

The Church and Communion of Saints
Ephesians 4:1-13
Week 2

Opening

Ask if anyone would like to open in prayer. They can pray on their own or use the prayer printed below. It also might be a good idea to reach out to a group member prior to your meeting and ask them ahead of time if they'd be willing to open in prayer. That's a great way to encourage participation without putting anyone on the spot.

God of ages, you have called us to this place at this time with these people to look more closely at ancient words of faith. As we encounter this creed, send your Holy Spirit to guide our discussions. Give us a humble eagerness and imaginative thoughtfulness that our eyes might be opened anew to the power of the faith we profess. We pray in the name of the One whose passion and resurrection we anticipate this Lenten season, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Depending on time constraints you may want to take a bit of extra time to check in with folks and see how they're doing. You could also wait and do this at the end of the session before closing in prayer.

It may be a good practice to recite the Creed together each week as we are taking a closer look at each line. This week, we'll discuss the line **"I believe in... the holy catholic church; the communion of saints..."**

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

Check-in questions

1. Identify as many things as possible that your church has in common with Christians of other denominations or fellowship groups. Consider both inward beliefs and outward practices. Do the results of your informal survey surprise you?

2. What are your attitudes toward Christians who belong to denominations different from yours? Which aspects of your beliefs and their beliefs feel most divisive, and which feel most unifying?

The Church and Communion of Saints

To believe in Jesus Christ is to believe in and belong to a dynamic community that spans the centuries. The Greek word *ekklesia*, used in the New Testament to refer to the church, denotes not a building but a group of people. It literally means “those who are called out.” The church is not a static building but a dynamic pilgrim people who are constantly moving on in faith and obedience. It includes those who have gone ahead of us and those who will follow. It is a great fellowship of faith, spanning the ages and the continents.

When the Apostles’ Creed uses the term *catholic*, it means “according to the whole” or “universal.” This is not a reference to the Roman Catholic church (capital “C”). In saying that the church is catholic we affirm that its message is valid and relevant to every age and every situation. In several of his letters, Paul wrote of Christians’ essential unity that underlies a diversity of gifts for service.

The disunity of churches we find in our world does not deny the fact that the church is one. There are many different churches or denominations, yet to the extent that these are genuinely Christian, they are all part of the one church. And the church’s message is valid and relevant to every age. It is not as if there were one church with a message suited to the second century and another with a message suited to the twenty-first. The same church, throughout all ages and across the world, seeks to apply the same gospel in any situation it may happen to meet.

To declare that we believe in the “communion of saints” does not mean that we believe in a holy club; it means that we believe in a holy God who has called us as individuals into a community, within which his work of renewal and regeneration can take place. *Communion* is the old English word for fellowship, and it identifies a key role of the church. Among its many functions the church is there to support its members. At one level it means “sharing joys and sorrows.” But fellowship operates at another level as well, the level of material goods and wealth. It is a reminder of the need of mutual commitment within the Christian fellowship. The word *saint* just means “someone who is holy.” Christians are holy not because of anything they are in themselves but because of the One who has called them. God’s holiness can be reflected in our lives, even if we ourselves are sinners.

Read Ephesians 4:1-13

*Make it a point over the course of this series to read from a few different translations. Encourage those who may be reading from a different translation to share any differences they see.

Initial Reactions

1. What from this passage confuses, inspires, or resonates with you? What questions or curiosities do you have about this passage?
2. What does this story tell us about God? What does this story tell us about humanity?
3. Were there any images, stories or insights that stuck out to you from Sunday's sermon?

Going Deeper

4. According to Ephesians, what do all Christian believers have in common? Find as many responses as possible.
5. After building a strong case for unity in verse 1-6, Paul abruptly switches to ways Christians differ (v. 7-11). According to this text, how are Christians dissimilar even in unity?
6. How does this Scripture passage express what the Apostles' Creed calls "the communion of saints"?
7. How do the various gifts of service named in verse 11 contribute to the unity of the church?
8. How would you describe maturity in Christ (v. 13)?

So What Question

1. What are some practical ways that Christians can "keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (v.3)? Consider not only theoretical ways but ways you have seen this actually happen.

Heidelberg Catechism Question*

Each week, a question from the Heidelberg Catechism (more information below) will be included with this study guide. The hope is that COB folks would take time to reflect on this question during the week as it gives more framework for the Creed as we study together.

Question 54.

What do you believe concerning "the holy catholic church"?

Answer:

I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself, a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. And of this community I am and always will be a living member.

*The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) was composed in the city of Heidelberg, Germany, as a tool for teaching young people, a guide for preaching in the provincial churches, and a form of confessional unity among the several Protestant factions in Germany. The project was the work of a team of ministers and university theologians under the watchful eye of the Elector at the time, Frederick III. The catechism was divided into fifty-two sections or Lord's Days, so that one could be explained in an afternoon worship service each Sunday of the year.

The Synod of Dort approved the Heidelberg Catechism in 1619, and it soon became the most ecumenical of the Reformed catechisms and confessions. It has been translated into many European, Asian, and African languages and is still the most widely used and warmly praised catechism of the Reformation period.

For Now or Later

- Study 1 Corinthians 14 concerning spiritual gifts and how they function to edify the church.
- Write a message of appreciation to someone whose spiritual gifts have blessed and helped you. If the person is no longer living, write the message as a prayer of thanksgiving for how the person's influence is still with you.
- Christians of many traditions and denominations regularly recite the Apostles' Creed in worship. The English wording of the creed varies somewhat across different translations. Read as many versions as you can find; church hymnals and orders of worship are a good source. What new insights do you gain by comparing different versions of the creed?

Closing

Check in if you haven't already done so and ask for any prayer requests. Encourage group members to write down these requests and follow up as necessary. Close with prayer.