The Church – set apart for unity and service

Text: Ephesians 4:1-16

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**Scriptures:** Ephesians 4:1-16

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 84, 87b, 391, 295, 429, 525

Series: Heidelberg Catechism LD 21 Q&A 54

Theme: The church is a united body of diversely gifted followers of Christ who are called to be holy.

Proposition: As the church, we are called by our Lord to strive for holiness, unity and service together in the Lord

**Introduction**

We’ve said the Apostles Creed together today as we do regularly together in corporate worship. This creed is a good summary of what we believe; a helpful pattern of sound words. Today we are going to look more closely at three of these words; ‘holy’, ‘catholic’ and ‘church', which we say in the creed “*I believe a Holy Catholic Church*”.

HCLD21Q54 asks “what do you believe concerning the “holy catholic church”? We’re going to answer this question from our text in Ephesians 4:1-16 under these three headings:

* The Church walks worthy in the Lord
* The Church is united in One faith
* The Church serves Christ together
1. **The Church Walks Worthy in the Lord (1-2)**

Paul writes to the Ephesian believers: v4.1 “*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received*”. The word “walk” does not refer to physical motion, but rather it describes an ongoing pattern of life. Paul is speaking to church/es in Ephesus exhorting them to live in a way which is worthy, suitable, fitting for their calling to follow Christ. Ephesus in western Asia Minor (now Turkey) was a multi-cultural, multi-religious commercial centre where many different lifestyles were acceptable. In today’s terms it was an LGBTI kind-of a society. Many 21st kiwis would feel at home there.

In his letter, Paul is saying, “don’t go with the cultural flow around you, but instead there’s a particular lifestyle for you- in line with your calling in Christ”. The church is to be visibly different from the world around her. As the Body of Christ - We are called to ‘dance to a different tune’.

When we confess the words: “I believe a **Holy** Catholic Church” we are saying two different, but related things with the word ‘holy’:

1. Firstly, that as the church, God has declared us to be set apart – holy: “*But you* ***are*** *a chosen race, a royal priesthood,* ***a holy nation***” (1 Pet 2:9a) This is a work of God’s sovereign electing grace.
2. Secondly that we are to live daily in a way which is consistent with our calling: *“Like the Holy One who called you,* ***be holy yourselves*** *also in all your behaviour; because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy.*" (1 Pet 1:15-16)

The Ephesian believers were called holy and were to live holy. But there was a big problem in the Ephesian church: the Christians themselves. They were not living holy lives – are we? Imagine if we could listen into all one another’s phone calls, read all the texts and emails which are sent/received, review all the websites visited, eavesdrop into our conversations, listen to each other’s music and watch T.V./videos together. Would we see each other always living a life worthy of our calling?

There is only one way to walk worthy of our calling. That is to follow Jesus. To ‘dance entirely to His tune’. He will tell you from God’s Word that you are naturally unholy e.g. “*There is no one righteous, not even one*” (Rom 3:10). He will tell you that God declares you to be holy because the perfect holiness, the true righteousness of Christ has been credited to you, as though it were your own. He will tell you that in Him you can and must grow in holiness.

* There is no holiness apart from Christ, only self-righteous moralism.
* There is no holiness apart from the indwelling Holy Spirit, only repeated frustrated attempts to “be a good person”.
* There is no holiness apart from the grace of God; only depressing, debilitating, guilt.

What then, does holiness look like in the Holy Church of the Lord Jesus Christ? The Apostle Paul gives some details, for example: **“***Be completely humble and gentle, be patient, bearing with one another in love”* (Eph 4:2). Practical holiness may be seen in the pattern of our mutual relationships with one another. In brief (although much more could be said!):

* **Humility** – lowliness of mind. Removal of pride “*with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves*” (Phil 2:3a).
* **Gentleness** – kind courtesy. Absence of anger. “*Let your gentle spirit be known to all men*”.
* **Patience** – long-suffering. Not quick to react to others. **“***For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favour with God*” (1 Pet 2:20)
* **Tolerance/forbearance** toward one another in love This is not the ‘politically correct’ postmodern tolerance of today which says, “anything goes”, but rather patient endurance.

Brother and Sister, by God’s grace you are part of the Holy Church. Are you striving for holiness in your life? Do you desire to walk worthy of your calling?

1. **The Church is United in One Faith (3-6)**

A word which causes much confusion in the Apostle’s Creed is ‘catholic’. This term is so closely associated in the minds of many with the Roman Catholic Church - which sees herself as being the universal church. We are not confessing anything about the organisation headed up by the Pope in Rome when we say: “*I believe a Holy* ***Catholic*** *Church*”. “Catholic” means “universal, encompassing the whole”. There are three aspects to this term: in space, time and truth.

1. **In space, geographically** – the church is gathered from all tribes, tongues and nations all over this earth. This is a direct fulfilment of the Lord’s covenant promise made to Abraham: Gen 12:3: “*And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed*". The catechism expresses it this way ‘out of the entire human race’.
2. **In time, temporally** – all of time (not just New Testament saints, but Old Testament ones also). God’s Church did not begin at Pentecost (Acts 2). The church is not exclusively a New Testament concept. In Deuteronomy 4:10 we read of the meeting of the ‘qahal’ congregation at Mt Sinai. The Greek word for church is ‘ecclesia’ which translates the Hebrew word ‘qahal’. Both words have the verbal root “to call”. Stephen refers back to Moses and the assembly of Israel at Mt Sinai: "*This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness*” (Acts 7:38). The church started when God began gathering people to Himself as our catechism states (HCLD21) “*from the beginning of the world*”. Before Pentecost, Before Mt Sinai.
3. **In truth, doctrinal** – The true church of Christ hears the voice of her Good Shepherd. She does not listen to any other teaching. "*My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me*” (John 10:27). The Apostle Paul writes to the Ephesian church about this ‘catholicity’ in truth as follows: **“***There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope when you were called-- one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all*” (Eph 4:4-6).

The unity of the church comes from following One Lord. The Word of the Lord is the source of our unity in the truth. We agree that the Word of God is given by Him -breathed out by Him, to be our only rule of faith and life.The unity of the church comes from one faith. Our common faith is grounded entirely in God’s revelation **by Scripture alone** – Sola Scriptura. Our salvation comes not by what we do, but by **By faith alone** – Sola fide. Our salvation is a gift from God, not because of any good in us **By grace alone** – Sola gratia. Salvation comes only through Christ Jesus, Son of God **In Christ alone** – Sola Christus. We recognise that this is all God’s work – To Him alone be the glory alone – **Soli Deo Gloria.**

What we believe as a church is sometimes a little confusingly called “the Reformed Faith”. The faith we confess is the faith of the Bible – true faith. However, when other Christians hear us using the term ‘Reformed faith’ it usually gives the impression that we are saying that we, and only we, are the true church – because we are called ‘Reformed’. It is for this reason that I try to avoid using the phrase ‘our Reformed faith’.

You may have grown up here and think just that our Reformed churches are just like any others. Don’t discard the treasure of your heritage! Search the Scriptures carefully and you will find that what is taught in this Christian church is the true Faith of the Bible. Beware the winds of doctrine which blow around the church!

How should the unity we have work out in practice? The Apostle Paul speaks of practical unity in our calling together *“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*” (Eph 4:1-3). We are to work diligently to maintain peaceful unity in this body – striving to make peace with one another, striving to be of one mind. This is an ongoing work for us all in the church; especially in light of developments which occur over time in the life of a local church e.g. changes in minister, changes in serving office bearers, members of committees, new families arriving, new challenges arising in church ministries, new requirements for a unifying vision for the church.

Are you striving for unity in the church for Christ’s sake? To do so is in keeping with confessing a holy, **catholic**, church. It is part of how we serve together, which brings us to our 3rd point.

1. **The Church Serves Christ Together**

The divine covenant promise: “*I will be their God and they will be my people*” creates a human community – the church. When we confess“*I believe a Holy Catholic* ***Church***” we speak of the gathering of individual Christians, who are called together in one body. Each member has a vital part to play, according to gifts which our Lord has given to them. This what Paul says in v8 as he quotes from Ps 68:18:*Therefore it says, “When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, And He gave gifts to men”.* Psalm 68 pictures God’s victorious ascension to dwelling place on Zion, compelling His enemies to submit to Him and bring Him tribute which He then graciously distributes to His people.

In the New Testament this image is applied to Christ’s victorious ascension into heaven. Jesus the Ascended Victor gives gifts to the church in order to equip her for service in Kingdom. (Note: this passage does not teach that Christ descended into hell.)

Paul writes of Christ’s gifts to the church: “*He gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ*”. (Eph 4:11-13). The Lord builds His church through the ‘agency’ of the ministry of pastors and teachers who employ God’s word to prepare the church for works of service. Ordained ministers are not so much those who are active in all the areas of church ministry, but rather those are used by the Lord to equip others for works of ministry.

The work of building the body of Christ is a work for all church members, who speak the truth of God’s word to one another in love, in order that the church may grow up to be like Christ, her Head. In Christ all parts of the body are joined together enabling growth as each part does its work. We are to serve Christ together as a church, this is how he grows the church to full maturity. No member is to be a part of the church without some service to perform.

When ministry student James Hyslop was here last summer, he led a series of studies working through a book by Colin Marshall and Tony Payne entitled “The Trellis and the Vine’’. If you look on the back of our church bulletin, you’ll see a roster for creche, greeters, coffee/tea, sound desk and music. These are important works of service in this local church. However, these all largely relate to what Marshall and Payne refer to as ‘Trellis’ work in their book. There is a certainly a need in the established church to have and to maintain ‘structures’: committees, programs, activities, working bees. We have been blessed with a new and large facility here – it does necessarily take a fair amount of “trellis” work to maintain. There are keys, insurance, power, security, cleaning, rosters all to be looked after.

Trellis work is necessary for the building of the church, but it does have a tendency to become more of a focus than what Marshall and Payne refer to as “vine-work” in the life of an established church. Vine-work is the reason that the trellis is there! Without the vine, there is no fruit! Vine-work is the making of disciples; that is the leading of people to and in Christ, teaching and modelling for them what it looks like to follow Him. The key importance of vine-work is emphasised in our church mission statement: “*To make and equip disciples of Jesus, our Saviour who joyfully serve and glorify God*”.

Marshall and Payne point out in their book that ‘trellis work tends to take over from vine-work’. On page 9 they write “*perhaps it is because trellis work is easier and less personally threatening. Vine work is personal and requires much prayer. It requires us to depend on God, and to open our mouths and speak God’s word in some way to another person. By nature (by sinful nature, that is) we shy away from this. What would you rather do: go to a church working bee and sweep up some leaves, or share the gospel with your neighbour over the back fence?”*

Which is easier: to have a business meeting about the state of the carpark, or to have a difficult personal meeting where you need to rebuke a friend about his sinful behaviour? Trellis work also often looks more impressive than vine work. It’s more visible and structural. When Paul writes about the church body building itself up in love, surely, he was talking about the vine, not the trellis which is there to support the fruit-producing vine.

Our ultimate goal is not to be the building and maintaining of an impressive trellis but being used of the Lord to produce much fruit for His Kingdom. Jesus spoke about this in John 15:5: "*I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing*”.

Brothers and Sisters, we are part of the Holy Catholic Church by the grace of God. We are called to be holy. We are called to be united. We are called to serve Christ together – yes working on the trellis, but also, and ultimately more importantly, on the vine so that God will be pleased to cause much fruit to be borne. Let’s do this in Christ’s strength because we love the Lord and His church!

Amen.