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Ecclesiology and Mission

Exploring the Church's Identity and Calling in a Changing World



Evelyn Hibbert, Kenneth Nehrbass, and Abeneazer G. Urga, Editors

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Chapter 1

"We Believe in One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church"
The Church and the Mission of God in the Nicene Creed

Grant LeMarquand

To begin, I wish to draw attention to the year we are in—2025. For most of the history of the church, the Creed of Nicaea has been a symbol of the church's unity. Given that the first draft of the Nicene Creed was produced in AD 325, it is appropriate to speak of ecclesiology and mission this year, the 1700th anniversary of its first formulation. It is slightly embarrassing that most of the paragraph on the Spirit was not added to the Creed until AD 381 when the church met for the council of Constantinople. But rather than waiting until AD 2081 to think about the ecclesiology and mission of the Creed, it seems appropriate to make some comments on the last paragraph of the Creed a bit ahead of schedule.

Here is the final paragraph of the Creed from AD 381—

> And we believe in the Holy Spirit,
> the Lord, the giver of life.
> He proceeds from the Father,
> Who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.
> Who spoke through the prophets.
> We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.
> We affirm one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
> We look forward to the resurrection of the dead,
> and to life in the world to come. Amen.

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It should be emphasized that this paragraph of the Creed is not a list of unrelated afterthoughts—the entirety of the final paragraph is a statement on pneumatology, giving the final draft of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed a Trinitarian shape. To speak of the church, therefore, is to speak of the church as created by and empowered by the Spirit. Ecclesiology, therefore, is a sub-set of pneumatology, not a completely separate category. It is in the light of this reality that we highlight some missiological issues concerning the church as "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic."

One

It is a bold statement to proclaim faith in the unity of the church. In a world which has literally thousands of denominations it seems almost farcical to assert as an essential matter of faith that we believe in a church that is "One." Indeed when the paragraph on the Holy Spirit was added to the Nicene Creed in AD 381, the church was already in danger of fracturing. The original Creed was drafted in Nicaea because the church was facing the danger of being torn apart by Arianism. Even in the New Testament period, there is ample evidence that there was already danger of division. In the Western church we have come to think it is normal to experience denominations splitting over issues of doctrine and morality. Doctrine and morality were crucial issues in the primitive church as well, but division was sometimes due to personality conflict (1 Cor 1–3), a source of schism which is prevalent in many parts of the world (including, I would venture to say, in the West).

According to John's Gospel, Jesus foresaw the possibility of division in the church and even prayed against it:

> I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20–23)[1]

1 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

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Hard as it is to imagine a prayer of Jesus being left unanswered, the notion (usually associated with Lutheranism) that the problem of church division is solved by postulating a distinction between the visible church (which is admittedly fractured) and the invisible church (which is one in God's eyes), does not dissolve the scandal of schism. The reason the visible/invisible distinction is unsatisfying is missiological: Jesus prays for the church to be one "so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21). In other words, the believability of the mission of God in Christ is dependent on visible church unity: "so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (v. 21); "so that the world may know that you have sent me" (v. 23). Conversely, the disunity of the visible church provides an unbelieving world with an excuse to reject the idea that God loved the world and so sent his Son (John 3:16). The very foundation of the gospel message is endangered because of our disunity (as recognized by, for example, Schaeffer 1970).

An implication of the scandalous reality of church division is that "ecumenism" (or if you like, transdenominational understanding and cooperation) is not an option for the missiologically engaged community. Ecumenical work is a missiological imperative. Understanding and working with brothers and sisters—and seeking to erase barriers to unity—cannot be a hobby for a few. Jesus prayed for unity; therefore we cannot ignore the essential task of working for unity (Newbigin 2012, 131–46).

Neither was Jesus's prayer based simply on a pragmatic missionary strategy. Jesus did not pray that the church would be one simply because he thought that this would make evangelism and disciple-making easier. Jesus was not suggesting that the church would be more numerous if we would adopt a particular technique. Jesus based his petition on the very nature of God. The church is to be one, because God is one: Jesus prayed "that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (v. 21). Jesus and the Father are one; therefore, the church must be one. To be divided is to imply that the triune God lacks unity.

Paul stated something similar in 1 Corinthians 1. He had been told that there are factions in the Corinthian church (1 Cor 1:11–13). Paul's response is emphatic: "Has Christ been divided?" (1:13). Division in the church (Christ's body), therefore, implies an absurdity—division within

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Christ himself. The major theological battle in Paul's ministry, in fact, had to do with an issue of church unity—the inclusion of gentiles into the people of God on the basis of faith apart from the works of Torah (on the disputed meaning of this phrase see, Dunn 1985, 523–42; Wright, 2016; Carson, O'Brien and Seigfrid 2001; Carson, O'Brien and Seigfrid 2004). A major pillar in Paul's argument about gentile inclusion was the central idea in the Old Testament and Judaism itself: God is one ("Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one"; Deut 6:4). If the *Shema* is correct that God is one, then God must have one people consisting of all those who trust in him through Christ. Therefore, at key points in Paul's arguments about Jews and gentiles, he appeals to monotheism. As Paul states, "Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith" (Rom 3:29–30; cf. Gal 3:20). In Ephesians 4, he appeals for unity using a monotheistic Trinitarian formula:

> making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and *one Spirit*, just as you were called to the 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 all. (Eph 4:3–5; italics added)

If God is one, God's people must be one. Our current divisions, therefore, are both sinful and heretical, as well as being an obvious impediment to mission. To state this, however, is simpler than changing the reality of the church in the world. I have no simple techniques for producing a unified church. Indeed, many attempts at bringing unity to the church have been wrong-headed, often based on finding the common denominator and jettisoning major issues of doctrine, ethics, or church order in order to establish the least offensive basis for a scheme of unification. More promising, but much harder, is the steady, difficult work which must be done on two fronts: engaging in serious, open, yet uncompromising theological discussion and, at the same time, attempting to do together what can be done without violating the conscience of either (or any) partner. The dangers of offense and misunderstanding are real, but the witness of church bodies attempting to work and speak together is worth the struggle.

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In the end, any unity that the church does have is unity *in Jesus Christ*. We are one because we are called to be in Christ. Growth in unity, therefore, is only accomplished by coming closer to Jesus. Unity is not primarily about putting up with one another (although that may be necessary as well); it is essentially about coming closer to Jesus.

Holy

If it seems a stretch to speak of the church as "one," it may provoke smiles or giggles (or perhaps anger or despair) to speak of the church as "holy." As the world knows well, as is evidenced by well-documented news stories of the fallibility of church leaders (and the glee that journalists seem to take in reporting such stories), the church is self-evidently sinful. In spite of Paul's admonition that church leaders should be "above reproach" (Titus 1:6), they (we!) are not. Liturgical churches include a prayer of confession at every service—because we know that we are sinners who can only be saved by grace and that we need constantly, repeatedly, to bring our sins before our merciful God. And although church leaders may pronounce prayers of absolution, they also join in the words of confession.

This is why we can only speak of the church's own holiness in terms of "gift," that is, grace. We are holy only because we have been sanctified by the *Holy* Spirit in Christ. In Greek, of course, the word translated as "sanctify" has the same root (ἁγια–) as the word translated as "holy." Amazingly, Paul can speak even of the Corinthian Christians (of all people!) using holiness language: "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified (ἡγιασμένοις) in Christ Jesus, called to be saints (ἁγίοις), together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours" (1 Cor 1:2).

But perhaps we have gotten ahead of ourselves, because "holiness" is not first of all a characteristic of the church. Holiness is an attribute of God. In fact, as a descriptor of God, "Holy" is not even primarily a moral quality. "Holiness in the Old Testament is not an ethical quality, but the essence of God's nature as separate and utterly removed from the profane" (Childs 2001, 55). God's otherness includes an element of danger. For a non-priest to touch the ark, therefore, brings death (2 Sam 6:3–8); the people of Israel are forbidden to approach God's presence on Sinai (Exod 19:12); only the high priest can enter the holy of holies (Lev 15:16, 34; Heb 9:7) (Gray 1903,

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