

“THE GREAT ATTRIBUTES OF THE CHURCH.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

March 23, 2014, 6:00PM

Sermon Texts: Ephesians 2:12-22

Belgic Confession Article 27

Introduction:

Americans are rugged individualist and have a generally low view of the church. Why do I need the church when I have my Bible? Why do I need the church when I can talk to God any time anywhere? Why do I need the church when I can have my own personal relationship with Jesus?

Something else that starting in the 1950's has undercut American's view of the church and that is the rise of para-church organizations. Many of them have done great things but you have heard of the law of unintended consequences. Para-church organizations have always said they exist to help the church but they have actually eroded American's commitment to church. Para-church organizations have drawn people and resources away from the church.

The low view of the church today is traced by some back to the reformation. The reformation produced one of the greatest schisms in the church in history. The Roman Catholic Church maintained that she was the only true church and that submission to the pope was required. They said that the Reformers were throwing off the church by breaking from Rome.

The Reformers had to work hard to show that the opposite was the case. They had a very high view of the church and because of their high view that was why they desired so strongly to reform the church, to return the church to her former apostolic and Biblical authority.

The Reformed creeds and confessions gave much attention to this important doctrine of the church.

It's worth noting that ten out of the thirty-seven articles of the Belgic Confession are devoted to the Reformed view of the church. From article 27 to 36 we will be considering the great doctrines concerning the church of Jesus Christ.

As far back as the Nicene Creed Christians have been summing up their teaching on the church through four attributes: one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

Let's consider these **four classic attributes of the Church of Jesus Christ**. The glory of the church is that she is one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

One

Ephesians 2 is clear. The wall between Jews and Greeks is destroyed, there is but one church. The Gentiles have been brought near, and made fellow citizens and members of the one household of God. Both Jews and Greeks have access in one Spirit to the same Father and are being built into a holy temple, which has one cornerstone who is Christ, and is the one dwelling place for God by His Spirit.

Two chapters later in Ephesians we read that great passage about the oneness and unity of the church that is printed on our bulletin cover.. **Ephesians 4:4** There is one body and one Spirit ... **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 glory of the church is seen in that she is one body, the body of the One Lord Jesus Christ.

There cannot be two bodies of Christ. Christ cannot be divided. "There is one body" (Ephesians 4:4). See front of bulletin.

But how can this be after all the division in the church. It seems to us that there are many faiths, many baptisms, many hopes. We are a house divided.

The church is one not because we are one. The church is not one by human effort. The church is not one based on subjective experience. The church is one based on objective reality, a reality that transcends our humanness and fallenness and sinfulness. The church is one because of the oneness of God, the oneness of our faith, and the oneness of our baptism.

The church is not some vulnerable, fragile human institution teetering on the brink of chaos and destruction. She is built on the solid rock of Peter's confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Our unity comes from Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2) who declares, "The gates of hell will never prevail against the church" (Matthew 16:18).

We make our confession not on what is seen but on what God says by His Holy Spirit in His Word. It is by faith and confidence in God's Word that we say, "I believe the church is one."

We get a very strong sense of how important and precious this unity is to our Lord by the repeated strong warnings against those who stir up strife and cause dissensions.

Romans 16:17 I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. **18** For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.

Therefore let's all work for the unity and oneness of the body. Let's not grumble and complain, criticize and tear down, murmur, gossip, spread rumors. Christ did not call us out of the world and into His body to attack and grumble and complain about music or committee decisions or pastors, leaders, elders, volunteers, worship planners and who did what and why.

The oneness of the church is a fixed reality for which Jesus shed His blood and which glorifies God. Let's live and act and speak in a manner worthy of this great reality.

Holy

The glory of the church is seen in that she is holy.

Ephesians 2:21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a *holy* temple in the Lord ... a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."

Just as we have reason from experience and observation to question the churches oneness or unity, for the same reasons we question her holiness. The church today around the world is corrupted by sin, by heresy, by strife and dissension. She doesn't look much different than the world out from which she has been called. Hatred, envy, power politics, lust, pride, greed, slothfulness, selfishness, lack of love for each other or the lost all characterized the church through the ages and in our present day.

The church is not holy because of her actions or deeds or by any merit or goodness. She gets her holiness from Jesus. The church is holy because she is indwelt by the Holy Spirit of the Holy God. What does Scripture say?

I Peter 2:9 But 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 marvelous light.

The church is holy in two ways.

The church is holy in that she is sanctified by God through the imputed righteousness of Christ, once and for all. And it is also being sanctified through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit removing by degrees all the pollution, stain, and remains of sin as we are being continually conformed to the image and likeness of Christ in practice and obedience.

For this reason all believers are called saints even in this life even though we are not yet perfected, but are covered with the perfect obedience and righteousness of Christ.

The church is also holy in that she has been consecrated and set apart by God for a holy purpose and use. We see this sense of things in the meaning of church, an assembly of called out ones, those separated, set apart, consecrated to God and for God.

The church is holy because she has been called out of the world and set apart to be holy devoted and dedicated to God. Each member is holy, individually consecrated to God, and the whole church is holy as she is corporately consecrated to God. We have a holy calling, let's live in a manner worthy of our calling out of the world and into the church.

Catholic

Ephesians 2:18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.
19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

Matthew 28:18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **19** Go therefore and ***make disciples of all nations***, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The word catholic, small **c**, means universal. When we use the term as a proper name of a denomination we are referring specifically to the Roman Catholic Church under the authority of the Pope. The Roman Catholic Church is part of the church catholic or the church universal.

The church catholic includes the three broad branches of Christendom, The Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Protestant Church or the church of the Reformation and following.

The glory of the church is seen in that she is universal.

The church is called catholic in the universal sense for three reasons (Aquinas) as we see in Article 27.

Article 27: “This church has existed from the beginning of the world and will last until the end. ... Not confined, bound or limited to a certain place or certain persons. But it is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world.”

The church is universal in respect to place (geographically).

She is spread all over the earth and is not limited to any one location. At Pentecost the church was no longer defined by the narrow limits of the Jewish nation.

The ethnic exclusivity of the old covenant is gone and it's replaced by the new covenant in which Christ calls us to go and make disciples of all nations. The old dividing wall is gone.

Romans 1:8b “... your faith is proclaimed in all the world.”

The church is universal in respect to persons.

It's gathered from all classes and stations, from every tribe, tongue, language and people, from every walk of life, great or small, high or low, rich or poor, men or women, young or old, red, brown, yellow, black, or white.

The church is catholic because it calls to obedience in Christ rulers and slaves, the most educated scholars and the most ignorant fool, the richest business man and the poorest beggar.

The church is catholic in that it is not a respecter of persons, none are rejected and all are accepted who come through the gospel.

Galatians 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

The church is universal in respect to time (chronologically).

The church as the elect people of God has existed from Adam and Eve. One company of people chosen by God.

The Roman Catholics of the reformation time argued that the Protestants were not part of the true church. The Protestants argued back that they had only left the Roman Catholic Church, but were united to the one true catholic church which has existed from the beginning of time and will endure forever when it is permanently gathered in the true sanctuary in the heavenly Jerusalem.

Matthew 16:18 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.

Matthew 28:20 And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

God’s great glory will be reveal when He is worshipped and glorified by saints gathered from the north and the south, the east and the west, from every tribe, tongue, language and people. Let’s live worthy of our calling to love and seek the lost and welcome all who come in our doors.

We will talk in later articles about the purity of the church and the problem of some many denominations and how there are churches that are more or less pure or true or faithful.

Apostolic

This was the most contentious issue between Rome and the Reformers. The Roman Catholic Church claimed for itself apostolic succession from the Apostle Peter to the present pope. The Reformers said that apostolic succession wasn’t based in a person but in the true teaching of apostolic doctrine.

Acts 2:42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching.

Ephesians 2:20 built on the foundation of the *apostles* and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.

The glory of the church is seen in that it is apostolic, grounded on the teaching of the prophets and apostles.

The church is apostolic because her authority comes from the teachings of the apostles faithfully preserved by the Holy Spirit in Scripture which is our foundation and our truth.

The apostolic church upholds and preaches and teaches and loves and embraces and shares the doctrine of the apostles.

II Peter 1:16 For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ... **19** And we have something more sure, the *prophetic* word, to which you will do well to pay attention ...

The issue is one of authority. What is our authority? The Pope, councils, creeds, synods? In the Reformation people threw off the authority of the Pope and the traditions. But today we are no better off. Now we simply throw off the authority of Scripture.

We are left today with the authority of private opinion. We are not a people who like authority or want to be under authority. We go along as long as we get along, but as soon as someone asserts himself over us, we rebel.

Today any pastor with an opinion and enough charisma and enthusiasm and entrepreneurial spirit can start a church.

The church is apostolic when it believes what the prophets and the apostles taught and when it rejects what they reject and when it rejects everything contrary to what they taught.

The church is being apostolic when it stands for the true orthodox faith and it is being apostolic when it declares heresy all that is contrary and opposed to the true orthodox faith. Let's live worthy of our calling and love the truth and defend the truth and share the truth.

Application and Conclusion:

The church is absolutely the most important institution on the face of the earth. To the extent that she is flawed, sinful and corrupt is largely to be understood by the fact that she is also the most attacked institution on earth and has the greatest enemy of any institution on earth. While the gates of hell will never prevail against the church, they have been unleashed against the church in an unrelenting assault.

Pharaohs, Herods, Ceasars, kings, and tyrants have all tried in vain to destroy the church. Thrones, principalities and powers will all pass away but the Church of the Firstborn shall be presented before the Father's throne as the spotless, pure and

perfect Bride of Christ and ushered into eternity shining with the glory of the Son who purchased her and cleansed her with His own precious blood.

It's a blessing and a privilege beyond comparison to be called out of the world, to be delivered from the dominion of the devil, to be set free from our bondage and slavery to sin and Satan, and called into the pure fellowship of Jesus Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, adopted into the family of God, called the children of God and made members of the body of Jesus Christ.

You and I belong to the most important institution in the entire world. Nothing even compares. Not the US Congress, not the Pentagon, not the Supreme Court, not the UN, nothing.

“As members of the body of Christ we are a part of the most wonderful phenomenon in the universe, the most amazing thing God has ever done” (Lloyd-Jones, p. 85). The church is the highest and most supreme manifestation of God's wisdom. In fact, she is the final expression of the wisdom of God, the thing above everything else God has done (Lloyd-Jones, p. 86).

I believe in the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church of Jesus Christ. Glory to God.