

XVI. The Apostles' Creed in Biblical Perspective

"I Believe..."

"The Communion of Saints"

Ephesians 4:1–16

Dr. Harry L. Reeder III

October 4, 2020 • Sunday Sermon

I'm going to start by reading from Psalm 133 as you read this imagine in your mind countless hosts coming up the hills of Zion. This is one of the hymns they would have been singing on their way to the temple. We don't go up the hill of Zion, we go up the hill of Calvary. We don't go to the temple, we go to the One the temple pointed to – Jesus. But O this blessing of the communion of the saints even declared in the Old Covenant. This is the Word of God. Psalm 133:1–3 says [1] *Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!* [2] *It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!* [3] *It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.* The grass withers, the flower fades, the Word of God abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

This is the 16th study of the Apostles' Creed and when we started this series I thought I would have 18 studies in the series but there will be a few more than that. We are at the part of the creed that has the phrase 'the communion of the saints' so I'd like to put it in context. This creed has been developed as an extra Biblical statement of faith. The Bible contains a number of creeds and we will look at one in this study from Ephesians 4. Creeds have been given for a number of purposes and one of those is for use in worship to profess what we believe. Secondly, creeds were also designed as an instrument of discipleship to teach the life for Christ and in Christ. Thirdly, they were given for protection against false doctrine so you can evaluate doctrine given from a pulpit because Satan is always trying to infiltrate the church with false teaching.

Creeds are also distillations of Biblical truth to help us establish, enjoy and employ the unity of the church – our common confession of faith – and they do so as long as they are faithful to God's Word. The Apostles' Creed is an extra Biblical creed. It's not a Bible creed but it is a creed to teach things that are in the Bible. Therefore it is only valuable so long if it's rooted in God's Word. So in this study I am showing where the three affirmations contained in the Apostles' Creed come from in the Bible. In the Latin version of the creed it is only 100 words. It establishes the essentials of the faith but not all the essentials are in the creed. Christians believe more than what is in the creed but not less.

In our study of the Apostles' Creed I have gone back primarily to two books in the Bible – the book of Philippians and Ephesians – because those two books seem to be their primary source in the creed. They tend to follow the form of those two epistles, particular Ephesians and Philippians 2. In this study we will be looking in Ephesians 4 as we study the phrase 'the communion of the saints.'

The Apostles' Creed contain essentials distilled in an economical way by those who had been discipled by the Apostles. The creed is the Apostolic writing of Christianity in the New Testament and how Christ is our Redeemer and the fulfillment of all the Old Covenant promises. It is laid out in a Trinitarian way, in the three paragraphs it contains. The Apostles' Creed is as follows;

I believe in God the Father Almighty, (first affirmation/1st Person of the Trinity)
maker of heaven and earth;

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, (second affirmation/2nd Person of the Trinity)
*who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended into hades.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
is seated at the right hand of the Father Almighty,
and will come again to judge the living and the dead.*

I believe in the Holy Spirit, (third affirmation/3rd Person of the Trinity)
*the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body
and the life everlasting. Amen.*

The ascended Savior gives gifts and the primary gift is the gift of the Holy Spirit which is the third affirmation of the creed and the part we are in. The Holy Spirit is not an 'it' or a 'force' or a 'power' but He is powerful. He is a Person, who has not come to bring attention to Himself. He has come to bring all the attention to Jesus. Jesus said 'when the Holy Spirit comes, He will come in power and you shall be My witnesses.' You will be the witnesses of Christ in word and deed because of His work. What is He doing? He is bringing us from sin to the Savior. He is saving the redeemed. He is securing the redeemed. He seals the redeemed. He is sanctifying the redeemed and maturing the redeemed to bring us to glory.

That is the Holy Spirit's work product. He saves us individually to unite us corporately – the holy catholic church. The word catholic comes from two Greek words transliterated 'the whole/universal church' before there was ever a formal organization of the Roman Catholic Church. It is the church universal, invisible, enrolled in the heavens, made up of all the elect of God, from all the nations and from all generations. The elect are secured by the Spirit, directed by the Word, saved by the blood of Jesus and the redeeming work He has accomplished with His righteousness. It is an unmixed, pure church, the body of Christ, enrolled triumphant enrolled in heaven. Now the creed turns from the church in heaven invisible to the church visible, militant, on mission, on message and in ministry. Then it gives us the culture of that church.

I had the privilege to pastor a church in Miami, Florida that was noted multi-ethnic and a man said to me at that time 'Pastor, you have a multi-cultural church.' I said 'no I don't.' He said 'You have about 30 percent Caribbean African, 20 percent African American, 20 to 30 percent American, Caucasian, European, there were Asian and others, so yes you do.' I said 'It reflects our neighborhood and it ought to but it's not multi-cultural for culture is the values represented and how you do business so it can't be multi-cultural.' Our mission is the Great Commission – go and make disciples of every ethnicity. Our message is the Gospel – leading to the whole counsel of God, teaching them to observe all that He has commanded. Our culture is the Great Commandment – to love the Lord with all of our heart, soul and mind and our neighbor as ourselves.

The testimony of the culture is the communion of the saints. These different gifted, different ethnic, heterogeneous people have become one. Those who were not a people have become the people of God, not the people of the blue collar or the people of the white collar or the people with black skin, white skin, brown skin. Whatever is out there in the parish is being drawn together to be one. You can't explain them sociologically or demographically, for you

can only explain them as the communion of the saints. They are unbelievably diverse but somehow they have this unity.

As I was thinking of the passage which best reflects the communion of the saints that divine communion to fill up the church triumphant, the only passage would be that in Ephesians 4:1–16. As we look at this passage I want to highlight a couple of things. Let's start with the first verse. Ephesians 4:1 says *[1] therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.* What I'm about to say many commentators have said so it's nothing new. I think Paul is writing in Ephesians 4 what he started writing in chapter 3 and the Holy Spirit led him in a different direction in chapter 3. The reason I say this is because it's the only time this is found in the Bible. Look at Ephesians 4:1 and now here is Ephesians 3:1 which says *[1] For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles.*

In Ephesians 1 and 2 Paul tells us of the blessings of the elect in Christ. Then he develops the holy catholic church triumphant in Ephesians 2 and in Ephesians 3 he tells us how to live together for Christ but starts another development of the Gospel in Ephesians 3:2. As he finishes that he then wants to get back to where he was. The reason I am pointing this out is because this Bible was written by the Holy Spirit through human agency – real human beings. Peter's Greek and Paul's Greek are not the same. He uses who they are and how they function. Here Paul is evidencing a slight case of ADD. We see the sovereign Authorship of the Scripture using real human agents.

So in Ephesians 4:1 Paul is telling us that every Christian is not saved by their walk but they are saved to walk. He didn't say I urge you to walk in a manner worthy to be called or to stay called but he says to walk in a manner worthy of your calling. We are never worthy but let's walk in a manner worthy of the worthy One who has called us and set us free. We were prisoners set free from our sins to become chained to Jesus by grace and love. The love of Christ compels to walk for Christ and in that walk we want to honor Christ. So when you make a decision about anything in life on what to do or say, the decision is not based on what satisfies you but what can you say or do that honors Jesus. That is our worldview as a Christian.

Ephesians 4:1–3 says *[1] therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called. [2] with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, [3] eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.* This sounds a lot like the fruit of the Spirit but he is saying when you walk for Christ you walk in the Spirit as you are led by the Spirit and you begin to show evidence of the fruits of the Spirit. Notice that the fruits of the Spirit are not something you get to choose what you display for it's one fruit with a cluster, they all come together. They lead to each other – love to joy to peace to patience to kindness to goodness to gentleness to faithfulness and then to self-control – a life self-controlled by the Spirit. Here he tells us how to maintain the bond of unity, not at the expense of truth but in truth, not grieving the Spirit but surrendered to the Spirit, bearing the fruit of the Spirit which leads to the unity of the Spirit. That's the communion of the saints. He saves you personally, not to live individually but corporately.

Perhaps you have gotten to where you have no more patience with someone. Have you heard of 70 times 7? Does God have to keep working on you? Is He patient with you? He is patient with you so let's be patient with one another, because the One who is patient with you has the Holy Spirit in you giving you the fruit of the Spirit so that you maintain the unity of Spirit. Then Paul goes to a creed.

Ephesians 4:4–5 says *[4] There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— [5] one Lord, one faith, one baptism, [6] one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.* The unity you have is not in you or in

each other but it is that each of you are in Him. Then Paul gives seven point to your unity in the creed. This is one of four creeds that Paul writes. The first is one body. That is the body of Christ and there he is looking at the church catholic. The local church is a manifestation of the church catholic for it is making visible the invisible. The second point to unity is one Spirit. The third is one hope that belongs to your call. Four is one Lord. Five is one faith. Six is one baptism which is referring to the Great Commission – baptize them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Trinitarian). Seven, that Trinitarian baptism declares one God that dwells in three Persons. Notice He is transcendent – Father of all who is over all, through all and in all. It also declares God the Father is imminent and permanently engaged. That is the foundation of our unity.

How do we know all those things? The Bible gives you all those things. So the Holy Spirit who brought you to Jesus dwells within you and you are led by the Spirit, walking in the Spirit, bearing the fruit of the Spirit, functioning with one another corporately, bringing the unity of the Spirit but the Spirit's unity is never at the expense of truth for it's based on truth. It starts with the most important thing revealed to us in the truth and that is who God is. We are built on this one Lord who has given us this one faith and our faith needs to be in the faith once and for all delivered to the saints – the Word of God. That is where we unite because the Spirit of God works with the Word of God. Put no confidence in the flesh for it Spirit of God who gives life, Jesus says 'My words are Spirit and life.' Now Paul leaves unity and goes back to diversity.

Ephesians 4:7–10 says [7] *But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. [8] Therefore it says, "When He ascended on high He led a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men."* [9] *(In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that He had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? [10] He who descended is the One who also ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)*

This would have been a common picture for a king in battle where he descends from the throne to battle, wins the battle, comes back ascending to the throne victorious and tied to his chariot are a representation of all the enemies as his chariot is full of the booty of the victory. Then he gives gifts to men. This now is a picture of Jesus coming into the battle, defeating His enemies and He saved His enemies which was you. Then when He ascended you legally and positionally ascended with Him as the redeemed. Then from heaven He gives gifts by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Christ who was with Jesus from the womb to the tomb, back to the throne, now from the throne is poured out upon us and then gives gifts to men. Paul starts listing some of those gifts.

Ephesians 4:11–13 says [11] *And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, [12] to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, [13] until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*

The unity of the faith in Ephesians 4:13 is the work of the Spirit bring the work of the truth to our lives, the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. In verses 11–13 Paul is saying that all of us our different. We come from various ethnic backgrounds and we're all at different levels spiritually. You have a measure of Christ's gift at work within you. It is not the unmeasured gift for that is in the body of Christ – the fullness of Christ is in the body of Christ, but a measure of Christ's grace is at work within you and part of that measure is to give each one of us a spiritual gift so that you become a part of the body. Paul loves this body picture of the church. Some of you are hands, some are mouths, some are feet but don't get excited about the more obvious ones.

What is the most important part of the body – what you see or what you don't see? It is what you don't see because if my hair falls out I'll still make it through the day but if my liver falls out I won't. The invisible gifts of the body is usually much more important than the visible

ones. So here is the body where every part counts. The hand can't say to the arm 'I don't need you' and the arm can't say to the hand 'I don't need you.' Here's the problem; some of us don't show up. Parts are missing. Or because we're not focused on Christ the part is debilitated or weakened or diseased. But Paul is telling us that if with the Spirit and the Word we're fixed on Jesus then every part begins to supply what it is to bring to the table – O blessed communion of the saints, as the body functions together, building itself up in love. Let's look how Paul goes on to explain this.

Ephesians 4:14–16 says [14] so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. [15] Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, [16] from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

He gives a negative and then a positive picture here. The negative is in verse 14. Paul is telling us that each part of the body has been designed by God and given through the Holy Spirit. All that you are is part of the tapestry of what God is bringing together so unity is not uniformity. Unity is diversity brought together by Christ with the Spirit and the Word as one in Christ, manifested in a local church, perfected in the church triumphant. Here it's mixed but here's the problem.

One of the blessings is, when the church enjoys its communion of each part speaking the truth in love in the culture of the Great Commandment (loving the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and loving your neighbor as yourself) and when that happens people begin to mature in the Lord becoming more like Christ. Then the church begins to bear the witness of Christ more powerfully to the world. We build in an inoculation against false teachings so that we're not tossed here and there by every wind of doctrine because the truth in love is at work from the pulpit to the people in the pew. Then it works to from the pew to one another as we're speaking the truth in love to each other, weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice. It is the Spirit of God drawing us together supernaturally for we all gather around Jesus through His Word by His Spirit and not the pastor. It is communion with the saints in Christ, with Christ for Christ with one another.

Ephesians 4:14 tells us that this is what Satan tries to do. The church triumphant is holy but the church visible is mixed. There are false sons in her pail. There are false professors and false teachers and preachers and you can't have communion of the saints when the truth is abandoned or when the Spirit is grieved. The Spirit and the truth are our foundation and capstone in our union in Christ and communion with one another. Then comes maturity in the Lord and for the Lord.

Paul doesn't list all the gifts in this Ephesians text for there are more in I Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 but in Ephesians 4:11 text he gives four gifts – apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor/teachers. Notice that they are all word oriented. Back in Ephesians 2 Paul said we are built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets which is the Bible with Christ the Cornerstone. The Apostles and the Prophets give us the Word. The evangelists spread the Word and the pastor/teachers equip us for the work of ministry.

What is the ministry of the Christian and the local church? There are four ministries. This is all given to us in Matthew 28, the Great Commission. There is the ministry of upreach to God which is called worship. We have a ministry of outreach to the world which is called evangelism. Then we have a ministry of inreach to love one another. Then we have a ministry of downreach, learning and discipling, being discipled and making disciples. So here is our mission, our message, our ministry and here is our culture – the communion of saints living out

the Great Commandment together with each one bringing their gifts with gentleness, humility, and love, speaking the truth in love.

What I'm about to say is not being given as self-serving. I believe the church is impotent, illiterate and polarized unnecessarily because of carnality. Paul says there will be divisions so that those who are of the truth are approved. Much of the divisions today in the church are carnal and one reason for that is because we do not have pulpit ministries committed to expository preaching. It's more celebrity preaching – here's my talk, my three stories, my pick-me-up and my coaching. I believe unity does not come without a full orb'd saturation of the Word of God preached, read, studied and memorized. This is absolutely crucial. We must be immersed in the Word of God, marinated and soaked in the Word of God. It doesn't end, but it begins with a pulpit ministry committed to expositional preaching, not to the celebrity status of the pastor.

I think that's why Paul uses the word gifts because you can't speak the Word in love unless you know the truth. You can't love with the truth if you don't know the truth, but you're not holding the truth if you don't hold it with love, gentleness, patience, kindness. As Bishop Ryle said 'Truth without love is barbaric, love without truth is cruelty.' The two are made together and then the body builds itself up and out in love for the Lord and with the Lord.

So here is my takeaway. The communion of saints is the result of saints in communion with Christ and with one another, empowered by the Spirit of God and saturated with the Word of God. When there is the communion of the saints the church will be on mission, on message and in ministry. This is what was anticipated in Psalm 133:1–3 which says Psalm 133:1–3 says [1] *Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!* [2] *It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!* [3] *It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.*

How good it is for brothers to dwell together in love and peace and then the Psalmist gives two word pictures. The high priests were baptized with water and oils so the oil one is used here as the oil runs down his head, his beard and his collar. Or it is like it's like the clouds which form from Mount Hermon and then navigate down to Mount Zion and pour forth their dew upon the city of Zion. In such a place is the blessing of God – life forevermore. Churches that communicate the Gospel of eternal life are churches that have the communion of the saints and praise God for Psalm 133 but we live beyond Psalm 133.

It's not Aaron we look to for it's Jesus. It's not Mount Zion or Mount Hermon, it's Mount Calvary. It's not the oil but it's the Holy Spirit. And it is not the wisdom of men, it is the wisdom of God revealed in His Word that is the foundation and the capstone of the communion of the saints. It is a communion that begins with believers being saved personally, being joined together as they are secured, sanctified and sealed together by the Holy Spirit. It is a unity that is embraced with intentionality. It is not a uniformity where people just want to be those who are like them. No, I want to be with sinners saved by grace and I want all different kinds of colors, social backgrounds, different gifts, different abilities, different ages and all kinds of different levels of spiritual maturity. I want all of that to be at work. Here is a picture of the early church in Acts 2.

Acts 2:42–47 says [42] *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching* (the preaching of the Word) *and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread* (God has given us a meal in the communion of the saint – The Lord's Supper) *and the prayers.* [43] *And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.* [44] *And all who believed were together and had all things in common.* [45] *And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.* [46] *And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food*

with glad and generous hearts, [47] praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

God has given this to us and we can enjoy it together, when we're saturated with the Word of God and by the grace of God with the Spirit of God, we work at speaking the truth in love and building up the body of Christ with gentleness, humility, patience, the fruit of the Spirit that brings the unity of the Spirit based upon the unity of the truth, all resting in Christ alone. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all, through all and in all.

The phrases 'bond of peace' and 'bond of love,' the Greek word for bond could be translated belt or tie. When I was growing up there was a song we sang after every communion service, usually at the New Year's Eve service and perhaps a couple of more times a year but during this pandemic it would be hard to do it the way we used to do it because we always held hands when we sang it. Introverts could not stand that moment in church until they got started but I used to love it. Extroverts would want to do this every week. In that church a few hundred people would join hands and sing this wonderful song written by John Fawcett.

Fawcett was an orphan sold into indentured servitude as a teenager. His pastor let him go to London, during the Great Awakening to hear the preaching of George Whitfield. He attended one service outside with over 20,000 there and heard the Gospel, then came to Christ. Somehow he was educated and got into the ministry. He pastored a little village church in West Yorkshire. His salary was two pounds a year. He had no parsonage. They would just move him and his family from home to home every couple of months. He served faithfully for seven years and then came the call from Carters Lane church, the great church in London. John Gill, the pastor had retired. Fawcett then would get 25 pounds a year, a beautiful manse and garden he could grow his own produce. He struggled with the call and finally accepted. He announced it to his church who helped him pack his meager belongings into the wagon. Before he and his family left the church members gathered around him, all sang the doxology and said a prayer of benediction over them.

They couldn't finish the doxology and it's reminiscent of when Paul left the church at Ephesus where the elders fell upon Paul, held him and kept kissing him. They just couldn't finish the song. The weeping, even the wailing of the small church losing their pastor whom they loved somehow got to the end of it. John Fawcett flipped the reins on the wagon and as they pulled away his wife looked at him and said 'John are we doing the right thing?' He said 'I'm so glad you asked and said 'No, we're not.' He turned the wagon back around for 45 years of ministry. Everyone asked him why he would do such a foolish thing for in London he would have a bigger platform and could take care of his family. Instead of answering each question that came to him, he finally wrote a hymn that many of us sin to try to express what was in his heart. It is the hymn, *Blest Be the Tie that Binds* that goes like this;

*(1) Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.*

*(2) Before our Father's throne
We pour our ardent prayers;
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one,
Our comforts and our cares.*

*(3) We share each other's woes,
Each other's burdens bear;*

*And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.*

*(4) When we asunder part,
It gives us inward pain;
But we shall still be joined in heart,
And hope to meet again.*

People have asked me during this pandemic if we're going to start a virtual church and the answer is no for we're going to weep with those who weep and get face to face as we reach out and love one another. We're going to do what this hymn talks about. Let's pray.

Prayer:

God thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. Friend, if you have not taken that first step to be emancipated from your sins and to be the prisoner of the love of God in Christ, may I invite you to Him today. If you would like to talk with me we'll arrange whatever is convenient for you just call me at (205) 776-5200. Come to Christ and He'll bring you into the body of Christ manifested in a local church. O Lord, please allow us to enjoy that fellowship divine, that blessed communion of the saints where the fruit of the Spirit, the truth of Word spoken in love provides the belt or the tie that binds us together, in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Power Point

"THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS"

The Apostles' Creed Context

The Apostle's Content

LIFE TAKEAWAY

The Communion of the Saints is the result of the Saints in Communion with Christ and one another empowered by the Spirit of God and saturated with the Word of God.

On Mission—On Message—In Ministry