



What Christians Believe

The Apostles Creed

(11) I Believe in the Holy Universal Church

Acts 2:42-47

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Introduction – building or people?

Good morning to all my brothers and sisters at Manor Park Church and to everyone else listening in today. Some years ago I asked the young people in our church to draw a picture of the word “church.” One young person drew a church building *and* a group of people, crossed out the building and placed a tick across the crowd of people. Another just wrote “Church is people!”

Both of them were spot on, because the church, according to the New Testament, is people. But there is confusion about “church” today. People are asking, “What is the Church – an organisation, a building?” “Who belongs to it?” and “Do you have to belong to a church to be a Christian?” The present pandemic has brought those questions to the surface. So there could hardly be a more relevant topic before us, today, Sunday 26th July 2020.

We are making our way through the Apostle's Creed, in this series of teaching or doctrine sermons, and today we've arrived at: *“I believe in the holy universal church, the communion of saints.”*

“Saints” may be a confusing word. In the Bible the word “saint” is used to describe every Christian. Not just a few special Christians. “To the saints at Ephesus” writes Paul (Ephesians 1:1), referring to the whole church. “*Communion of saints*” may also be a strange term today, but all it means is “sharing with,” “fellowship with”, “being part of a loving community,” not Eucharist or breaking of bread.

So when a Christian affirms, *“I believe in the holy Universal Church, the communion of saints”*, just what are they affirming? Three Bs:

- I **believe** in the Universal Church of Jesus Christ
- I **belong** to a local church, and
- I **bow** to my local church

(1) I BELIEVE in the Universal Church of Jesus Christ

First, then, a Christian believes in this vast community of people, stretching across time and space, who all together are called “the Church”, the Universal Church. The word “Church” is used in two

ways in the New Testament. Sometimes it is used, small c, to describe local congregations, like Manor Park Church, Worcester, “To the church of God in Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:2), for example. But the word “church” is also used, capital C, to describe this whole universal church: “*Jesus Christ “is the head of the body, The Church” (Colossians 1:18)*. Paul’s talking about the universal church that stretches across time and space and includes everyone who has been called by God, everyone who has responded to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christians believe in this One Church which crosses all divisions and time. When my eldest son left home to live in Sunderland for a few years, someone said to me, “Isn’t it good to belong to a global family which has members in every city of the world” - perhaps she should have said, “almost” every city of the world! But she was right! We were able to phone up some members of that global family—total strangers to us!—and ask them if they would look after our far away son, and they did!

What a wonderful thing to belong to this worldwide and numberless family of brothers and sisters from every nation, tribe, people or language spanning from Adam to the last person to believe before Jesus returns! Billions upon billions!

I was sad to read this month that Minkeye Enquedi died at the ripe old age of 90. I have read so much about him! Along with other members of the fearsome Auca Indian tribe in Ecuador Minkeye killed five missionaries January 1965 but then he became a Christian himself! Minkeye is a member of this One Universal Global Church of Jesus Christ. He’s my brother in Christ, and I’m really looking forward to meeting him one day!

Still talking about this big church, we believe Jesus Christ is the head of this Universal Church. The pope is not the head of the Church, the Archbishop of Canterbury is not the head of this Universal Church, nor is the Queen. Jesus Christ, and he alone is the head of the church, which he purchased with his blood “*Christ is the Head of the church (Ephesians 5:22)*).

And we acknowledge the headship of Jesus Christ, by believing his Word, the Bible, preaching his wonderful Gospel and obeying his good commands.

One last thing about this Global capital C church: the Creed calls it the Holy universal church. We believe that this Universal Church is called to be holy. The English word “church” comes from the Greek word “ekklesia” which, is made up of two words: ek—out of, and kaleo—called. The church is composed of people who have been “called out of the world” by God’s grace to become his holy people. There is the world over there and there is the church of Jesus Christ over here, and the two are very different. “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (1 Peter 2:9) The church is called to live holy and distinctive lives. Our thinking is to be different from the world, our life-style will be different and our destination is different — so much so that the apostle Peter called believers “strangers” or “aliens”: “To God’s elect (God’s chosen ones) strangers in the world.” (1 Peter 1:1)

If you have ever lived in a culture different from your own, you will know how this feels—you never quite feel at home. Perhaps you are a new Christian and you are beginning to feel this more with every passing day—you're drifting away from your old friends—you find you have less and less in common with them. That's normal, for you have been called by God's grace to be part of this new and different and HOLY people called the church.

*This world is not my home, I'm just a passing through
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue;
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door,
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.*

So when a Christian says “I believe in the Church,” the first thing they are saying is that I believe in the one universal church, which stretches right across the world today, backwards in time and forward in time, to encompass everyone whom God has called to himself from every country and nation and tribe and people.

(2) I BELONG to a local Church

But more than that, when we affirm this line of the Creed we say, this is our second B, “I *belong* to the local church.” I don't only believe in the global church, capital C, I believe that it is made up of thousands of smaller congregations all over the world.

Some years ago, a friend of mine gave me a letter he had received in the post, which also had some money in it. It came from an anonymous Christian couple in his city who wanted to give away some of their money, each month, but because they did not belong to a local church, they just randomly found an address in their area, every month, wrote that person a lovely letter along with a gift!

They did not believe in the local church! I don't know why, perhaps they had been hurt in the past or perhaps they had never really been taught well. The Christianity of the Bible is based around local churches, “To the seven churches in the province of Asia”, writes John in Revelation 1:4, “we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.” writes Paul in 2 Corinthians 8.

Christians believe in local churches! And it does not matter where they meet. We here at Manor Park Church meet in a school, our daughter church meets in a community centre. A church is a local group of believers who meet in a school, or a hall, in the open air, or in a theatre, and especially, in homes—that's where all New Testament churches met!

And if we believe in local churches we should also belong to one! All the Christians in the New Testament belonged to local churches, Eudias, Syntyche, Phoebe, Rufus, Junias all of them.

Suppose someone told you they were a footballer. You begin to quiz them, Who do you play for? When does your team practice together? What was the goal score in your last game? and so on. But

this guy says to you, “I don’t belong to a team, I just kick a ball against a wall all on my own!” What would we say? We’d all say that the young man was in error, because football by definition is a team game! And so it is with Christianity. It is just impossible to be a Christian and not belong to a local church. Do you my listener, belong to a local church? If not there is either something deficient in your thinking, your doctrine or something lacking in your obedience. And I would urge you to connect to a Bible-believing church as soon as you can. We need one another, to encourage, comfort, teach, rebuke, strengthen pray for and stir each other up to love and good works, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another and all the more as you see the day approaching. “ (Hebrews 10:25)

So when we say “I believe in the church”, we mean, Big church, capital C church, “I Believe in the one universal church, spreading across time and space”, and we mean, Little church, “I belong to one of the local expressions of that vast numberless church.”

We Believe, We Belong, and third B We Bow.

(3) I bow to my local church

Bow is not quite the best word but I couldn’t find a word that began with the letter B, that means submit to, or agree with, or live in harmony with. This last point may come across strong to some ears, but we live in a consumer society, where people sometimes treat local churches like they treat supermarkets: if they don’t like the products they move on. But that is not a Christian attitude to the church.

It is all too common, sadly, to find a believer who attends a church for a few years, then either falls out with someone or they discover that the church doesn’t believe exactly what they believe, or they discover the church is not perfect and so they leave.

What’s wrong in their thinking? Well they have absorbed the individualistic philosophical spirit of our western culture age, which comes from the so-called Enlightenment, rather than absorbing the sweet humility and submissiveness of Jesus Christ: “submit to one another out of reverence to Christ.” (Ephesians 5:21) and “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority.” (Hebrews 13:17) Unpopular words in our culture, aren’t they? But then the church is different from the world. Beautifully different from the world: we submit to Christ our loving head, we submit to our leaders and we submit to one another.

So when a Christian says “I believe in the Holy Universal Church and the communion of saints” they *Believe* in the immense sea of people from every tribe and nation with Jesus Christ at its head, they *Belong* to a local expression of that church, and in that local church and they are submissive and agreeable, they *Bow* to other members out of reverence for Christ. As we close I want to leave you with three very practical church guidelines for this strange season in which we live:

Maintain the discipline of meeting every Sunday morning, 10:30 in front of the TV. Don’t get out of

that good habit. Meet with one another in home groups. Even though zoom is not as good as real life—it is far better than nothing. If you don't like being seen, just turn your camera off and listen in. Meet up with other Christians for fellowship in back gardens, in public spaces as the law now permits! I have set up a gazebo in my back garden as my new meeting place! Don't wait for others to take the lead, you take the initiative and meet up, and do so while the summer weather permits, before autumn arrives or winter sets in. And let us all pray that God will give wisdom and insight to the scientists who are working on a vaccine, so that they will find one very soon.

How do you join the church, someone asks: "Repent and be baptised..." "those who accepted his message were baptised and about 3000 were added to their number that day" (Acts 2).