

The Spirit in the Church

Rebecca Davis, M.Div.

The marks of the church, as set forth in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, are that she is “one holy catholic and apostolic church.” The Creed is the church’s confession about the Triune God, that doctrine being the central, crucial question for the church to answer at the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. Thus, the creed can be divided into three sections, each addressing the church’s belief in and understanding of the workings of one member of the Trinity. The statement of belief in the church is in the third section, falling under the domain of the Holy Spirit. Along with confessing that the Holy Spirit is, indeed, an equal member of the Godhead by naming him “Lord” and “giver of life... who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,” we confess that we believe in the church, which exists because of the life-giving Spirit. Leroy T. Howe says, “The Church is the Spirit’s creation, and the Spirit intrudes into the world for the sake of creating that land of community of which the Church is both sign and promise.”¹ Jürgen Moltmann agrees with this assessment when he says, “The statements about the church... belong to the article about faith in the Holy Spirit, and are only justified and comprehensible in the framework of the creative workings of the Spirit.”² Geoffrey Wainwright adds, “The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed places the Church under the divine sovereignty of the Holy Spirit, now, and always, and unto ages of ages.”³

If, then, the church is created and operates under the divine sovereignty of God the Holy Spirit, what does that look like? How is the Spirit involved in making the church who she is? According to Moltmann, our confession

¹ Leroy T. Howe, “Holy Spirit and Holy Church,” *Saint Luke’s Journal of Theology* 22, no. 1 (1978): 43

² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 337–38

³ Geoffrey Wainwright, “The Holy Spirit,” in *Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* 1997, 441

in the Creed “is acknowledgment of the uniting, sanctifying, comprehensive and commissioning lordship of Christ.”⁴ This paper will examine the Spirit’s role in these four marks of the lordship of Christ over the church, according to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed: (1) unity, (2) holiness, (3) catholicity, and (4) apostolicity.

Unity

Unity in the church is a difficult thing to achieve. Often, it is even difficult to describe. What is meant by “one” church? How can the many expressions of the church today be one?

To begin, we must be aware that unity is not the same as uniformity. Moltmann says, “The unity of the congregation is a unity in freedom. It must not be confused with unanimity, let alone uniformity in perception, feeling or morals.... Because it is Christ who gathers it and the Spirit of the new creation who gives it life, nothing that serves the kingdom of God and the freedom of [the person] must be suppressed in it. It is a unity in diversity and freedom.”⁵ If the Holy Spirit is the giver of life, he is creative. In giving life to the church, it is logical that the resulting community would be as creative as the individual believers who constitute it. There is no need to insist on uniformity in order to be united. Ephesians 4:4 and 7 says, “There is one body and one Spirit.... But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it” (NIV). All the “oneness” language in this passage is immediately followed by a statement telling us that each of those who make up the “one” are different. It follows that “one church” does not mean there should only be one expression of what “church” means, or even that every Christian must comply with a single comprehensive set of beliefs. Our core beliefs, as set forth in the Creed, are integral to our identity as the church, but there are many differences of understanding that need not destroy our unity.

The Triune God is a God of unity. We often use the word “communion” to express the idea of connection, or oneness among more than one, including when we speak of the Trinity. Silouanos Fotineas says, “It is from the

⁴ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 338

⁵ *Ibid.*, 343

third person of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit, that the event of communion is realised. In the Holy Trinity, it is the Holy Spirit which connects the Father and Son as well as the human person with divine life.”⁶ This idea of unity is accomplished through the work of the Holy Spirit, who connects the church with himself, the individual members with each other, and all with God the Father and God the Son.

At the very beginning of the church in the book of Acts, we can see the work of the Spirit creating unity where no unity was humanly possible. The story of Pentecost and the resulting church is an amazing example of unity in spite of diversity. Another story describing how the Spirit produced unity in the early church occurs in Acts 8. This passage tells the story about Philip the evangelist preaching in Samaria. A central point of the story is that the new believers were baptized but did not receive the Holy Spirit immediately. Alexandre Vieira gives us a possible explanation for this situation. First, Vieira recounts the history of enmity between the Jews and Samaritans. He then says it is significant that verse one tells us that everyone except the apostles were dispersed because of persecution in Jerusalem, letting us know the apostles were not in Samaria with Philip. When the apostles heard about what had happened in Samaria, they sent Peter and John. Vieira posits that the reason the Samaritans did not receive the Holy Spirit concurrently with their baptism was for the purpose of uniting the Jews and Samaritans in the new church. He says,

God wanted to show the Jerusalem church that He was behind the Samaritans’ acceptance of the faith, and therefore the church had no choice but to welcome them as well.... In fact, centuries of enmity could only be undone by the hand of God Himself. If the Holy Spirit had “ordinarily” come as expected, together with the baptism of the Samaritans, the ancient rupture between the two peoples would not have been dealt with.⁷

⁶ Silouanos Fotineas, “Saint Basil of Caesarea: The Κοινωνία of the Church and Κοινωνία in the Holy Spirit,” *Phronema* 32, no. 2 (2017): 91

⁷ Alexandre Vieira, “Holy Spirit, Church, and the Outsiders: A Brief Study of the Relation between Baptism and Holy Spirit in Acts 8:14-17,” *Missio apostolica* 22, no. 1 (2014): 115

The unity of the church involves acceptance of those whom God accepts. When Jesus told his disciples they would be his witnesses in Samaria, he was preparing them to accept the people they hated. Vieira believes Peter and John needed to be first-hand witnesses of the Holy Spirit filling the Samaritans to accomplish unity between the two groups.

The unity that we confess our belief in as the “one church” is not something we can conjure up ourselves. The working of the Holy Spirit produced the unity between the Jewish and Samaritan believers. The unity described in Acts 2 was also achieved through the Holy Spirit. Brent A. Strawn says, “In Acts 2, the unity that is present is not a unity that is achieved. It is a unity that is given. It is not only desired by God, but it is provided by the Spirit. The kind of unity that God wills is granted by God.”⁸ George Eldon Ladd talks about *koinonia*, another expression of unity, in the same way. “This is something more than human fellowship or the pleasure people of like mind find in each other's presence. It is more than a fellowship in a common religion. It is an eschatological creation of the Holy Spirit. Probably II Corinthians 13:14 should be rendered ‘the fellowship created by the Holy Spirit.’”⁹

Even considering Biblical admonitions to believers to act in ways that promote unity (e.g., Eph 4:3, Rom 12:18, Phil 4:2), these choices are not merely an act of the human will but are a result of submission to the Spirit’s leading. The Spirit empowers believers to be an expression of the unity of the Trinity. Human beings may attempt to replicate this type of unity, but it is an unreachable goal without the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus, in his prayer for future believers as reported in John 17, prays “that all of them may be one.” The very fact that he prayed to the Father for this to happen implies that the future believers would not be able to achieve oneness on their own but would need help. Further, Jesus says, “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—so that they may be brought to complete unity” (John

⁸ Brent A. Strawn, “Unity, Diversity, and the Holy Spirit,” *Journal for Preachers* 40, no. 4 (2017): 13

⁹ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 543

17:22-23a NIV). Although Jesus does not specifically name the Holy Spirit in this prayer for unity, reading back into this prayer we can see how the Spirit promotes unity in the church as a reflection of the unity between himself, the Father, and the Son.

In what may seem to be a divided Christendom, Ron L. Staples assures us that “the Church remains one. The communion of saints is not something that can be built by ecclesiastical structures.”¹⁰ Our creed says we *believe* in one church, not that we *make* it one. Our faith rests not in ourselves or our own ability to achieve unity, but in the work of the Holy Spirit, who makes us one in Christ.

Holiness

Holiness, like unity, is only achievable through the power of the Holy Spirit. In the same way that we believe in one church, we *believe* that the church is holy; we don’t *make* it holy. The holiness of the church is not a result of our personal, individual holiness—the church as the Body of Christ is holy because Christ, the Head, is holy. Holiness in the Body is effected by the power of the Holy Spirit. As Wainwright says, “The divine agent of holiness in the Christian and in the Church is precisely the Holy Spirit.”¹¹ Our positional holiness as the Body of Christ does not mean that everyone who is a part of that Body has achieved perfection. Wainwright also says, “The sanctification or divinization of the believer and the Church is to be conceived as a dynamic process in which the absurdity of sin is being overcome and a salutary eschatological transformation is taking place. Saints are being made.”¹² We are in a place of “already and not yet” in regard to personal holiness. Yet, we believe in the holiness of the church. As noted above, we acknowledge in the Creed the “sanctifying... lordship of Christ.”¹³

As Wesleyan believers, we emphasize perfect love as the highest aim of holiness. Howe speaks to this idea when he says, “The power which [Jesus]

¹⁰ Rob L. Staples, *Outward Sign and Inward Grace: The Place of Sacraments in Wesleyan Spirituality* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1991), 157

¹¹ Wainwright, “The Holy Spirit,” 448

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 338

bequeathed his followers included the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, to be sure, but what those followers may be most remembered for in all generations to come will be their capacities for patience and longsuffering, for associating with the unacceptable, even unto disgrace and martyrdom.”¹⁴ The church’s concern for the other is the true holiness given by the Holy Spirit. Howe goes on to say, “Its holiness emerges as it builds up the community of believers into a redemptively open community, within which, traditionally expressed, the fallen condition of human beings may realize that perfection which God has intended from the beginning.”¹⁵

The holy church is not just a conglomeration of individuals who are growing in holiness. Edmund P. Clowney says, “Growth in true holiness is always growth together; it takes place through the nurture, the work and worship of the church.”¹⁶ Ephesians 2:21–22 says, “In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (NIV). The church is only a holy temple together. One stone in the building may be holy, but it is not, on its own, a holy temple. God’s church is “being built together.” Although we may each experience the presence of God dwelling in us individually, we are only his church corporately. The Holy Spirit takes all the individual stones and builds them into a unified structure in which God dwells.

Holiness can also be thought of as transformation, or being made new. Moltmann says, “

According to the prophetic promise, *holiness* is part of the inmost nature of the coming divine glory that is going to fill the earth. “The Holy One of Israel” will redeem his people. When the church is called “holy” in the New Testament, this means that it has become the new creation in Christ and therefore partakes of the holiness of the new creation, which the holy God brings about

¹⁴ Howe, “Holy Spirit and Holy Church,” 46

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 50

¹⁶ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*. Contours of Christian Theology. (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1995), 89

through his Spirit.¹⁷

The church is the present-day embodiment of Christ, who is holy. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the church is holy. Our individual lives are a part of that, but we cannot enhance or reduce the holiness of the church; it belongs to Christ, who is holy.

Catholicity

Howe says that what makes a holy people a catholic people is “An all-encompassing responsibility accepted by the people of God for service in the world, which knows no qualification and no condition.”¹⁸ The mark of catholicity is the pervasive presence of the church throughout the world. Howe goes on to say that, in the language of the Second Vatican Council, the catholic church is “a pilgrim people, about God’s mission in the world.”¹⁹

Veli-Matti Karkkainen’s view of the catholicity of the church involves the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. He says,

Not only is the local church a church by virtue of the celebration of the Eucharist, it is also a catholic church insofar as it involves the coming together of the whole church at a specific place. If the whole Christ is present at the Eucharist—and according to Zizioulas he is—then it becomes understandable that catholicity of the church is guaranteed by Christ’s presence. This is also the key to the relationship between the local and universal church.²⁰

Thus, to be a *catholic* church, the church must have a worldwide presence, and each part, or local expression, of this catholic church must include the presence of Christ, who is the head of the body. As Karkkainen points out, the real presence of Christ can be experienced in the Eucharist. However, that is not the only way in which Christ is present. Jesus himself is recorded as saying that he would be present wherever his people are gathered in his name (Matthew 18:20). It may be a point of contention whether

¹⁷ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 339

¹⁸ Howe, “Holy Spirit and Holy Church,” 52

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical & Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 101

Christ's presence in the church requires the Eucharist. The question could be asked: is Christ truly present in every believer? If the answer is yes, then is the physical presence of the Eucharist necessary, or is the spiritual presence of Christ embodied in his followers sufficient? In either case, to apprehend the presence of Christ requires an awareness of a spiritual reality. This spiritual reality is communicated to believers by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Can those without spiritual understanding see Christ in the Eucharist or feel his presence when believers gather? A catholic church, understood in this sense, is not possible without the Holy Spirit.

There is yet more involved in the catholicity of the church. Believers are connected by the commonality of the Holy Spirit dwelling in them. The Spirit-produced connection between all believers under the headship of Christ results in a catholic church. For Ladd, the catholic church "cuts across our normal human sociological structures. Race does not matter; social status does not matter; by Spirit baptism all kinds of people are equally members of the body of Christ because we have all experienced the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit."²¹ Again, it is the Holy Spirit in us who connects the individual believer to the local church and the local church to the universal church. Millions of people all over the world connected only by a shared religious belief is tenuous at best. But we believe in the Holy Spirit, the giver and sustainer of life, who is the connection between us all.

Wainwright highlights the qualitative aspect of the word "catholic" in contrast to the quantitative connotation of using the word "universal." He says, "The deepest meaning of catholicity, its inner heart, is the fullness, *πλήρωμα*, of God's saving act as it is achieved in Church and world."²² The catholicity of the church is not determined by the mere fact that the church is geographically universal, but that God saves the world through the church. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the church is the light of the world. This understanding of catholicity expands the idea of the church's identity from "We are Christ's worldwide church" to "We are Christ's church for the world." Our mission becomes part of our identity.

²¹ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 543

²² Wainwright, "The Holy Spirit," 448

Apostolicity

There is a difference between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox understanding of apostolicity, and the Protestant understanding. The Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches think of apostolicity as the authority conferred on the episcopacy by virtue of the laying on of hands in the ordination of bishops in a direct line back to the original twelve apostles. The problem Protestants see with this view is that it does not guarantee the transfer of truly apostolic teaching. As Clowney says,

The longer the succession list of bishops, the more tenuous the claim to untainted apostolic tradition.... Apostleship in the sense of the original and fundamental ministry of the first witnesses and messengers died out with the death of the last apostle.²³

The Protestant church, then, believes that apostolicity depends on the faithful transmission of the original apostles' teaching. According to Thomas C. Oden,

The church is apostolic insofar as it retains, guards, and faithfully transmits its apostolic mission. Those sent by the Son are the apostolate. As Christ was sent by the Father, the apostles were sent, empowered by the Spirit, and the continuing apostolate is still being sent.²⁴

He goes so far as to say,

It is primarily the whole church, and not merely discrete individuals, that succeeds the apostles and embodies apostolicity. It is the whole church catholic and not merely a fragment of it that is the temple of the Spirit, built on the foundation of the apostles (Eph. 2:20).²⁵

Regardless of the divide over how apostolic truth is transmitted, the concern for the authenticity of the apostles' teaching has always been uppermost. Howe says,

When many diverse communities became involved in the mission,

²³ Clowney, *The Church*, 77

²⁴ Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, 1st ed., v. 3 of *Systematic Theology / Thomas C. Oden* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 349

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 355

it became essential for the churches to find ways of maintaining the integrity of the inclusive missioning fellowship throughout the Empire; hence, the criterion of apostolicity reminded the pilgrim people that their mission, expressed in diverse ways, nevertheless had to be the mission of Jesus Christ the Lord, and of none other than he.²⁶

But how can the integrity of the apostolic mission be maintained through so many years? As with the other marks of the church, this, too, is the domain of the Holy Spirit. Oden says,

The basic affirmation of the apostolicity of the church does not specifically require or supply a particular theory of how that apostolicity is transmitted intergenerationally. Regardless of how the succession is viewed, whether symbolic or actual, the line of succession between the apostles and present apostolic witness is conceived as a continuous line of testimony sustained by the Spirit.²⁷

And again, “Accurate recollection of apostolic testimony was understood to be undergirded and ensured by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”²⁸

This idea is, of course, supported in Scripture. John 16:13 states clearly that the Holy Spirit “will guide you into all the truth.” In this passage Jesus calls him the “Spirit of truth.” If the Holy Spirit were not present in the church, apostolicity would not be possible. How could we be sure the traditions handed down over two millennia were correct? We could not, unless we believe in the Holy Spirit, who empowers the church and guides her into all truth.

Why do we believe in the apostolic church? We believe because we have faith in the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit. Clowney says,

The church is not the source of the divine revelation given through the apostles (Gal 1:6–9). Rather, New Testament revelation is part of Christ’s work through his Spirit; it is the apostolic foundation on which Christ builds his church.²⁹

²⁶ Howe, “Holy Spirit and Holy Church,” 53

²⁷ Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, 354

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 352

²⁹ Clowney, *The Church*, 75

The apostolicity of the church is not only guaranteed by the Spirit, truth was revealed by the Spirit in the first place. The revelation that resulted in the existence of Christ's church that continues until today is the work of the Holy Spirit, who is our sustainer, teacher and guide.

Conclusion

The one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church is nothing less than the working of the Holy Spirit in the world. John H. Wright says it well when he says,

All that belongs to the visibility of the Church has only one purpose: to manifest, sustain, strengthen, and intensify the inner life communicated to us by the Holy Spirit, in virtue of which we are a community of faith, a community of worship, and a community of love.³⁰

The church without the Spirit could not possibly be conceived of as unified. The church without the Spirit has no possibility of being and becoming holy. The church without the Spirit has no presence in or witness to the world. And the church without the Spirit would not be able to maintain the mission given to her by Christ himself two millennia ago. We believe in the church because we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life.

Bibliography

- Clowney, Edmund P. *The Church*. Contours of Christian Theology. Leicester: InterVarsity, 1995.
- Fotineas, Silouanos. "Saint Basil of Caesarea: The Κοινωνία of the Church and Κοινωνία in the Holy Spirit." *Phronema* 32, no. 2 (2017): 77–96.
- Howe, Leroy T. "Holy Spirit and Holy Church." *Saint Luke's Journal of Theology* 22, no. 1 (1978): 43–57.
- Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti. *Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical & Global Perspectives*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002.
- Ladd, George Eldon. *A Theology of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution*

³⁰ John H. Wright, "The Church: Community of the Holy Spirit," *Theological Studies* 48, no. 1 (1987): 40

- to Messianic Ecclesiology*. 1st ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
- Oden, Thomas C. *Life in the Spirit*. 1st ed. v. 3 of *Systematic Theology / Thomas C. Oden*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994.
- Staples, Ron L. *Outward Sign and Inward Grace: The Place of Sacraments in Wesleyan Spirituality*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1991.
- Strawn, Brent A. "Unity, Diversity, and the Holy Spirit." *Journal for Preachers* 40, no. 4 (2017): 10–14.
- Vieira, Alexandre. "Holy Spirit, Church, and the Outsiders: A Brief Study of the Relation between Baptism and Holy Spirit in Acts 8:14–17." *Missio apostolica* 22, no. 1 (2014): 109–17.
- Wainwright, Geoffrey. "The Holy Spirit." In *Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine 1997*, 441–53.
- Wright, John H. "The Church: Community of the Holy Spirit." *Theological Studies* 48, no. 1 (1987): 25–44.