

## Apostles Creed

I believe in the holy universal church, the communion of saints.

These two phrases should be taken together, holy universal church, communion of saints.

Now in most forms of the creed, the words are holy catholic church, communion of saints. And even the presence of that word make some Christians allergic to the whole Creed. That's a mistake for several reasons. First of all, this creed predates anything that you would recognise as Roman Catholic. It first appears in the year 140, and is in its current form by 250, which is centuries before Rome is the centre of the church, centuries before a pope, before indulgences, worship of Mary, confession to a priest. In fact, the Roman Catholicism you and I know really only becomes the dominant form after the Council of Trent in 1545-63, in response to the Reformation.

Second of all, the word catholic, while it is now strongly connected to the Roman church doesn't belong to them. It simply means universal, from the Greek word *kathos*, meaning whole, entire. Originally, it meant the true church made up of believers who held to the orthodox, biblical faith, wherever those believers are found. But to avoid all the connotations of the word, we substitute the word universal in its place, to avoid confusion and discomfort every time we confess it.

What is it that we are confessing then? We are confessing that we believe the Holy Spirit began at Pentecost, and continues to call people out of the world into an group, a congregation, an assembly called the church. The word translated church is the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means assembly, congregation. The church is the Body of Christ, the flock of God, the household of God and it is a true, set-apart group of called, saved, sealed people throughout the world.

Those who are called out from the world to belong to this assembly are set apart, cleansed and declared holy. That's the meaning of the word *saints* in the second phrase. A saint is a holy one, a set-apart, sanctified one, someone called out from the world to be different, to know and love God. A saint is not a special kind of Christian; whenever Paul writes to the local churches, he addresses them as the saints who are at Ephesus, meaning, all the Christians, all the members of that local church.

This church is holy because it is composed of saints. The church is made up of truly regenerate people. It is not a mixed multitude of wheat and tares, saints and unbelievers, children of God and children of the devil. No, that is what might be said of what gathers in church buildings on a Sunday, but the church is holy. The church has a book with the names of all its members and only its members, and that book is called the Lamb's Book of Life. There is no one who is part of the holy universal church who is not in that book, and there is no one in that book, at least since the day of Pentecost, who does not belong to the holy universal church.

That is why Christians who believe in a pure church, a regenerate church, hold that the local church is supposed to reflect the holy universal church on a miniature scale. In other words, every member of the local church is to have a credible testimony of being a saint, belonging to God. Unbelievers are welcome to attend our services, professing Christians are welcome to join us as we worship God, but the local church is those saints who have a credible testimony of faith, have made that known to the church, and made a covenant together to love and serve God as one body.

We are also confessing that this holy universal church is also a communion. What does that mean? It is a union, held in common. Believers are united to Christ in His death and resurrection, hidden in Christ, with Christ in us. That union with Christ that each individual believer has, is in turn a union with the whole.

This is why the Bible uses several images that stress we are individuals, but yet one, we are distinct, and yet united. The image of a body, where the organs are different, but yet only have life as they function interdependently as one body. The image of a vine, where each branch is different in size, shape and fruitfulness, but only lives as it remains connected to the whole. The image of a Temple, where the stones do not make a whole temple, but each one is needed to hold the others in place, to keep the structure solid. And there are two ordinances, or sacraments that symbolise our common union: baptism, which shows we have died to sin and self and risen to Christ and a new life, and the Lord's Supper in which we, being many partake of the one loaf around a shared table.

Now how will confessing this affect us?

First, it will save us from the sinful pride of thinking that one local church could be the universal church. To believe your church and yours alone has the gospel is to say that Jesus' promise to build His church applies only to your local assembly. Ironically, that kind of cultic view means the group will very soon not be a part of the church, but off on some heretical tangent.

Second, it teaches us the importance of unity. The communion of saints is to be built. Before Paul tells us in Ephesians 4 that there is “one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who *is* above all, and through all, and in you all” he tells us “endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” By our words, by our attitudes, by our service, we should always want God's church to thrive. That's primarily a task for us in the local church. When it comes to the universal church, we can only support the unity we find. In other words, we fellowship with other Christians to the extent that we share the faith. I can fellowship to a limited degree with a Methodist brother, I can find fellowship on certain issues with a Presbyterian brother, more fellowship with a baptistic brother and so forth. It is not our role to forge a world-wide church; it is our role to have a unified local church, and fellowship with other Christians insofar as we find it, and separate from error where we find it.

Third, we're supposed to grow the church externally and internally. The Great Commission tells us to make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things Christ commanded us. We're supposed to witness of the gospel to others, and then teach and train them as they come to faith and join the local church.

Fourth, we're supposed to be different from the world. The holy, universal church is a living organism that convicts the world by its different, separated way of living, thinking, acting, speaking. If we are so at home in the world that the world loves us, then we are not performing our role as salt and light. We are not acting as a called-out assembly. 2 Corinthians 6:14 and following puts it this way:

2 Corinthians 6:14–18

<sup>14</sup> Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? <sup>15</sup> And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? <sup>16</sup> And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “*I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people.*” <sup>17</sup> Therefore “*Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you.*” <sup>18</sup> “*I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty.*”

The Forgiveness of Sins

Most of the Apostles' Creed defines who the Father is, who the Son is and His work, and who the Spirit is. Only in the last paragraph does it come to the application of all this, how this comes to us and our time: the holy universal church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins.

What is interesting in the creed is that it mentions the church before it mentions the forgiveness of sins. In our age, we always think of personal salvation, individual salvation first, and then the church, but the framers of this creed seemed to think of the church first and then salvation. After all, it is the church that preaches, that makes disciples, that baptises, and so it is a helpful reminder that there is a corporate identity bigger than individual salvation.

Having said that, there would be no church without the forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness of sins is at the heart of salvation and the gospel. The gospel is not about political revolution, it is not about self-improvement, poverty alleviation, social justice, environmental and ecological protection, economic reform. At the centre of the Good News is a simple truth: God can, and will, and does, forgive sins. Salvation is about your sins being forgiven.

The forgiveness of sins has two terms we must understand: sins and forgiveness. So to begin with, what is sin? If you get this wrong, you will certainly misunderstand what forgiveness is. Let's eliminate what sin is not. Sin is not mistakes. Being mistaken is part of being a limited, finite being. You can mistake one thing for another, mistake one sound for another, absent-mindedly leave something. Mistakes, though, are not evil, and mistakes don't typically involve the damage of another person.

Sin is also not personality. We all have different temperaments, leanings, likes and dislikes, extroversion or introversion. Up to a point, this is just difference; beyond a certain point it is sin manifesting or taking advantage of that personality.

If sin was just mistakes or just the variety of our personalities, then Christ did not need to die on a cross. If there is one thing an Israelite knew when he slit the throat of that animal, and saw it groan and bleed to death, it was this: this animal died because I sinned, not because I accidentally made a mistake.

So what then is sin? The Bible uses a host of words to give us a 360 degree view of what it is. Trespass tells us that God sets boundaries for life, and we deliberately go over them. Transgression similarly means we know God has stopped us, but we go across. Iniquity is related to the word inequity: instead of being fair and just and equitable, we do the opposite, we choose unfairly in our own favour. The word sin means to miss the mark, to fail to do what was required.

The important thing to understand is that sin is deliberate, wilful choice to go against the will of a Person. That Person is ultimately always God. God has a perfect will, and sin violates that will, breaks through that boundary, says no, goes its own way, gets warped and twisted. And so sin is always against God. It is His image-bearers acting unlike Him, mirrors of God now cracked and deformed, now not only displeasing God, but taking the glory of God and smearing it with filth, graffitising His name with curses. When you sin, you have done something to God, and you owe Him.

That's really bad news because God is Almighty, God is infinite, God's standards are perfect, God cannot be bought off or bribed, and God doesn't change. He doesn't have moods that shift, nor does He forget. So what then is forgiveness of sins? Here are three definitions.

**Forgiveness is not a feeling, it is a release.** Forgiveness does not have to do with moods and feelings, as it does to do with debt, with what is owed. When God forgives you, His affections toward you do change, from anger to delight, but that is the fruit, not the root of forgiveness. The root of forgiveness is that God cancels your debt, He tears up your account. He releases your debt.

Of course, when anyone cancels a debt, it is costly to someone. God freely forgives the debt, but someone had to pay. God cancels your debt not because He is just going to take the hit. God cancels your debt because someone else paid in your place, suffered as a sinner, experienced wrath reserved for you. When you forgive, it is not about feeling better. It is firstly about releasing the debt, giving up your right to punish another in your heart, giving up all desire for revenge.

**Forgiveness is not forgetting, it is refusing to remember.** Some believe they have forgiven when they are no longer thinking about the injury. But there are many reasons why you might be thinking less about it – busyness, distractedness, good things. But let something remind you of the injury, and all the anger, bitterness and rage are still there. That's not forgiveness. Forgetting is passive, you forget by accident, by weakness, by old age. God does not forget our sins. God being omniscient cannot forget anything. Instead, what God says in Jer 31:34, “Their sins will I remember no more”. God no longer calls those sins to mind when thinking about them. When God forgives you in Christ, your sins are not what He sees when He considers you. There are things that have been done to you that you will never forget, but you can choose to not remember.

**Forgiveness is not fleeting, it is repetitive.** Forgiveness, most often is not something you can do in a fleeting, passing way. You have to repeat it, not only because of repeat transgressions, but because you are tempted to take back your forgiveness of someone already forgiven. God's forgiveness of us is not fleeting and then He reverts back to condemnation. He does not forgive and then decide that enough is enough. Colossians 2:13–15 (NKJV)

<sup>13</sup> And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, <sup>14</sup> having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. <sup>15</sup> Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.

His forgiveness is past, present, and future, and His forgiveness is ongoing. As long as our High Priest stands in Heaven, our forgiveness is ongoing, repetitive, continual, perpetual.

Not a feeling, a release.

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Not fleeting, it is repetitive.