

What Is the Church?

Robert M. Bowman Jr.

What is the church? We often think of sound doctrine as focused on God, Christ, and salvation. While these are essential matters in Christian doctrine, we also need to have a good understanding of the church in relation those essentials. Briefly, the church is the community of people formed by the one, true, living God into a saving relationship with him through his Son, Jesus Christ. Its charter or standard is the revelation of God in Scripture. Its purpose is to love, honor, worship, and obey the triune God, and to reflect his character in the actions of its people. Its basis for existence is the salvation accomplished by Christ and administered or applied to them by the Holy Spirit. Its future is eternal glory in which we will be like Christ in the presence of God.

This church is classically described in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds as "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." In this article, we will unpack this description.

The Church Is "One"

As *one*, the church is a historical, organic unity (1 Cor. 12:12–13; Eph. 2:14–16; 4:4–6, 13–16). It was founded by Christ in the first century, and Christ will return for the same church at his second coming. The church has and will continue to suffer divisions, apostasies, heresies, and scandals, and in some cases what were true churches have become no churches at all (Acts 20:28–30; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 11:18–19; 2 Cor. 11:4, 13–15; Gal. 1:6–8; 1 Tim. 4:1; Titus 3:10–11; 1 John 2:19; 3 John 1:9–10; Jude 17–19; Rev. 2–3). However, there will always be a true church worshiping the true God and keeping, although imperfectly, the true faith, until Christ's return (Matt. 16:18; 28:18–20; Eph. 3:21; 4:11–16; Jude 4).

The Church Is "Holy"

The church is *holy*, then, not in the sense that it is perfect or even admirable in character, but in the sense that it is consecrated to God and is therefore a unique institution through which God is working to accomplish his redemptive purpose in history. As such, those who identify themselves as its members individually have the promise of all spiritual blessings in Christ if they believe (Eph. 1:3–14) and severe judgment if they disbelieve (Heb. 2:1–3; 4:1–2; 10:29–31).

The Church is "Catholic"

The church is also described as *catholic*. The Greek word *katholikos* means "universal," and does not refer distinctly to the Roman Catholic Church. The true church includes the association of all true believers in Jesus Christ throughout the world (see 1 Cor. 1:2). In a sense, this is really nothing more than another way of stating that the church is one.

The doctrine of catholicity cuts two ways. On the one hand, since the true church includes all Christian churches, no denominational institution or association of churches today can claim exclusively to be the only true church—a claim traditionally made by both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. Although these churches have always qualified their claim to admit the existence of Christians outside their walls, the claim is still at odds with a biblical concept of catholicity. On the other hand, the Roman and Eastern churches are right in their insistence that the church's oneness *ought* to be reflected institutionally. Protestants, in their zeal to defend the integrity of their churches, have often tried to deny this. Denominational divisions are often symptomatic of sin in the church. We may disagree as to where the fault lies, but we ought to be

able to admit this much. Making the local congregation completely autonomous and eschewing all denominations does not solve this problem, either; all that results is that each congregation becomes its own denomination. My point is not that we should abandon all denominational divisions tomorrow, but that we should work to overcome unnecessary divisions in the church.

The Church Is “Apostolic”

Finally, the church is *apostolic*. This has been held to mean one of two things. In the view of Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglicans (Episcopalians), it means that the church was established as an institution with the apostles commissioning bishops, who in turn commissioned the next generation of bishops, and so on down through the centuries. In this view, only churches that have bishops who can trace their ordination back to the apostles are part of the “apostolic” church. This doctrine is commonly called apostolic succession, although of course bishops are not regarded as apostles. In the view of Protestants, the church is apostolic if it upholds the doctrine of the apostles as preserved in Scripture. This means that churches with bishops are apostolic only if they adhere to the doctrine of the apostles (some have not), while churches without bishops are apostolic if they adhere to apostolic doctrine (some do, some don’t).

It is not within my purpose here to argue this matter out. Obviously, the position I have taken as to the meaning of catholicity commits me also to the Protestant view of apostolicity. However, I do not see the apostolic succession view as all wrong. In keeping with the doctrine of the unity of the church, I would agree that there must be some historical linkage between modern-day churches and the apostles. There must be some continuity by which the same faith is transmitted from one generation to the next. Any specific church or denomination must be able to show that its faith has its roots in the church’s historical development from the apostles to the present. The church as a community (if not an institution) is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets—the spokespersons of Christ in its first generation (Eph. 2:20). One may (and must, if he or she is a Protestant) maintain that this development has at times necessitated reformation, confrontation of church officials, and even separation from those segments of the church that have abandoned the faith for liberalism or other apostate doctrines. But no group can turn its back on the church, abandon the faith upheld by the church throughout the centuries, and seek to be “apostolic” by adopting a novel reinterpretation of the apostles’ teaching in the New Testament. Such groups are not apostolic, because to be apostolic means not only to uphold apostolic doctrine but also to be part of the church founded by the apostles. This, as I see it, is the truth in the non-Protestant understanding of apostolicity. The difference is that I maintain, along with Protestants generally, that this historical apostolicity need not be tied exclusively to a succession of bishops.

Conclusion

The doctrine of the church is an area of much greater disagreement among Christians than perhaps any other. Yet its importance is very great. Wrong views of the church can, in the worst cases, keep people from salvation. Some people think so little of the church that they imagine they can safely abandon the historic faith of the church and reinvent Christianity. Others think so highly of the church that they imagine that mere membership in its ranks or participation in its activities will save them. Both errors are fatal spiritually. Less extreme errors may not keep people from being saved, but they can keep them from experiencing a full, robust Christian life by separating them from whole segments of the church.

Adapted from Robert M. Bowman Jr., *Orthodoxy and Heresy: A Biblical Guide to Doctrinal Discernment* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 91–94.