**The Holy Catholic Christian Church**

Text: Matthew 16:18

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** 1 Kings 19:9-18; Matthew 16:13-20

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 145, 176, ‘Grace’, 393, 319, 180

**Series:** Doctrine of the Church - Belgic Confession (Article 27)

**Occasion:** Public Profession of faith

**Theme:** There is one catholic or universal true church which is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world and has existed from the beginning of the human race and will continue forever as a holy congregation of true Christian believers who confess Christ, the Son of the living God.

**Proposition:** God has preserved the true church and He will always do so.

**Introduction**

What is the church? Many people today might answer that question in some of these ways:

* With a dictionary definition ‘*A church is a building used for public Christian worship*’ – this can be illustrated with two hands ‘here’s the church, there’s the steeple, open the doors, there are the people’.
* With a contemporary comment on an ‘*out of date, largely irrelevant and sometimes obstructive institution’ – ‘A church is a relic of the past – surely we’ve moved on from religious superstitions haven’t we?*’.
* With a reference to the unholy lives of Christians – ‘*churches are places filled with self-righteous hypocrites and some who abuse children*’.
* With a description of presumed perfection – ‘*A church is where really good people go – I would never fit in there*’.

Over the next six sermons in this preaching series, which focusses on what the Bible reveals about the church, we’ll be looking at different passages of Scripture with the structure of these messages taken from the Belgic Confession, articles 27-32. The Belgic Confession originated in Belgium and was written in 1561, mainly by Guido de Brès, who was a preacher in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands. He died as a martyr for his Christian faith in 1567. This confession is one of the seven historical documents which we believe, as a Reformed church, faithfully summarise many aspects of the teaching of the Bible.

Creeds and confessions are useful in a number of ways (taken from RCNZ website).

* They assist in answering the question, “What do the Reformed churches believe or teach?”
* They provide a common standard, uniting the members of our churches in a common confession.
* They also provide a standard for discipline for all the office-bearers in the church, and enable the church to guard its members from false doctrine and to maintain the purity of the truth taught by its members (2 Timothy 1:13,14).

Unlike the usual approach to preaching from this pulpit, where the truth of a particular passage in the Bible is expounded, this series takes a topical approach, where a subject is explored from a range of texts and concepts in the Bible. Our title and topic today are taken from Belgic Confession Article 27 which we heard earlier in this service. We’re going to look at the Holy Catholic Christian church under three headings:

1. The confession of the church
2. The catholicity of the church
3. The holiness of the church
4. **The confession of the church**

The name ‘Jesus’ means different things to different people. For some this is a swear word, others use it as an exclamation without meaning to refer to a person. Others think ofJesus as ‘a good moral teacher’, ‘a mythical figure’, or perhaps ‘a 1st century political activist’. Who do **you** say that Jesus is?

In his public ministry, Jesus was visible to many people as he moved from place to place, performing many miracles and speaking with a powerful authority the likes of which the people had never heard before (Matt 7:29). It is clear from the disciples’ reply to the question Christ asked him “*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*” (Matt 16:15) that people in the crowds had different ideas about who Jesus was. ‘Son of Man’ is the title Jesus most frequently used to refer to himself, emphasizing his humanity. Some popular suggestions back then were: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the other Old Testament prophets. This is not so different from today where people have different ideas about who Jesus is.

In Matthew 16:16 we read how Jesus then asked his disciples a direct and personal question “*Who do* ***you*** *say that I am?*” Their next reply comes from Peter who responded both for himself and for the other disciples saying, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*” (Matt 16:16). ‘Christ’ means ‘anointed one’, or ‘Messiah’; the prophet, priest and king promised through the Old Testament who would bring blessing, restoration and life to the people loved by God and chosen to be His own. To declare that Jesus is the Christ is a huge statement, made long ago by Peter and made today about 2000 years later in a public profession of faith.

Jesus responds to Peter’s public profession by saying: "*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.* (Matt 16:17). In order for a person to recognise Jesus for who He really is, God the Father must supernaturally reveal this to them. This is why people like you and me cannot, by ourselves, convince other people that Jesus is actually who He really is. Only God can open their eyes to see the truth.

However, God is pleased to use the witness, testimony and proclamation of those who know Jesus to reveal Him to others. This is exactly what the disciples went on to do for many people after Jesus ascended into heaven (e.g. Acts 1:8; 2:41). God has been using the testimony of Christians to reveal who Christ is to many people for the past 2000 years.

On behalf of the other disciples as their representative and for himself, Peter made a key confession about who Jesus is: “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*” (Matt 16:16). This confession from a believing heart is the confirmation that a person has been saved from their sins: “*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*” (Rom 10:9); “*Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God*” (1 John 4:15).

After confirming that His Heavenly Father had revealed His true identity to Peter, Jesus said these words: *And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*” (Matt 16:18). There are widely different interpretations of these words which speak about the church, for example:

1. The ‘rock’ is a reference by Christ to Himself. This view has been supported by noting that the Greek for Peter is different from the word for rock. However Jesus would have spoken these words in Aramaic where the same word is used for Peter’s name and for the rock. Also, it’s clear that Christ is the Builder of the church in this declaration, not the foundation in these words (cf. Eph 2:20).
2. The ‘rock’ is a reference to Peter himself and so in making this prophesy, Jesus confers on Peter a place of primary honour and authority over the whole church. This interpretation led to the idea that the primary leadership in the church flowed down from Peter himself in what is called the ‘apostolic succession’. This concept then developed into the supposed supreme authority of popes in the Roman Catholic church and of bishops in the Eastern Orthodox church and other groups (e.g. Anglican, and some Lutheran). However, it is clear from the book of Acts that authority in the early New Testament church was shared between the Apostles (e.g. James in Acts 15:13ff) and that Peter was not in a higher position than the others (e.g. with Paul in Gal 2:11). In John 20:23 we see the authority given to Peter in Matthew 16:19 being given to the other disciples.
3. The ‘rock’ is a reference to Peter as a representative of everyone who makes a true heartfelt ‘apostolic’ confession about Jesus “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*” (Matt 16:16). Christ is then promising that His church will be built on all those who confess Him to be who He is. This fits the context of Christ’s words in Matthew 16:13-18 and is in harmony with the church as described in Scripture after Christ’s resurrection (e.g. Eph 2:20; 1 Peter 2:5).

The church then is not an institution led by a single human being who has been given supreme authority over her. She is a group of people who share together in common confession that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God and that in Him alone they have salvation from their sins and stand before God accepted, loved and blessed as His children

Today, we could say that the person who publicly professed faith stood in the line of ‘apostolic succession’ from Peter in her public profession of faith as she said: “*I fully realize that I am a sinner unworthy of any of God’s grace or mercy. I am therefore humbled before God, and repent of my sins, trusting that through Jesus’ unbounded love for me, I am saved from my sins”.*

The Christian church is a confessing church, she is also a catholic church, which brings us to our 2nd point.

1. **The catholicity of the church**

Almost always when we hear the word ‘catholic’ we think of the Roman Catholic church, but that is **not** the root meaning of this term. The word ‘catholic’ is a combination of two Greek terms ‘according to’ and ‘the whole’. So ‘catholic’ means ‘universal’ – the whole of something.

We first find this term written down by the early Christian church leader and writer Ignatius in the 2nd century AD. Ignatius used the word ‘catholic’ to describe a single group of confessing Christians. We find the word catholic in the early church statements of belief which form the three ‘creeds’ that we confess as Reformed Churches; the Apostles’, Nicene and Athanasian creeds. In each one of these we find reference to the ‘catholic church’:

* Apostles creed “*I believe a holy* ***catholic*** *church, the communion of saints*”.
* Nicene creed “*I believe one* ***catholic*** *and apostolic church*”.
* Athanasian creed “*The* ***catholic*** *faith is this:*’

If you ask many Christian when the church began, they may say something like “*at Pentecost, as recorded in the book of Acts*”. This refers to the time when many people heard the Apostle Peter preaching about Christ and then about 3,000 repented, believed, were baptized and ‘*were added that day*’ (Acts 2:41). You may recall however, that we heard earlier from the Belgic Confession Article 27 that ‘*the church has existed from the beginning of the world*’.

Let’s explore this idea now by seeing what the Bible says. In the book of Revelation (13:8) it is revealed that the names of all who are saved ‘*been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain*’. In the mind of God, the church, as the entire (catholic!) group of those who share a common confession that Jesus Christ is who He says He is has existed from the very beginning.

It’s helpful to know that the Old Testament was translated into Greek (from Hebrew and Aramaic) around 250BC. According to Jewish tradition this work was done by about 70 scholars which resulted in the name of this Greek Old Testament ‘the Septuagint’ – from the Latin meaning 70. The Greek word translated ‘church’ in the New Testament Scriptures is used to translate the Hebrew word ‘qahal’ in the Old Testament Septuagint. Qahal means a ‘gathering’ or ‘assembly’. For example: “'***Gather*** *the people to me, that I may let them hear my words*” (Deut 4:10); “*as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the* ***assembly***” (Deut 18:16).

Just before Stephen was stoned to death because he confessed Christ, he spoke to the Jews and gave a history of Old Testament Israel referring to the ‘*congregation in the wilderness*’ at Mount Sinai (Acts 7:38). The word ‘congregation’ here in the Greek is ‘ecclesia’ – elsewhere in our English versions translated ‘church’. The Greek ‘ecclesia’ is where we get the English term ‘ecclesiastical’ from (meaning ‘connected to the Christian church’). The ‘*congregation (or church) in the wilderness*’ were God’s chosen people Israel who had been led out of slavery in Egypt by Moses. D.A. Carson, the American theology professor and author has written about the early church: “*The church begins when the first human sinner is redeemed and joined with another redeemed human sinner*”. The church has a long history!

In the words of the Belgic Confession, ‘the catholic or universal church’ is a ‘*congregation and assembly of true Christian believers who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ*’. Abraham, ‘the father of faith’ (Rom 4:16) is part of this catholic church. His faith in the promises of God (Gen 12:1-3) then yet to be realised in Christ (Heb 11:13) was credited to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6).

Later in history there was a time in the prophet Elijah’s ministry when he was really depressed, feeling utterly alone as the only one who trusted in the Lord, but God spoke to him to assure him that the church, as an assembly of true believers, did not just consist of one person. God spoke then of a remnant of the church which remained, even during the ‘*perilous reign of King Ahab, the husband of wicked Jezebel*’ saying: “*Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.*" (1 Kings 19:18). ‘Baal’ is the name of a false god in Old Testament times.

Not only is the church catholic, being a universal assembly of true believers stretching back in time, she will also always exist in the future – God will always preserve some who truly love and worship Him. This universal, catholic church will be together forever in the New Heavens and New Earth, composed of people from ‘*every tribe and language and people and nation*’ (Rev 5:9).

The church is also ‘catholic’ in her geographical spread around the world. In the words of the Belgic Confession, she is ‘*not confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world*’.

However, whilst the Scriptures do refer to the whole, catholic church as the body of Christ (e.g. Eph 1:22-23), more frequently the word ‘church’ is used to describe a **local congregation** in a particular place e.g. ‘*the church of God that is in Corinth*’ (1 Cor 1:2).

The Biblical (Christian) church confesses Christ for who He is. The church is the assembly of all those who have trusted in the promised Saviour throughout all history, all those who believe in Jesus now and all those who will come to faith before Jesus returns. This church is a large congregation of people from all around the globe throughout the history of this world. She is the catholic (universal) church. She is also holy, which brings us to our third point.

1. **The holiness of the church**

Like, ‘church’, ‘Jesus’, and ‘catholic’, ‘holy’ is another widely misunderstood word. For many people the word ‘holy’ conjures up a mental picture of an especially good or perhaps a very religious person, maybe even with a halo round their head!

The basic meaning of holy is to be ‘set apart’ as pure. The holiness laws in the Old Testament were God’s commands for Israel who were to be a ‘holy nation’. God Himself is holy. He is ‘altogether other’. He is set apart from all that He has made. He is perfect in every way and worthy of reverence, praise, adoration and worship. The heavenly beings around God’s throne in a vision revealed to the prophet Isaiah call out to one another "*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!*" (Isaiah 6:3).

The Belgic Confession identifies the true catholic church as a ‘*holy congregation and assembly of true Christian believers*’. The Bible describes the church in these words in 1 Peter 2:9 “*you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a* ***holy*** *nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light*”. This confessing catholic Christian church is ‘set apart’ to be God’s holy people who speak out the glory, grace and grandeur of their Lord and Saviour.

From early New Testament times onwards different groups have sought to be ‘set apart’ from the world around them by withdrawing from society (e.g. the Montanists of the 2nd century AD, the monastic movement, German pietism). A modern example of this type of community is the isolated West Coast Gloriavale settlement – also known as the ‘Cooperites’. Practicing abstinence (not indulging in something) from sensual or worldly pleasures in order to pursue personal purity has been a characteristic of some of these groups.

Holiness has been greatly misunderstood by many people over the years. Here is what the Bible says: The people who are part of the local church in any particular location are called ‘saints’ – which means ‘holy ones’ or ‘set apart ones’ e.g. “*To the* ***saints*** *who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus*” (Eph 1:1); “*To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be* ***saints***” (1 Cor 1:2). God declares those who make a true heartfelt ‘apostolic’ confession like Peter’s to be holy because they are saved by faith in Christ and His perfect holiness is credited to them as if it were their own.

All those who confess Christ, who believe in the Son, have eternal life. They are adopted into God’s holy family as His children that they would be ‘*holy and blameless before Him*’ (Eph 1:4). They are also called to live lives which reflect the holy people God has declared them to be. They are not called to earn credit with God, but to live out who they are as Christlike holy people. So when Guido de Brès wrote about the ‘*holy congregation and assembly of true Christian believers*’ in 1561 he was not being naïve -somehow thinking that the church was full of perfect people. He would have known, as we know that there is unholiness, sin and hypocrisy in the church. At times ministers commit moral failures. Elders take up positions for prestige and power, not out of love for Christ and his church. Deacons and treasurers fiddle the books to line their own pockets. Congregational members squabble over minor matters and churches divide as a result.

Those whose confession of Christ comes from a believing heart do fail. They do sin and they do not live perfectly holy lives; however they do desire to be the holy people God has called them to be. They take the Bible seriously. For example, these words: ‘*As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but 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 Peter 1:14-16). This desire to be holy in her life was expressed in the public profession of faith today with the words “*as set apart in Christ, I am now determined to live a godly life, through God’s help, and to strive to put to death my old sinful human nature*”.

In general local church congregations are a mixture of those who truly confess Christ as their Lord and Saviour and those who do not. This is like a paddock with weeds mixed in with a crop where you can’t tell the difference between them until harvest time (Matt 13:24-30). This mixture of true believers and others can be called the ‘visible’ church.

Sometimes we speak of the ‘invisible’ church; meaning the whole catholic church worldwide and down through history, scattered amongst various denominations who truly confess Christ to be who He is. This ‘invisible’ church is the whole number of those who are saved. This the Holy Catholic Christian Church whom God will preserve to the end.

In light of this sermon, how would you answer these questions:

1. What is the church?
2. Who is Jesus?
3. What does ‘catholic’ mean?
4. What is holiness?

The most important one is this: who is Jesus? Can you say from your heart in the words of the public profession of faith form: “*I fully realize that I am a sinner unworthy of any of God’s grace or mercy? I am therefore humbled before God, and repent of my sins, trusting that through Jesus’ unbounded love for me, I am saved from my sins*”?

If you can then you are part of the holy catholic Christian church. You are called not to be ashamed of Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt 8:38), but to publicly proclaim Him (e.g. 1 Pet 2:9). You are called to be holy in all your conduct (e.g. 1 Pet 1:15). You, like the Apostle Peter, have been supernaturally changed by God so that you know who Jesus Christ truly is. You can be assured that God will preserve the holy catholic church forever.

Praise the Lord for His mercy and grace towards the Apostle Peter and everyone else who is part of the holy catholic Christian church.

AMEN.