

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ECCLESIOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Church

One Body, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of All

UNIT 3: THE MARKS OF THE TRUE CHURCH

What Identifies a Genuine Assembly of Christ's People

Lesson 8

THE FOUR CLASSICAL ATTRIBUTES

One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic, The Nicene Creed's Description of the Church

The church confesses these attributes by faith, not by sight, not yet in their fullness, but as the real and present possession of the community that belongs to the triune God.

"We believe one holy catholic and apostolic church."

The Nicene Creed, A.D. 381

Key Texts: Ephesians 4:4–6; 2:19–22; 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 7:9; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Jude 3

"I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth."

1 Timothy 3:15, NASB 1995

Dr. Joshua Nichols

Pastor, Theologian, Author

faithfultotheword.com

Introduction

In the year A.D. 381, at the Council of Constantinople, the assembled bishops of the church expanded the creed originally produced at Nicaea in 325 to include an explicit confession about the church: “We believe one holy catholic and apostolic church.” These four attributes, one, holy, catholic, apostolic, have been the church’s own self-description in her most solemn confessional act across sixteen centuries, repeated in liturgies from Geneva to Seoul, from Canterbury to Nairobi, from Moscow to Buenos Aires. They are not the property of any single tradition; they are the shared inheritance of the whole church, confessed with full sincerity by Christians who have never agreed on almost anything else. They describe what the church is, not as she appears in any given moment of her historical imperfection, but as she truly is in her deepest nature and as she will be fully revealed at the return of her Lord.

Lesson 7 treated the three Reformation marks, the faithful preaching of the Word, the right administration of the ordinances, and the faithful exercise of discipline, as diagnostic criteria for identifying a true church. Those marks are functional: they assess the church’s fidelity to Christ’s own appointments. The four attributes treated in this lesson are ontological: they describe what the church is in her essential nature, grounded in the character and purposes of the triune God. The marks ask what the church does with what Christ has given her; the attributes describe what the church is by virtue of what God has made her. Both kinds of description are necessary, and neither is complete without the other. A congregation can meet the functional test of the three marks without yet displaying the full character of the four attributes; the attributes are the eschatological vision toward which the marks are oriented.

Each of the four attributes has been appropriated, distorted, and weaponized in the history of the church in ways that have obscured rather than illuminated its genuine biblical meaning. “One” has been used to justify the coercive imposition of institutional uniformity by those who identified their own organization with the one true church. “Holy” has been used to license both perfectionist separatism and moralistic legalism. “Catholic” has been virtually monopolized by the Roman tradition, stripped of its original Greek sense and converted into a denominational label. “Apostolic” has been used to justify the Roman doctrine of apostolic succession and the claim that only churches in hierarchical continuity with Peter can be genuine churches of Christ. This lesson recovers each attribute from its distortions, grounds it in its biblical and theological substance, and asks what it means for the practical life of a local congregation that confesses the Nicene Creed with theological seriousness.

The governing conviction of this lesson is stated in the cover maxim: the church confesses these attributes by faith, not by sight. The church is one, but she is visibly divided. She is holy, but she contains sinners in various stages of sanctification, and some who are not yet regenerate at all. She is catholic, but particular congregations are always culturally and historically located, and none encompasses the full breadth of the believing community across all times and places. She is apostolic, but the pressure to compromise the apostolic deposit is constant, and no congregation is immune. The Nicene confession is not a description of what the church has achieved; it is a description of what she has been given by God, what she confesses by faith, and what she will fully embody only at the consummation of all things. Holding together the eschatological fullness of the attributes and the present imperfection of their expression is the theological art this lesson attempts to model.

I. THE CREED AND ITS CONTEXT

A Gift from the Ancient Church to Every Generation

A. *The Nicene Creed and the Four Attributes*

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of A.D. 381 is the most widely received doctrinal statement in the history of the Christian church. Its authority rests not on the council that produced it but on its fidelity to the apostolic teaching of Holy Scripture, a fidelity that has been recognized and tested across sixteen centuries of church life in virtually every Christian tradition. The creed's ecclesiological clause, "We believe one holy catholic and apostolic church", is notable for its brevity and its depth. In six words it describes four attributes of the church that require a lifetime of theological reflection to fully appreciate.

The four attributes were not invented at Nicaea or Constantinople; they are the crystallization of a self-understanding that the church had been developing since the apostolic period. Ignatius of Antioch, writing in the early second century, used the phrase "catholic church" to describe the universal community of believers gathered around the bishop. The concept of the church's apostolicity was central to the second-century church's defense against Gnostic innovations: the true church is the church that teaches what the apostles taught. The church's oneness and holiness are themes that pervade the Pauline letters, the Johannine writings, and the letter to the Ephesians in particular. The creed did not create these attributes; it gave the church's existing self-understanding its most compact and authoritative confessional form.

The Protestant reception of the Nicene Creed's ecclesiological clause is an exercise in theological discernment: receiving the creed's genuine content while rejecting the distortions that various traditions have attached to it. The Reformers universally affirmed the four attributes but contested the meanings that Rome had assigned to "catholic" (the exclusive possession of the Roman church) and "apostolic" (determined by hierarchical succession from Peter). The Baptist tradition stands in this Reformed reception: it confesses all four attributes of the Nicene Creed with full sincerity, while insisting that "catholic" means universal, encompassing all genuine believers regardless of institutional affiliation, and that "apostolic" means doctrinally faithful to the apostolic deposit preserved in Scripture, not institutionally connected to a chain of episcopal ordinations.

B. *The Attributes as Descriptions of the Church's Ontology*

The four attributes describe what the church is in her essential nature, not what she does or what she must accomplish. This ontological character distinguishes them from the three Reformation marks, which are functional and diagnostic. The attributes are given to the church by God; the marks are practiced by the church in faithfulness to God's appointments. The church is one because God is one; she is holy because she is set apart by the Holy One; she is catholic because the gospel knows no ethnic or geographic boundary; she is apostolic because she is built on the foundation that God laid through the apostles. These attributes belong to the church as the purchased possession of the triune God, not as achievements that the church has produced by her own faithfulness.

This ontological grounding of the four attributes has a crucial pastoral implication: the attributes cannot be lost, even when they are imperfectly expressed. The church's unity is not destroyed by her visible divisions; it is obscured and contradicted by them, but it subsists in the one Spirit who indwells every genuine believer. The

church's holiness is not abolished by the sin of her members; it is the positional reality of those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:2), being progressively worked out in their lives by the Spirit. The church's catholicity is not diminished by the cultural particularity of any given congregation; it is the property of the universal community to which every local assembly belongs by virtue of union with Christ. The church's apostolicity is not forfeited by any congregation that departs from the apostolic deposit; it is the standard against which every departure is measured and from which every recovery is made possible.

The church confesses the four attributes by faith because they are the property of the invisible church in her eschatological fullness, and the visible church in her present, historical form is always an imperfect approximation of that fullness. But the confession is not merely aspirational; it is grounded in the theological realities that are already and truly present in the community of the redeemed: one Spirit, one Lord, one God and Father (Ephesians 4:4–6), one redemption accomplished through the blood of Christ, one inheritance awaiting the full company of the elect. The church confesses what is already true of her in the deepest theological sense, while pressing forward toward the full visible realization of that truth in the age to come.

II. THE CHURCH IS ONE

Unity Grounded in the Unity of the Triune God

A. *The Theological Ground of the Church's Unity*

The church is one because she belongs to one Lord, is animated by one Spirit, and is the creation of one God and Father of all. Paul's sevenfold confession in Ephesians 4:4–6, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all", is the New Testament's most concentrated statement of the theological ground of the church's oneness. The seven unities are not human achievements but divine givens: the church is one because the God to whom she belongs is one. Her unity is a Trinitarian reality before it is an ecclesiological one, and any ecclesiology that loses sight of this Trinitarian ground will inevitably either collapse the church's unity into institutional uniformity or abandon it as an impossible ideal.

The oneness of the church is the oneness of the body of Christ: not the numerical unity of a single organization, but the organic unity of a living community whose many members are united to a single Head. Paul's body metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 is the primary New Testament vehicle for this understanding. The body is one because it has one Head, and the one Head communicates His life to every member through the one Spirit. The diversity of the members, their different gifts, different functions, different cultural contexts, different historical locations, does not undermine the body's unity; it is the expression of the Head's richness working through the full range of the body's members. Unity and diversity are not in tension in the church; they are the complementary dimensions of the one body's Spirit-given life.

The oneness of the church also has an eschatological dimension that prevents it from being collapsed into any present institutional arrangement. The full visible unity of the one church awaits the gathering of all the elect into the presence of the Lord at His return. The prayer of John 17:20–23, "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me", is a prayer for a unity that

is rooted in the Trinitarian unity of Father and Son, that is already spiritually real in the community of all who are in Christ, and that will be fully and visibly manifest only in the eschatological community of the redeemed. The church's present labor for visible unity is the pursuit of an eschatological reality, not the construction of a human institution.

B. The Unity the Church Must Maintain and the Divisions She Must Mourn

Paul's exhortation in Ephesians 4:3, "be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace", is addressed to the present responsibility of the local congregation to maintain and express the unity that the Spirit has already established. The unity of the Spirit is not achieved by human effort; it is maintained by human faithfulness. The specific virtues Paul lists as the means of maintaining unity, humility, gentleness, patience, tolerance for one another in love, are the Spirit-given character traits that resist the divisive impulses of pride, harshness, impatience, and intolerance. The church's unity is always threatened from within by exactly these vices, and it is maintained by exactly these virtues. Unity is not the absence of disagreement; it is the presence of love strong enough to hold the community together through disagreement.

The church's present visible divisions are a theological scandal that must be mourned honestly, not rationalized away. Every unnecessary division in the body of Christ is a contradiction of the first attribute, a denial of the Trinitarian unity that is the church's deepest nature. Not every division is unnecessary, there are genuine gospel-level issues that demand separation, and the church that maintains unity at the cost of doctrinal faithfulness has not preserved the first attribute but betrayed the fourth. But many of the divisions that currently fracture the visible church are the product of pride, historical accident, cultural preference, and institutional self-interest rather than genuine doctrinal necessity. The honest confession of this reality, that the church's visible divisions are partly her own fault, that she has not always been diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit, is both theologically accurate and pastorally necessary.

The practical implications of the first attribute for the local congregation are several. It means that the congregation should actively pursue fellowship with other genuine churches in its community, not treat its autonomy as license for isolation. It means that the congregation should be ruthlessly self-critical about whether divisions within its own membership, between families, between factions, between generations, are being addressed with the diligence that Paul's exhortation requires. It means that the congregation should view its participation in the broader confessional community as a contribution to the visible unity of the church, not merely as an institutional affiliation. And it means that the congregation should wait with genuine longing for the eschatological day when the prayer of John 17 will be fully and visibly answered, when the one body will be gathered before the one Lord in the one consummated community of the redeemed.

III. THE CHURCH IS HOLY

Set Apart by God, Indwelt by the Spirit, Called to Holiness

A. The Three Dimensions of the Church's Holiness

The holiness of the church is the most immediately paradoxical of the four attributes, because it is the attribute most visibly contradicted by the church's actual condition in the present age. The church is holy, and yet she

contains sinners in various stages of sanctification, some of whose conduct falls far short of the holiness the gospel demands. The resolution of this paradox lies in recognizing that the church's holiness has three distinct but inseparable dimensions: positional holiness, progressive holiness, and eschatological holiness, each of which is grounded in the work of the triune God and each of which has a different relationship to the present and the future.

Positional holiness is the holiness that belongs to the church by virtue of her relationship to God. Paul addresses the Corinthian congregation, a community notorious for its moral failures, as "those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling" (1 Corinthians 1:2). The perfect participle "sanctified" (*hēgiasmenois*) indicates a completed action whose results are ongoing: the Corinthians have been definitively set apart by God for His purposes, and that setting apart is a present and abiding reality regardless of their continuing moral struggles. This positional holiness is not earned by the congregation's moral achievement; it is the gift of union with the Holy One, imputed to those who are in Christ. The church is holy because she belongs to the Holy God, and that belonging is not conditional on her performance.

Progressive holiness is the ongoing process by which the Spirit is working in the church and in each of her members to produce a life that corresponds to the positional holiness she already possesses. Paul's description of Christ's purpose for the church in Ephesians 5:25–27 captures this dynamic: He is "sanctifying her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless." The present participle "sanctifying" indicates ongoing action: Christ's sanctifying work through the ministry of the Word is not a completed event but a continuing process. The church is being made holy through the regular, faithful, patient ministry of the Word and Spirit in the congregation's life. Progressive holiness is the target that the three Reformation marks are aimed at; it is what faithful preaching, right administration of the ordinances, and church discipline are all working toward.

B. Holiness as Gift and Demand

The holiness of the church is simultaneously a gift and a demand, and the proper relationship between these two dimensions is one of the most practically important theological questions in the doctrine of the church. The gift of holiness, the positional reality of being set apart by God, the eschatological certainty of being presented without spot or wrinkle at the last day, is the ground of the demand. God does not call the church to holiness as a condition of His acceptance; He calls the church to holiness as the appropriate response to an acceptance already given. The indicative precedes the imperative: "You are holy [indicative]; therefore be holy [imperative]" is the grammar of the New Testament's holiness ethic (cf. 1 Peter 1:15–16, quoting Leviticus 11:44–45).

The demand for holiness in the church has both individual and corporate dimensions, and the corporate dimension is frequently underemphasized in contexts where the Protestant emphasis on individual sanctification has become detached from the communal context in which the New Testament situates it. The church's holiness is not the sum of its members' individual holiness; it is the quality of the community's life together, the character of its fellowship, the integrity of its worship, the honesty of its relationships, the justice of its common life. A congregation can contain many individually sincere and devout members and still be corporately compromised: by unaddressed factions (1 Corinthians 1:10–12), by tolerated immorality (1 Corinthians 5:1–2), by unjust treatment of the poor at the Lord's table (1 Corinthians 11:20–22), or by the suppression of the Spirit's gifts in

favor of human preference (1 Corinthians 14). Corporate holiness is a dimension of the third attribute that the third Reformation mark, the faithful exercise of discipline, is specifically designed to protect.

The eschatological dimension of the church's holiness is the anchor that prevents both perfectionist despair and complacent nominalism. The church will be fully holy at the return of Christ, "holy and blameless", without spot or wrinkle, presented in glory to the Bridegroom who died to make her so. That eschatological certainty does not license complacency about present holiness; Paul's argument is precisely the opposite. Because the end is certain, the present process is urgent. Because Christ will present the church without spot or wrinkle, the church must allow His sanctifying work through the Word to cleanse whatever spots and wrinkles are currently present. The eschatological holiness of the church is not an excuse for tolerating the present church's imperfections; it is the measure against which those imperfections are identified and addressed, and the hope that gives the hard work of progressive sanctification its assurance of ultimate success.

IV. THE CHURCH IS CATHOLIC

Universal Without Being Uniform

A. *The Original Meaning of Catholic*

The word "catholic" has suffered one of the most thoroughgoing semantic appropriations in the history of Christian vocabulary. In its original Greek form, *katholikos*, from *kata* (according to) and *holos* (whole), it simply means "universal," "whole," or "according to the whole." When Ignatius of Antioch used the phrase "catholic church" (*holē hē katholikē ekklesia*) in his letter to the Smyrnaeans around A.D. 110, he meant the universal church as opposed to any local or sectarian assembly. The word described the church's scope, her universal, trans-local, trans-ethnic character, not her institutional form. It was only through the centuries of Rome's institutional self-identification with the universal church that "catholic" became a denominational label rather than a descriptive adjective.

The Protestant recovery of the word's original meaning is not a polemical move against Rome but a straightforward return to the pre-Roman usage that the creed itself reflects. When the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381 confessed the "one holy catholic and apostolic church," it was not confessing allegiance to a Roman institution that would not exist in its developed form for several more centuries. It was confessing the universal, whole, comprehensive character of the one church of Christ, a church that is not the property of any single cultural tradition, geographic location, or institutional hierarchy, but that encompasses all genuine believers from every nation and tongue and tribe and people across all times and all places. That is the catholicity this lesson affirms, and it is precisely what the word originally meant.

The biblical ground of the church's catholicity is the universal scope of the Abrahamic promise, "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3), and its fulfillment in the community of all who are in Christ, the true seed of Abraham (Galatians 3:16, 29). The great doxological vision of Revelation 7:9 is the eschatological expression of the church's catholicity: "A great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." The church gathered before the throne at the consummation is catholic in the most literal possible sense: she is the whole, the universal, the complete gathering of all those whom the one God has called from every corner of His creation. No culture has a

monopoly on the gospel; no ethnicity is excluded from the new humanity; no language is too remote for the Spirit to bring the Word of God to life.

B. Catholicity Without Uniformity

The catholicity of the church does not require uniformity. The one universal church is expressed in a rich diversity of cultural, linguistic, and liturgical forms that reflect the breadth of the human community that the gospel has reached and transformed. The congregation that gathers in East Texas and the congregation that gathers in Lagos and the congregation that gathers in Seoul are all expressions of the one catholic church, and they look and sound remarkably different from one another, not because the gospel has been adapted to cultural preferences but because the same Spirit has worked in different cultural soils to produce communities whose worship, fellowship, and mission take culturally particular forms. This diversity is not a problem to be overcome by imposing a single cultural or liturgical form on the universal church; it is the expression of the gospel's power to transform human beings within their own cultural contexts.

The catholicity of the church has direct implications for the local congregation's self-understanding. No local congregation is the whole church; every local congregation is a particular, culturally located, historically bounded expression of the universal church. This means that every local congregation stands in relationship to the broader catholic community, in a relationship of mutual learning, mutual accountability, and mutual enrichment. The local congregation that is not in any meaningful relationship with the broader body of Christ, that reads no theology from outside its own tradition, that has no connection to churches in other cultural contexts, and that treats its own particular form of church life as the definitive pattern, has mistaken its particular cultural expression of the gospel for the universal church herself. The catholic attribute is a standing corrective to every form of ecclesiological parochialism.

The most striking contemporary expression of the church's catholicity is the shift of the world's Christian population toward the Global South. The church that was once predominantly European and North American is now predominantly African, Asian, and Latin American. The center of Christian gravity has moved, and this is not a demographic accident but the fulfillment of the Great Commission's vision of disciples made from all nations. The Western church that relates to the Global South church primarily as a missionary sending body that has nothing to receive has misunderstood its own catholicity. The Global South church has gifts, of theological freshness, of liturgical vitality, of missional zeal, of patient faith in the face of poverty and persecution, that the Western church desperately needs. The catholic church is a community of mutual giving and receiving, in which no single cultural tradition is the norm and every expression of genuine faith enriches the whole.

V. THE CHURCH IS APOSTOLIC

Built on Apostolic Doctrine, Not Apostolic Succession

A. Two Understandings of Apostolicity

The fourth attribute, apostolicity, is the one most directly contested between Rome and the Protestant traditions, because it touches the question of where the church's authority resides and how it is transmitted. The Roman Catholic understanding of apostolicity holds that the church's apostolic character consists in its unbroken

hierarchical continuity with the apostles through a lineage of ordained bishops, beginning with Peter and extending through the popes to the present bishop of Rome. On this understanding, the church's apostolicity is institutional and genealogical: the church is apostolic because her bishops stand in an unbroken line of ordination reaching back to the apostles themselves. A community that lacks this institutional pedigree, however faithful it may be in its doctrine and worship, is not apostolic in the Roman sense and therefore not a genuine church.

The Protestant understanding of apostolicity holds that the church's apostolic character consists in her fidelity to the teaching of the apostles as preserved in Holy Scripture. The church is apostolic insofar as she teaches what the apostles taught, believes what the apostles believed, and practices what the apostles commanded. The test of apostolicity is doctrinal, not institutional: it is not whether the church's leadership can trace an unbroken line of ordained succession back to Peter, but whether the church's proclamation faithfully represents the apostolic word that Scripture preserves. This understanding is grounded in Ephesians 2:20, where Paul describes the church as "having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone." The foundation is the apostolic teaching, not the apostolic office; and every generation of the church is apostolic to the extent that it builds on that foundation.

The historical argument for the Protestant understanding of apostolicity is as powerful as the exegetical one: the Roman doctrine of apostolic succession did not guarantee doctrinal faithfulness. The medieval papacy, which by Rome's own criteria stood in unbroken succession from Peter, presided over centuries of doctrinal corruption, moral scandal, and the systematic suppression of genuine gospel proclamation. If institutional succession were the guarantee of apostolicity, the medieval church should have been the most faithfully apostolic institution in the world. Instead, it was the Reformers, men who stood in no unbroken line of episcopal ordination but who recovered the apostolic teaching from the pages of Scripture, who were most genuinely apostolic in the Protestant sense. Doctrinal faithfulness, not institutional genealogy, is the criterion by which apostolicity is determined.

B. The Content of Apostolic Doctrine

The apostolic doctrine to which the church must be faithful is the body of teaching delivered through the apostles and preserved in Holy Scripture, what Jude calls "the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints" (Jude 3). This is not an open-ended tradition that develops and expands across the centuries through the ongoing teaching of the church's magisterium; it is a fixed deposit, complete in the canon of Scripture, that the church in every generation is called to receive, guard, and transmit without addition or subtraction. The apostolicity of the church is therefore inseparable from the doctrine of the Scripture's sufficiency: a church that holds Scripture to be the sole final authority for faith and practice is, by that very commitment, committed to apostolicity. A church that supplements Scripture with authoritative tradition, ongoing revelation, or the binding decrees of an institutional hierarchy has departed from the apostolic conviction about the completeness and sufficiency of the apostolic deposit.

The specific content of the apostolic doctrine that determines the church's apostolicity is the whole counsel of God as Scripture presents it, not a reduced canon of "essential doctrines" that permits the neglect of the apostles' teaching on the church, the ordinances, the nature of salvation, the role of the Spirit, or the shape of the Christian life. Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders is the paradigm: "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God" (Acts 20:27). The apostolic church is not the church that teaches only a minimal orthodoxy while remaining agnostic or negligent about the full range of the apostolic deposit; it is the church that declares, with Paul's pastoral courage and thoroughness, the whole counsel of God. The fourth attribute calls every pastor and

every congregation to the kind of comprehensive, courageous, theologically substantive proclamation that settles for nothing less than the full apostolic inheritance.

The Baptist tradition's commitment to apostolicity is expressed in its consistent appeal to Scripture as the final authority for every aspect of church life: its doctrine, its government, its ordinances, and its discipline. The 1689 Confession's opening chapter on Scripture, its inerrancy, authority, sufficiency, and perspicuity, is the doctrinal foundation of the Baptist tradition's apostolicity. A congregation that holds Scripture to be inerrant, authoritative, and sufficient for all matters of faith and practice is a congregation committed to building only on the apostolic foundation, and to refusing every human supplement or replacement. The Baptist tradition's willingness to be corrected by Scripture alone, even when that correction challenges cherished traditions, cultural assumptions, or institutional preferences, is its most important expression of the fourth attribute.

VI. THE IDEAL AND THE REAL

Confessing the Attributes in the Already-and-Not-Yet

A. The Tension Between Confession and Reality

The most honest and theologically rigorous engagement with the four attributes requires an unflinching acknowledgment of the tension between what the creed confesses and what the church actually displays in any given moment of her historical life. The church is one, but the visible church is divided into thousands of denominations, associations, and independent congregations separated by genuine doctrinal disagreements, historical grievances, cultural preferences, and institutional self-interest. The church is holy, but congregations contain sinners who sin, leaders who fall, communities that drift, and institutions that protect themselves at the cost of the people they were established to serve. The church is catholic, but particular congregations are always culturally particular, and the breadth of the universal community is never fully visible in any single assembly. The church is apostolic, but the pressure to compromise the apostolic deposit is constant, and every generation faces the temptation to exchange the faith once delivered for the cultural accommodation that promises a wider hearing and a more comfortable institutional life.

This tension is not a failure of theological nerve; it is the honest consequence of living in the "already and not yet" of redemptive history. The four attributes are fully present in the invisible church, in the totality of the elect as God knows them, in the communion of all genuine believers united to Christ by the one Spirit. They are imperfectly expressed in the visible church, in the historically concrete assemblies of professing believers in every age and culture, where the Spirit is at work but sin is also still present. They will be fully and visibly realized in the eschatological church, in the great multitude of Revelation 7:9, visibly one, visibly holy, visibly catholic, visibly apostolic, gathered before the throne of God and the Lamb in the fullness of the age to come. The creed confesses by faith what the Spirit is presently working toward and what the Lord will finally bring to completion at His return.

The practical effect of this already-and-not-yet tension is not despair but a combination of honest realism and active hope. Honest realism: the congregation that confesses the four attributes must be willing to evaluate its own life honestly against the standard they set, acknowledging where the unity is being strained, where the holiness is being compromised, where the catholicity is being narrowed by parochialism, and where the apostolicity is being eroded by accommodation to cultural pressure. Active hope: the congregation that confesses

the four attributes does so in the confidence that the God who has promised to bring the church to her eschatological fullness is presently at work through His Spirit and His Word to advance that fullness in the life of every faithful congregation. The creed is not a description of a distant ideal; it is the confession of a present reality that is being progressively manifested and will be finally consummated.

B. The Attributes as Criteria of Self-Examination

The four attributes serve as powerful criteria of congregational self-examination when they are held with theological seriousness alongside an honest recognition of the present church's imperfect realization of them. The first attribute calls the congregation to ask: are we diligently preserving the unity of the Spirit? Are we pursuing fellowship with genuine sister churches? Are we addressing the divisions within our own community with the humility, gentleness, patience, and love that Paul prescribes? Are we contributing to the visible unity of the one church, or are we adding to her divisions through pride, insularity, or institutional self-interest?

The second attribute calls the congregation to ask: are we genuinely pursuing the holiness to which the gospel calls us? Not the performance of holiness before an observing community, but the genuine transformation of the community's corporate life by the sanctifying work of the Word and Spirit. Are the means of holiness, the Word, the ordinances, the discipline, the mutual accountability of covenant membership, being faithfully employed? Is the congregation visibly different from the surrounding culture in any morally significant way? Is it becoming more holy, more set apart, more like the community that Christ is preparing to present to Himself without spot or wrinkle?

The third attribute calls the congregation to ask: are we genuinely connected to the catholic community of all genuine believers? Are we learning from traditions and cultural expressions of faith beyond our own? Are we in relationship with the global church, praying for it, supporting it financially, being enriched by its theological and devotional witness? Are we resisting the temptation to treat our own particular cultural and liturgical form of church life as the universal standard against which all other expressions are measured? The fourth attribute calls the congregation to ask: are we faithful to the apostolic deposit in its fullness? Are we declaring the whole counsel of God, or are we selecting the parts of the apostolic inheritance that our cultural moment finds congenial and neglecting the parts that would challenge or disturb? Are we building on the apostolic foundation, or are we supplementing it with human traditions, contemporary preferences, or cultural accommodations that the apostles would not recognize?

VII. THE FOUR ATTRIBUTES IN THE LIFE OF THE LOCAL CONGREGATION

From Confession to Practice

A. Making the Creed's Confession Concrete

The four attributes of the Nicene Creed are not merely doctrinal propositions to be assented to and then filed away in the systematic theology drawer. They are descriptions of what the church truly is, and what she truly is must become the pattern of what she visibly does. The confession "We believe one holy catholic and apostolic church" places four specific and demanding obligations on every congregation that makes it: the obligation to

pursue and maintain unity; the obligation to pursue and embody holiness; the obligation to understand itself as a particular expression of the universal community and to live in relationship with that broader community; and the obligation to build its entire life on the apostolic foundation of Holy Scripture and to pass on the apostolic deposit undiluted to the generation that follows. These are not abstract ideals; they are the concrete obligations that flow from the concrete theological realities the creed describes.

The obligation of unity expresses itself in the congregation's internal culture of love, patience, and forbearance; in its active pursuit of fellowship with sister churches in its community; in its support of the broader confessional community of like-minded congregations; and in its refusal to allow the secondary differences that distinguish it from other genuine churches to become barriers to the basic fellowship that the one Spirit grounds. The congregation that confesses the first attribute will be an ecumenically humble congregation, one that knows that the one universal church is larger than its own tradition and that it has as much to learn from others as to contribute to them.

The obligation of holiness expresses itself in the congregation's commitment to faithful preaching (the primary instrument of progressive sanctification), to the right administration of the ordinances (the visible enactment of the gospel that seals and renews the holiness covenant), to the practice of church discipline (the community's mechanism for maintaining the integrity of its covenant claims), and to the mutual accountability of covenant membership (the relational fabric in which progressive holiness takes its corporate form). The congregation that confesses the second attribute will be a community that takes sin seriously, not with the harshness of perfectionism or the rigidity of legalism, but with the pastoral seriousness of those who know that the community's holiness is the concern of the Bridegroom who is preparing them for the wedding feast.

B. Apostolicity as the Congregation's Most Urgent Obligation

Of the four obligations that flow from the four attributes, the fourth, apostolicity, is arguably the most urgently needed in the contemporary evangelical church, because it is the attribute most directly threatened by the cultural pressures that are reshaping the church's proclamation and practice in the early twenty-first century. The temptation to exchange the apostolic deposit for cultural accommodation is as old as the church and as fresh as this morning's social media feed: the temptation to soften the gospel's demands in order to increase its cultural palatability; to replace the apostles' teaching on sex, marriage, authority, sin, and judgment with the surrounding culture's assumptions; to reframe the apostolic proclamation in the therapeutic categories that the culture finds more congenial than the forensic and eschatological categories that the apostles actually used. Every one of these temptations is a departure from the fourth attribute, and every departure from the fourth attribute is a departure from the apostolic identity that is the church's most fundamental heritage.

The congregation that takes the fourth attribute seriously will cultivate what might be called an apostolic stubbornness: a settled, cheerful, culturally courageous refusal to trade the inherited apostolic deposit for the applause of any cultural moment. This apostolic stubbornness is not intellectual arrogance or cultural contempt; it is the fruit of genuine conviction that the apostolic word is the living Word of the living God, that it is sufficient for every challenge that the church faces in every cultural context, and that the congregation that holds it will outlast every cultural wind that has tried to blow it down. Jude's call to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints" (Jude 3) is addressed to every congregation in every generation, and it is the most direct biblical expression of the fourth attribute's practical demand.

The congregation that lives all four attributes together, striving for visible unity in the bond of peace, pursuing progressive holiness through the means of grace, understanding itself as a particular expression of the universal community of the redeemed, and building its entire life on the apostolic foundation of Holy Scripture, is a congregation that is doing justice to the creed it confesses. It is a congregation that will not be remembered for its size or its cultural influence or its institutional impressiveness, but for its faithfulness to what the church truly is: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, the creation of the triune God, the purchase of the Son's blood, the dwelling of the Holy Spirit, and the instrument through which God is displaying His manifold wisdom to the watching universe until the day when what the creed confesses by faith will be revealed in its full and glorious eschatological truth.

“After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands.”

Revelation 7:9, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Nicene Creed	The ecumenical creed produced at the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) and expanded at the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381). The most widely received doctrinal statement in the history of the church. Its ecclesiological clause, “We believe one holy catholic and apostolic church”, is the foundational confessional description of the church’s four classical attributes.
One (attribute)	The first classical attribute of the church: the church is one because she belongs to one Lord, is animated by one Spirit, and is the creation of one God and Father of all (Ephesians 4:4–6). The unity is Trinitarian in its ground, organic in its nature (one body, many members), and eschatological in its full realization. The church’s present visible divisions are a contradiction of this attribute that must be honestly mourned and actively addressed.
Holy (attribute)	The second classical attribute of the church: the church is holy in three dimensions. Positionally: she is definitively set apart by God for His purposes by virtue of union with Christ. Progressively: she is being sanctified by the Spirit through the ongoing ministry of Word, ordinance, and discipline. Eschatologically: she will be presented without spot or wrinkle at the return of Christ (Ephesians 5:27). The holiness is simultaneously gift (indicative) and demand (imperative).
Catholic (attribute)	The third classical attribute of the church: from the Greek <i>katholikos</i> , meaning “universal” or “whole.” The church is catholic in that she encompasses all genuine believers from every nation, tribe, tongue, and people, across all times and all places. Predates and is independent of its Roman denominational appropriation. Does not require institutional uniformity; the one universal church is expressed in a rich diversity of cultural and liturgical forms.
Apostolic (attribute)	The fourth classical attribute of the church: the church is apostolic by virtue of being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20). The Protestant understanding defines apostolicity as doctrinal faithfulness to the apostolic teaching preserved in Scripture (in contrast to Rome’s institutional definition through apostolic succession). The test is doctrinal fidelity, not institutional lineage.
Apostolic Succession	The Roman Catholic and some Anglican doctrine that the church’s apostolic character consists in unbroken hierarchical continuity with the apostles through a lineage of ordained bishops. Rejected by the Protestant and Baptist traditions on both exegetical grounds (the foundation of Ephesians 2:20 is apostolic doctrine, not apostolic office) and historical grounds (institutional succession did not guarantee doctrinal faithfulness in the medieval church).
Positional Holiness	The holiness that belongs to the church by virtue of her relationship to God in Christ, the definitive setting-apart of all who are united to Christ by faith. Described by Paul’s address to the Corinthians as “those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling” (1 Corinthians 1:2). Not earned by moral achievement; the gift of union with the Holy One. The indicative ground of the imperative call to progressive holiness.
Already-and-Not-Yet	The theological description of the church’s eschatological situation between the first and second advents of Christ. The four attributes of the church are “already” fully true of her in the invisible church, “not yet” fully visible in the present imperfect expressions of the visible church, and will be “finally” fully and visibly realized at the return of Christ. The church confesses the attributes by faith in the already, pursues them in the not yet, and hopes for their fullness in the finally.
Catholicity	The quality of being universal, comprehensive, and trans-cultural. The church’s catholicity is the attribute by which she encompasses all genuine believers across all times and places, and by which no single cultural tradition can claim to be the definitive expression of the universal

	church. Practically expressed through inter-church fellowship, global mission engagement, learning from other traditions and cultural expressions of faith, and humility about the cultural particularity of one's own congregation.
Apostolic Deposit	The body of teaching delivered through the apostles and preserved in Holy Scripture, "the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints" (Jude 3). Fixed and complete in the canon of Scripture; not subject to development or supplementation by ongoing tradition or continuing revelation. The standard against which the apostolicity of any church or teaching is measured. The Baptist tradition's commitment to Scripture's inerrancy, authority, and sufficiency is its formal commitment to receiving and transmitting the apostolic deposit.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the four classical attributes of the church are genuine theological descriptions of what the church truly is, not aspirational ideals that the church might one day achieve, but present realities that belong to the church by virtue of what God has made her in Christ. The church is already one in the Spirit, already holy in Christ, already catholic in her universal scope, already apostolic in the deposit she has received. These are the church's possessions before they are her achievements, and they ground her life and mission with the certainty of God's own character and purposes.

We must believe that the tension between the attributes as they are confessed and the attributes as they are displayed is not a theological problem but a pastoral reality that must be held honestly. The creed is not describing a fiction when it confesses the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic; it is confessing what is fully true of the invisible church, partially true of the visible church, and will be fully visible in the eschatological church. The honest acknowledgment of the gap between confession and reality is not faithlessness; it is the theological honesty of those who know that the church lives in the already-and-not-yet of redemptive history.

We must believe that the four attributes impose four concrete obligations on every local congregation: the obligation to pursue and maintain unity; the obligation to pursue and embody holiness; the obligation to understand itself as a particular expression of the universal community; and the obligation to build its entire life on the apostolic foundation of Scripture and to transmit the apostolic deposit undiluted to the generation that follows. These are not optional aspirations; they are the obligations that flow from the attributes that God has given the church, and the congregation that takes the Nicene confession seriously will take these obligations with equal seriousness.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

We should feel the wonder of belonging to a community that is genuinely one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, not by her own achievement but by the gift of the triune God. The small, ordinary, sometimes struggling congregation that meets faithfully Sunday by Sunday is part of the one universal church that stretches across all ages and all cultures; it is the holy community set apart by God and being sanctified by His Spirit; it participates in the catholicity of the whole people of God; and it is, when it is faithful to the apostolic deposit, a genuine expression of the apostolic church that the creed confesses. That should produce not complacency but awe, the awe of those who know what they have been given.

We should feel the grief of the church's present failures against the standard of the four attributes: the needless divisions that contradict the first attribute, the tolerated impurity that contradicts the second, the parochialism that contradicts the third, and the cultural accommodation that contradicts the fourth. This grief should not produce despair, the God who has promised to bring the church to her eschatological fullness will accomplish what He has promised. But it should produce the kind of pastoral seriousness that refuses to be satisfied with the present imperfect expression of the attributes and that presses forward in the pursuit of what the creed confesses.

We should desire for this congregation to be genuinely characterized by all four attributes in its visible, daily, corporate life. Not the performance of the attributes for the sake of theological reputation, but the genuine embodiment of what the creed confesses: a community that is actually working to maintain the unity of the Spirit,

actually pursuing holiness through the means of grace, actually connected to the broader catholic community of the redeemed, and actually building its life on the apostolic foundation with the apostolic stubbornness that Jude's call to earnest contention requires.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Memorize the Nicene Creed's ecclesiological clause: "We believe one holy catholic and apostolic church." For each of the four attributes, write one sentence describing what that attribute means theologically and one sentence describing what it demands of you personally as a member of this congregation. Bring both sentences to the next study session.
- Evaluate this congregation's current practice against the obligation of catholicity: are you genuinely connected to the broader body of Christ beyond your own congregational walls? Identify one specific relationship with a believer or a congregation in a different cultural, ethnic, or denominational context that you could pursue or deepen in the next three months. Commit to one concrete act of cross-cultural Christian fellowship.
- The lesson identifies apostolicity as the most urgently needed attribute in the contemporary evangelical church. Identify one specific area of your own life or this congregation's practice in which cultural accommodation has begun to soften, dilute, or replace the apostolic deposit. Bring that identification to God in honest prayer, asking for the apostolic stubbornness that Jude's call to earnest contention requires.
- Read Jude 3–4 this week as the New Testament's most direct call to apostolicity. Who are the "certain persons" Jude describes in verse 4? What have they done to the apostolic deposit? What does Jude's urgency, "I felt the necessity to write to you", tell you about how seriously he regards the threat to apostolicity in his own day? What comparable threats exist in your own day, and how does the congregation's life and preaching need to respond to them?
- Pray specifically this week for the visible unity of the church: for the healing of genuine doctrinal divisions where Scripture's teaching has become clearer and the historical grounds for division have diminished; for the maintenance of necessary doctrinal distinctions where Scripture's teaching has been compromised in the name of a false unity; and for the grace to distinguish between these two kinds of division with the theological wisdom and pastoral charity that both require.

Key Texts: *Ephesians 4:4–6; 2:19–22; 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 7:9; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Jude 3*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- When you recite or hear the Nicene Creed's confession, "We believe one holy catholic and apostolic church", which of the four attributes most immediately resonates with your experience of the church, and which seems most remote from or contradicted by your experience? What accounts for that difference?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Ephesians 4:1–6. How does Paul ground the church's unity in the Trinitarian structure of the seven unities (one body, Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism, God and Father)? What specific virtues does Paul name as the means of maintaining unity (verse 2–3)? How does the relationship between Paul's exhortation to maintain unity and his grounding of unity in the sevenfold Trinitarian reality suggest that unity is preserved, not created, by human effort?
- Read 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 1 Corinthians 3:16–17 together. How does Paul simultaneously affirm the positional holiness of the Corinthian congregation (saints by calling, sanctified in Christ Jesus) in 1:2 and warn them against destroying the holy temple they are in 3:17? What is the relationship between the positional holiness of 1:2 and the threatened corporate holiness of 3:17? What does this combination tell us about how the second attribute functions in the visible church?
- Read Revelation 7:9. List the specific categories of diversity that the multitude before the throne represents. What does the gathering of all these groups in one worshiping community before the throne demonstrate about the third attribute's content? How does the eschatological fulfillment of catholicity in Revelation 7:9 function as both a promise (what the church will be) and a standard (what the church's present life should approximate)?
- Read Ephesians 2:19–22. What is the "foundation" on which the church is built, and who is the cornerstone? How does this passage ground the Protestant understanding of apostolicity in the apostolic teaching rather than in the apostolic office? What is the church being built into, and who is doing the building?
- Read Jude 3–4. What does "once for all handed down" (hapax paradotheise) say about the nature of the apostolic deposit? What specific threat does Jude identify in verses 3–4 that makes the earnest contention for the faith necessary? How does Jude's description of the threat, "certain persons have crept in unnoticed", characterize the typical form that departures from apostolicity take?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the church's unity is a Trinitarian reality that must be maintained by human faithfulness rather than created by human effort. What are the practical implications of this distinction for the way a congregation pursues unity? Is the distinction between "maintaining" and "creating" unity merely semantic, or does it represent a genuine and practically significant difference in how unity is pursued?
- The lesson identifies three dimensions of the church's holiness: positional, progressive, and eschatological. How do these three dimensions relate to one another? Can you be genuinely holy in the positional sense while making no progress in the progressive sense? Does the eschatological certainty of final holiness relieve or increase the urgency of present progressive holiness? How do you hold all three dimensions together without collapsing them into one?

- The lesson argues that “catholic” originally meant “universal” and was a descriptive adjective before it became a Roman denominational label. Is this historical argument convincing? Does reclaiming the word’s original meaning have any practical value for Protestant and Baptist churches, or should the word simply be abandoned to its Roman appropriation and replaced with “universal” in confessional contexts?
- The lesson contrasts the Roman institutional definition of apostolicity (through unbroken episcopal succession) with the Protestant doctrinal definition (through fidelity to the apostolic teaching in Scripture). Is the Protestant argument exegetically and historically compelling? What is the strongest response available to the Roman position, and how does the Protestant tradition answer it?
- The lesson’s governing conviction is that the church confesses the four attributes by faith, not by sight, in the already-and-not-yet tension of redemptive history. Does this eschatological framing risk making the attributes effectively irrelevant to the church’s present life, so future-oriented that they place no practical demand on the church now? How does the lesson guard against this risk?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson calls the congregation to “apostolic stubbornness”, a settled, culturally courageous refusal to trade the apostolic deposit for cultural accommodation. Identify one specific area of the contemporary cultural pressure on the church in which apostolic stubbornness is most urgently needed in your own context. What would it cost this congregation to hold the apostolic line in that area? Is it willing to pay that cost?
- The third attribute’s practical obligation is to understand the congregation as a particular expression of the universal community, which means both receiving from and contributing to the broader catholic community of the redeemed. In what ways is this congregation currently contributing to the broader catholic community? In what ways is it receiving from it? What is one specific relationship or resource from outside its own tradition that could enrich its theological and devotional life?
- The second attribute’s practical obligation is the pursuit of corporate holiness, the holiness of the community’s life together, not only the sum of individuals’ private sanctification. What is the most significant threat to this congregation’s corporate holiness right now? Is it unaddressed conflict? Tolerated immorality? A culture of comfort that resists the Spirit’s sanctifying demands? Name it honestly and bring it to God in prayer.
- The Nicene Creed’s ecclesiological confession is addressed in the first-person plural: “We believe.” The four attributes are not confessed privately by individual Christians but corporately by the whole community. What would it mean for this congregation to confess the four attributes not only as doctrinal propositions but as a corporate commitment, to pursue unity together, to pursue holiness together, to understand itself as part of the catholic community together, and to guard the apostolic deposit together? How might that communal dimension of the confession change the way the congregation approaches its life together?

Prayer Focus

Begin with the Nicene Creed's ecclesiological clause read aloud together: "We believe one holy catholic and apostolic church." Read it slowly, one attribute at a time, with a pause between each. Let the weight of each word land before moving to the next. We believe one, not the many competing institutions that fracture the visible church, but the one community of the Spirit, the one body of the risen Christ. Holy, set apart by God, being sanctified by His Word, destined for the spotless glory of the Bridegroom's presentation. Catholic, the whole community of all who are in Christ, from every nation and tongue and tribe and people, across all the ages of redemptive history. Apostolic, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, confessing the faith once for all delivered to the saints. This is what we are. This is what we confess. Now let us pray from this identity.

Pray for the visible unity of the church. Give thanks for the genuine unity that already exists in the one Spirit: the unity that makes the Baptist in East Texas and the Reformed believer in Scotland and the persecuted believer in North Korea members of the same one body of Christ, animated by the same Spirit, bound for the same eschatological home. Pray for the healing of divisions that are genuinely unnecessary, the historical wounds, cultural distances, and institutional self-interests that have kept genuine brothers and sisters from the fellowship that the one Spirit grounds. Pray for the wisdom to maintain necessary distinctions without allowing them to become barriers to the basic fellowship of those who confess the one Lord, the one faith, and the one baptism.

Pray for the progressive holiness of this congregation. Be specific. Pray for specific members of this community who are in the thick of the sanctification struggle, not by naming their sins before the group, but by holding before God the reality that the community is a community of sinners being sanctified, and that the Spirit's work of progressive holiness is costly, slow, and sometimes invisible. Pray for the elders and pastor: that they would be agents of the congregation's sanctification through faithful preaching, the right administration of the ordinances, and the pastoral courage to practice discipline when the community's holiness demands it. Pray that the congregation would visibly reflect, to the watching community around it, the difference that the gospel makes in the corporate life of a people who are being made holy.

Pray for the catholicity of the church, for the global community of all genuine believers. Give thanks for the remarkable growth of the church in the Global South: the millions of believers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America who are part of the same universal community to which this congregation belongs. Pray for persecuted churches in hostile countries, for believers in contexts where gathering for worship is genuinely dangerous, where the cost of the faith is measured in imprisonment, exile, and sometimes death. Pray for the church's mission to the unreached peoples of the world: that the great multitude of Revelation 7:9, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, would be gathered in, and that this congregation would be a faithful participant in that gathering through its prayers, its financial support, and its direct engagement.

Pray for the apostolicity of this congregation and of the broader church. Pray for the courage to hold the apostolic deposit without compromise in a cultural moment that rewards accommodation and punishes doctrinal fidelity. Pray for the pastors and teachers in this tradition and in the broader evangelical world who are facing pressure to soften the apostolic message on matters of sexuality, salvation, the exclusivity of Christ, the reality of judgment, and the authority of Scripture. Pray that the Spirit who inspired the apostolic word would give His people the love of that word, the understanding of that word, and the courage to preach and practice that word without apology until the King returns.

“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”

Ephesians 3:20–21, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Ephesians 4:4–6; 2:19–22; 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 7:9; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Jude 3

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com