:2). To put it in different words, Christ is a monogamous husband; therefore, he works to unite all believers into his one redeemed body, which is the church, the bride of Christ.

This does not mean that everything was always homogenous within Christ’s church. On the contrary, there are numerous indications that the early church experienced many tensions and much disunity. Examples include the tension between Jews and Gentiles in the churches at Rome and Ephesus (Rom 13–14; Eph 2:11–22), the party spirit in the church at Corinth (1 Cor 1), and the personality conflicts in the church at Philippi (Phil 2:1–4; 4:2). Still, just as with the temple in the Old Testament, the

Lord continues to redirect his household to the blessings of salvation that they have received in common, rather than to the conflicts that arise due to sinful jealousy and pride. This is why the apostle Paul tells God’s people to focus on the “one Spirit . . . one hope . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, [and] one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4–6). Concentrating on our own desires causes divisions, but focusing on the Lord’s undeserved blessings promotes unity.

At the same time, this God-generated unity within the church is a precious gift that we must maintain and promote. As mentioned earlier, in the same breath in which the Holy Spirit announces that “there is one body,” he also urges us to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3, 4). We must avoid simply cheering for our favourite leader or preacher and instead keep following the one Christ, who was crucified for us and in whose name we have all been baptized (1 Cor 1:10–17). This requires a healthy dose of humility, which is the only sure path leading to like-mindedness (Phil 2:1–4) and mature cohesiveness (Phil 3:12–15).

As the Heidelberg Catechism reminds us, unity within the church is also unity in the truth (LD 21, Q&A 54). This is the same direction in which the apostle Paul points when he writes about “speaking the truth in love” within the framework of growing up into Christ who is the Head and being joined together tightly, even as the different parts of the body are firmly held together by ligaments and tendons (Eph 4:15–16). Thus, the church today must aim for substantial, not superficial, unity. What has been truly accomplished if believers unite in enthusiastically and simultaneously calling out the name of Christ, all the while disagreeing sharply on what Christ teaches and how he requires us to live? Such unity is a veneer that may satisfy the eye, but it does not penetrate to the heart, and the Lord of the church is definitely looking for unified hearts and minds (1 Sam 16:7; Phil 2:2).

Developing substantial unity begins by speaking the truth in love to fellow believers within your own congregation. By *truth* the apostle Paul does not only mean refraining from lies or gossip, but also, and more

positively, discussing the truth of the gospel found in Scripture. Note how truth and the gospel are combined in Ephesians 1:13 when the apostle writes, “You heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.” In practice, then, Bible study groups within a congregation are an excellent means of promoting local unity.

At the same time, the unity of the church must extend beyond the boundaries of our own local congregation. Working toward consensus and consistency in doctrine and life within a federation of churches, or between two federations, is certainly no small task. Yet if everyone involved is willing to “bend their necks under the yoke of Jesus and serve the edification of the brothers and sisters” (BC 28), all the while governing themselves “according to the pure Word of God [and] rejecting all things contrary to it” (BC 29), there is hope that in spite of the divisions that presently exist, the church may as yet demonstrate that she is “joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith” (BC 27).

HOLINESS: “BUT YOU ARE A PEOPLE BELONGING TO GOD” (1 PET 2:9)

One of the most common criticisms levelled at the church is the charge of hypocrisy. People both within and outside of the church are dismayed that those who call themselves Christians could still be involved in so much gossip, greed, lust, and lethargy. In short, they find the church to be full of more hypocrisy than holiness.

Weeding out immorality from the church is a serious and necessary task. We will return to that topic a little later. However, as mentioned previously, our understanding of the church’s attributes must be pursued by faith, not by sight. Faith turns, and always returns, to the *terra firma* of Holy Scripture, and as soon as we do that, we discover that holiness has a different connotation than we might first expect. Take, for instance, the very first time that word *holy* is applied to God’s people: “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6). Yet what does the LORD mean here by *holy*? The answer is supplied in the context: “You shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all



the earth is mine” (Exod 19:5). Notice how holiness is directly connected to the LORD’s choice. Already at that time there were many different nations on the earth. In a certain sense they all belonged to the LORD, for, as he says, “All the earth is mine” (see also Ps 24:1). Yet, in his sovereign good-pleasure, the LORD decided to pick one nation, Israel, and make them his “treasured possession,” his “kingdom of priests,” and his “holy nation.”

The LORD’s choice was not based on the fact that the Israelites were doing a better job than any other nations at avoiding gossip, greed, lust, lethargy, or any other vice. Truth be told, the facts spoke otherwise. In the preceding chapter, Exodus 18, Moses needed the help of many elders just to keep up with all the disputes that reared their ugly heads among the Israelites (vv. 15–26). Before that, they grumbled against Moses and put the LORD to the test over water (Exod 15:22–27; 17:1–7) and food (Exod 16). To understate the case, the assembly of Israel was certainly no camp of angels. Yet, they were holy—not because of their exemplary lifestyle but because of the LORD’s loving choice.

This theme of belonging, in a special way, to the LORD runs throughout Scripture’s teaching on the holiness of the church. In Leviticus 20 the LORD declares, “I am the LORD your God, who has separated you from the peoples” (v. 24), and then he immediately follows that up with, “You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine” (v. 26). Similarly, in the book of Deuteronomy, the LORD connects his choice and holiness when he says, “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth” (Deut 7:6). Here the echo of Exodus 19:6 is obvious. Moreover, notice the constant refrain in these verses that the people are holy “to the LORD” (see also Deut 14:2, 21; 26:19; Jer 2:3). Significantly, the first note of emphasis in holiness is *relationship*, not upright behaviour. The holy church is a group of people that have been distinguished from the rest of humanity and dedicated to the LORD in a special bond of love. In other words, holiness *begins* with

what the LORD graciously does for his people, not with how his people live before him.

Naturally, this does not mean that holiness has nothing at all to do with how people live. On the contrary, as part of a regular refrain in the book of Leviticus, the LORD says, “Be holy, for I am holy” (11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8). The apostle Peter fully concurs when he writes, “As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet 1:15–16). This simultaneously heightens the standard for holy living and makes it possible. It would be easy for Christians today to draft a quick list of holy-living items: clean tongue, sexual purity, church attendance, etc. However, if our holy living is to aspire to the standard of “as he who called you is holy,” the list will need to be a lot longer and go much deeper than that. As the Lord Jesus Christ illustrated in his Sermon on the Mount, holiness of action is insufficient and holiness of attitude must be added (Matt 5:22, 28, 40–42, 44, 48).

In fact, the holiness that the LORD requires can be worked in our lives only through the Holy Spirit. It is for this reason that the third person of our triune God is often mentioned in connection with the sanctification, or ongoing cleansing, of God’s people (Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 6:11; 2 Thess 2:13; 1 Pet 1:1). The same God who sets his church apart also sends his Holy Spirit in order to make this holiness a concrete reality in the lives of his people. Indeed, the New Testament church is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19; 1 Pet 2:4–5). Once again, the close connection between identity and action comes to the fore. Since the church is, by God’s grace, the temple of the Holy Spirit, she must also avoid all manner of spiritual uncleanness. It is one thing for a person to sin, but the offence is only compounded when that sin defiles the holy, living temple of the LORD. If the temple of the old covenant had to be a place of fastidious cleanliness, as the regulations of Leviticus confirm, then how much more should the temple of the new covenant, the church, be a place where spiritual cleanliness is a top priority. Not only are we called to eagerly pursue unity within the church (Eph 4:3) but also holiness (Heb 12:14), especially since we belong to the new covenant (Heb 12:25–29).

This “serious and holy pursuit of a clear conscience and of good works” (CoD 5.10) is also connected to the church’s redeemed status as the bride of Christ. As the betrothed bride of God’s Son, we consider purity to be of utmost importance (2 Cor 11:2). We want to walk down the aisle on our wedding day undefiled (Rev 19:7–8). To be sure, the temptations will be great in number and strength. The world has many allurements to offer. However, if we focus on our wedding feast with the Lamb of God (Rev 19:7–8; 21:2–4), we have powerful and joyful motivation to stay holy and pure for our eternal Husband.

This does not mean that we will achieve perfect holiness within the church of this age. The very fact that the Bridegroom is busy cleansing her “by the washing of water with the word” (Eph 5:26) is a sufficient indication that the church is not perfectly pure yet. In this life sin will always be with us, also in the church. To think or claim otherwise is to lie and, worse than that, to make God a liar (1 John 1:10). Sadly, hypocrites and hypocrisy are found in the church too (Matt 13:24–30). Those weeds will be finally and fully removed on the last day, but until that time they might linger for a season.

However, what will the church do about the unholy conduct within her midst? That is the challenge for all of us today. The Lord has graciously chosen the church to be his treasured possession. That is where holiness starts, but it cannot stop there. On this side of final glory, moral and spiritual uncleanness will always be found within the church, but it may never be nurtured or tolerated there. Using the keys of the kingdom, both the preaching of the gospel and church discipline, the Bride of Christ must keep herself pure with the same godly jealousy that motivated the apostle Paul (2 Cor 11:2). For this reason the Belgic Confession speaks not only of church members that “are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit” (Art. 27) but also of members who “must submit themselves to [the church’s] instruction and discipline” (Art. 28).

CATHOLICITY: “FROM ALL TRIBES AND PEOPLES AND LANGUAGES” (REV 7:9)

When people hear the word *catholic* they often think of the Roman Catholic Church. Or, if they do understand the difference between *catholic*, which simply means *according to the whole*, and *Roman Catholic*, then they will probably associate this word with diversity. They envision the catholic church as one that includes people from different ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Such a vision of the catholicity is correct—at least partially. Catholicity, in the full sense of the word, includes not only ethnic diversity but also chronological longevity. There is a common saying that describes the catholic church as the “church of all ages and places.” This is correct: catholicity is about both chronology and geography. The Catechism highlights this as well when it confesses, “I believe that the Son of God out of the whole human race [geography], from the beginning of the world to its end [chronology], gathers defends, and preserves for himself . . . a church chosen to everlasting life” (LD 21, Q&A 54).

Chronological catholicity is often overlooked, but only to our detriment. For starters, it ought to be affirmed because it is clearly revealed. It is true that a quick search of a Bible concordance will list the word *church* only in New Testament passages, beginning with Matthew 16:18. However, as we learned in the previous chapter, the church is the *assembly* of God’s people, and that term is used some ninety times in the Old Testament, beginning already in Exodus 12:6. Added to that, there is often a seamless transition in Scripture between God’s people in the Old Testament and the New Testament. One striking example is found in the book of Hebrews, where the Holy Spirit has just been speaking about God’s people assembled at the foot of Mount Sinai (Heb 12:18–21), and then in several effortless steps strides from Mount Sinai to Mount Zion, then on to the heavenly Jerusalem and the city of the living God, and finally to the church of the firstborn, who is Christ (Heb 12:22). Other examples includes the identification of all believers as the children of Abraham (Rom 4:16–17) and the disciples of Christ as “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16).

Affirming this chronological catholicity of the church counters the rather widespread notion of dispensationalism. Although there are various forms of dispensationalism, the key idea in all of them is that the LORD works in different ways with different people in different times. For example, it is said that while the LORD worked through the generations of the covenant with the Jews in the Old Testament, he no longer takes this approach with Christians in the New Testament. This kind of dispensationalism, in turn, is connected with a rejection of infant baptism, as a sign of the new covenant. However, confessing one church throughout all ages helps us to see the continuity from old to new covenant. As another example, it also helps God's people remember that although the law makes us aware of the full depth of our sinfulness (Rom 7:7), it also provides us with a delightful rule of thankfulness that is sweeter to the soul than honey (Ps 119:103). So, as you can see, chronological catholicity has a deep impact on other areas of theology.

In addition to chronological catholicity, there is also geographical catholicity. As mentioned above, the LORD always had in view a multi-national church. A church of many skin colours and mother tongues is, strictly speaking, not just a post-Pentecost phenomenon. The LORD introduced the geographic catholicity of his church already to Abram, telling him, "In you all the families of earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3). This promise was fulfilled in the international atmosphere of Abraham's own covenant household (Gen 17:27), the rabble that went up with God's people out of Egypt (Exod 12:38), the protection of the sojourners among the Israelites (Lev 19:34), and the foreigners, such as Ruth, who joined God's covenant people (Ruth 1:16). The Old Testament church certainly had a particular kind of catholicity, long before the apostle Paul set out on his missionary journeys.

This multi-national character of the church also fits with the scope of the rule of David's great Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. The Psalms declare that he will rule over all nations (Pss 2:8; 67:3–5; 72:11, 17). Therefore it is no surprise that Jesus the King sent out his apostles to all nations (Matt 28:19–20; Mark 16:15–16). Furthermore, at Pentecost Christ poured out his Spirit, who spurs along this international church-gathering work by

swiftly overcoming the language barriers that had been standing since Babel (Acts 2:5–12). Ever since then, the church of Christ has been expanding into new countries and new language groups, although the ongoing work of groups such as Wycliffe Bible Translators indicates that the church has not yet reached every linguistic corner of the earth. One day, though, the gathering work will be complete, and as the vision of John in Revelation assures us, there will be “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev 7:9). In the meantime the church of Christ is called to press on, fulfilling the Great Commission and bringing the gospel to all nations, both those close by and those far away.

At the same time, catholicity should come to expression within each congregation as well. Catholicity in the local church means that all ages should be involved in church life (chronological catholicity), and if there are people of different backgrounds, or even language groups, every effort should be made to serve each other without any favouritism, for “God shows no partiality” (Rom 2:11). In this way, confessing the catholicity of the church is not limited to having a global vision of Christ’s church-gathering work. We should also embrace catholicity as a local and hands-on activity. On the one hand, we confess that “this holy church is not confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world. Yet, it is joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith” (BC 27). On the other hand, we also affirm that we are to “serve the edification of the brothers and sisters, according to the talents which God has given them as members of the same body” (BC 28). When we conscientiously seek to edify *all* our brothers and sisters—regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, or biography—then we are putting catholicity into action in our own local context.

Before leaving the topic of catholicity, one more thing should be addressed. In the minds of many, the catholic church is, for lack of better terms, a hypothetical union of all Christian denominations. In other words, it is obvious to all that there are many different churches

in the world—upwards of 41,000, according to statistics. Moreover, it is very challenging to merge any two federations into one. It is true, mergers have happened, but it is also true that they are rare. Since it appears to be so difficult to unite churches, people do in their minds what church assemblies cannot seem to do in reality. They mentally combine all the different denominations, or at least all the sincere believers in those denominations, and call this mental construct *the catholic church*. At times they also use such terms as the *universal church* or the *invisible church* to describe the same thing. Simply put, Scripture does not speak about catholicity in this way. The catholic church is being gathered from all different nations, not all different denominations.

The approach of mentally combining all denominations into one invisible church that supersedes them all is called the theory of church pluriformity, not catholicity. Church pluriformity understands all the diverse church groups to be different forms (thus, *pluri-form-ity*) of the one ideal church, which does not concretely exist anywhere on earth but represents what the church should be, if sin were not a factor. Although the theory of pluriformity is tempting for those who are frustrated by the lack of visible unity among Christians, the way forward does not lie in mental constructs. Instead, it lies with a constant, gracious, and patient effort to speak the truth in love, as “we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph 4:15).

## CHRISTIAN AND APOSTOLIC CHURCH

Originally the Apostles’ Creed only had two adjectives describing the church. It read: “I believe a holy, catholic church.” In the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther added a third one: “a holy, catholic, *Christian* church.” He did so because he was concerned that as soon as people heard the phrase “catholic church,” they would immediately associate this with the *Roman Catholic Church*. Therefore he inserted the word “Christian” to distinguish it from “Roman.” Some versions of the Apostles’ Creed have Luther’s addition while others do not.

Regardless of which version your church may use, Luther's concern is valid. Our sinful hearts easily begin to identify the church with a certain influential person or a certain holy place, and the Roman Catholic Church is not the only church that is guilty of this tendency. Too many dynamic preachers have come to regard the church as their own, and too many members of the church have (perhaps unintentionally) stroked their pastor's ego in precisely that direction. Therefore the reminder of the apostle Paul is relevant for everyone: *Christ* bought the church with his own blood (Acts 20:28). Since Christ bought the church, at the purchase price of his own precious blood (1 Pet 1:19), no human being should act as if the church, whether catholic or local, belonged to him. After all, the bride belongs to her husband, Jesus Christ, and to no one else. In this sense, the church is most correctly called "Christian."

Furthermore, the Nicene Creed also speaks of the *apostolic church*. This does not mean that the church belonged to the apostles. Those men did not buy her with their precious blood either. However, the teaching of the apostles, as this is recorded in the inspired Scripture, is part of the foundation of the church. In Ephesians 2:20 the Holy Spirit says that God's household is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone." Also in Revelation 21:14 the twelve foundations of the New Jerusalem are inscribed with "the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb." Thus, in calling the church *apostolic* we are challenged to keep the doctrine of the church, also in the twenty-first century, tied to the teaching of the apostles, rather than trying to innovate and develop a new gospel that would purportedly be more relevant for our time. There is a constant need to reaffirm that there is only one gospel, which has been entrusted to the saints through the apostles once and for all (Jude 3). Any other so-called new gospel is really no gospel at all (Gal 1:6-7) and will lead people to be burdened again by a yoke of slavery (Gal 5:1).

In conclusion, it is quite true that the bride of Christ does not exhibit her God-given attributes as fully and consistently as she should. As members of the church we certainly should be more united, more holy, more catholic, more Christian, and more apostolic. However, let us begin with



what we have received. That the church has any unity, holiness, and catholicity at all is entirely the work of Christ, the Bridegroom, through his Spirit. Moreover, no one should fault Christ for unfinished work when the masterpiece of his redemption is still in progress. It is true, one day the church will be “a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev 21:2), and at that time she will be filled with “splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:27). But that day, which is the Great Wedding Day, has not arrived yet. In the meantime let us all, as members of the church, be diligent in preparing for, and praying for, that great day when the present attributes of the church will be transformed into her eternal perfections.

*Suggested Readings: Ephesians 4:1–6; Revelation 7:9–17*

#### QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Given the vast number of different church groups in the world, how do we think about church unity in the most scriptural manner possible? Do concepts such as the universal church or invisible church have any role to play? Or do they inevitably lead to ecclesiastical pluriformity? (See the explanation in the section above on “Catholicity.”)
2. Give a two- or three-sentence definition of the holiness of the church. Explain how the church’s holiness is connected with her identity as the temple of the Holy Spirit and the bride of Christ.
3. The church at Corinth was plagued by a partisanship that favoured certain leaders over others (1 Cor 1:10–17). Identify some of the root causes of this partisanship, which still afflicts churches today. Also strategize about practical ways to prevent it from developing or deepening.
4. Why and how can the church remain relevant today, even though she is preaching a gospel that was articulated two millennia ago? Passages such as Matthew 5:17–20, Hebrews 13:8, and 1 Peter 1:22–25 may be helpful.

## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Where should unity with other faithful churches begin: with the local congregation or the federation? Give principled reasons for your answer. If both the local congregation and the broader federation have a role to play, how would you describe the respective responsibilities of each? How do we prevent congregations from running ahead of the federations, and vice versa?
2. It is often said that unity is not the same as uniformity—in other words, that there should be room for some diversity among churches within the unity that we have in Christ. That sounds good in theory, but it is challenging in practice. Where do we draw the line? At what point does diversity tip over into disunity? For example, the Westminster Standards speak of a covenant of works in Paradise, but the Three Forms of Unity do not.<sup>2</sup> Is some doctrinal diversity a healthy thing or a hindrance? On a slightly different note, how many liturgical differences can a federation sustain before they begin to chip away at its unity?
3. In this chapter we posed the following question: “What will the church do about the unholy conduct within her midst?” Being careful not to gossip about certain individuals, discuss various unholy trends in your own congregation, or federation, including how to address them in the best possible way.

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2. For more details see *Growing in the Gospel*, Volume 1, Chapter 11.