

## I believe in the holy catholic church

Yes, the church is part of the Creed! It is not just an optional extra. It is an essential part of the package. God doesn't just call us into a cosy relationship with Himself. Nor does he merely invite us to "find ourselves" in a loving interaction with Him. He calls us to *belong*. And to belong to an all-too-human organisation which counts among its members an uncomfortably large number of the kind of people we would rather run a mile away from. Each reader would probably select different church members to put in that category, but I think most would accept that it is often the Church, not doctrinal problems, that make it difficult to accept Christian faith. It may be what individual Christians have done in times past that is the problem, or some stance taken by a church as a body (e.g. Catholic teaching on contraception). Either way, we may be prepared to accept the tenets of Christian doctrine; we may well wish to enter into a personal relationship with God; but do we have to join the Church? And what about those boring old church services with the wheezing organ, and those fanatical happy-clappy types with their trite choruses? And do I actually have to sing? It is questions like these that have led many people to stay at home on Sundays, satisfying their consciences with phrases like "One is nearer God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth." It is perhaps a good thing most people who quote those lines do not read the rest of the poem, because it is full of over-romantic nature-mysticism which is not only completely out of tune with Christianity, but also liable to make one's stomach turn over.

Unfortunately, it simply is not true to say, "You can be a Christian without going to church." Nor is it true to say, as some do, that "There are more true Christians outside the churches than there are inside". There may be some true Christians outside the churches, but very few. Obviously, God does not expect church attendance from people who are sick, or of limited mobility. Nor will he cast anyone out of the kingdom because they miss the odd week. But we are called to belong to the Church, the "Body of Christ", as St. Paul called it, the fellowship of those who believe in Christ, and to live for God and serve God *together*. Why? Well, not only is the Church in the creed, but Jesus also commanded his followers to stick together and meet together. According to John's Gospel, Jesus prayed for the unity of His followers the night before he died. Among other things he prayed: "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you 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. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."(John 17: 20-23) By this, Jesus meant we should be one in three senses:

### CATHOLIC

By the way "catholic" in the creed translates the Greek word *katholikos* which meant "universal" or "mainstream", as opposed to the various heretical sects that were proliferating at the time the creed was written. All mainline churches, and many smaller bodies, would regard themselves as being members of the "catholic" church (small "c"). No reference is intended to the Roman Catholic Church, which can only be truly dated from the split with the Eastern Orthodox Churches long after this creed was written. Before then there was just the "catholic orthodox" church (which is still the way the Orthodox Churches describe themselves) to which everyone belonged...

## **1. One with God**

The early church was a mixed bag. It contained former Zealots (a guerilla group opposed to Roman rule) and tax-collectors (who collected taxes for the Romans; it contained former Pharisees and former prostitutes; it contained fishermen and academics; rich and poor. How could a rag-bag like that really be one? Things are even worse today. We have all sorts in the church: enthusiastic types and quiet types, rationalistic intellectuals and emotional creatives, practical types and idealists, extroverts and introverts, organized people and disorganized. We believe different things; we have differing tastes in music, church architecture, décor, and forms of service. How can we be united?

Only by God. That is why Jesus prays that his followers should be drawn into the close relationship he shared with the Father (“May they also be in us...that they may be one as we are one.”). It is essential that each believer is bound to God in a close personal relationship, built up by regular prayer, reading of the Scriptures, meeting with one’s fellow Christians in worship, so that God can lead us nearer the truth as it is in Jesus, and so He can fill us with His love, which will enable us to love our fellow-believers - all of them!

## **2. One with each other**

Jesus said: “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.” He also prays later on, “May they be brought to complete unity.” Jesus recognized that his cause would be lost, as many another cause has been lost, if his followers all fell out and did their own thing. It was important that they were *together*. They all needed each other for support, for fellowship, and for service. There are many jobs God wants his people to do (yes, sorry folks, but God does require us to work, not just find fulfillment) which can only be done by people working together. God gives us all gifts by His Spirit (see “I believe in the Holy Spirit”) and expects us to use them in His service, and in serving each other. It takes everyone working together to do God’s work and to fulfil His mission in the world. If we decide to take a back seat, the whole work suffers. The Letter to the Hebrews paints a graphic picture of the need for Christian fellowship: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” We need our fellow Christians to spur us on to love and good deeds. We need them, not just because they can help us with our problems, but because of the lessons they can teach us, and the way they can inspire us to help other people with *their* problems. And we all need encouraging when the going gets tough, and we need someone to lean on. John Wesley once said: “The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion”. And he was right. All Christians are called into the fellowship of faith, the army and workforce of Christ. A burning lump of coal on its own goes out very quickly. It is neither use nor ornament. But as part of a fire, it can warm a whole room.

## **3. One message to the world.**

This is what the whole purpose is. This is why Jesus calls us into His fellowship – so we can take His message to the world. We have just the one message. The message of Jesus’ atoning death and resurrection. But our words are not enough. Our unity is part of the message. Jesus said: “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their

message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you 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 fact that such a motley bunch of people as us, Jesus’ followers, can be one, will demonstrate the love of Jesus in a way no words could match. It goes without saying that disunity among God’s people can do the opposite (i.e. it can give the impression that God’s love is a sham, or ineffective). Only *together* can we take Jesus’ message to the world. We cannot do it as a individual, isolated believers. And mission is more difficult when we do it as separate denominations. It is only when we act *together* as God’s *whole* people that we will demonstrate God’s love in its full power.

I have said nothing about services, orders of ministry, or sacraments. These are the means by which the church puts Christian fellowship into practice. These things often cause dispute, but the fellowship in Jesus is what counts. All else is only a means to that end. I am not making a pitch for any particular church or denomination. But anyone who is serious about serving God should be involved with a fellowship of Christians somewhere, and be fully involved in its life. Because only as a united force can we serve God and witness to Him in this world.