

I Believe in... the Community of Saints

(The Essential Christian Truth About the Nature of the Church)



The First Community of Saints

So far, our study of the Apostle's Creed has helped us to understand some of the essential truths of the Christian Faith related to issues like the nature of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. But the Creed also helps us to understand the essential truth related to the nature of God's design for us a family: the nature of the Church.

"I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints..."

In this early context of the first believers, the word "catholic" begins with a "little 'c'" as it refers not to the Roman Catholic Church, but to the community of ORTHODOX Christian believers. As we begin to understand what it is that God wants for us as believers, let's first look at the nature of Church in the earliest years...

The first Christians were revolutionaries. They had little interest in what we now know as the Christian CHURCH. The scriptures tell us that they met in their homes and devoted themselves to God's Word and His directive to change their world. And as a result, these early Christians brought about the most amazing and powerful transformation the world has ever known. Think about it for a minute. Christianity emerged from a tremendously diverse Roman melting pot of social and religious ideas, and through purely peaceful means they completely changed the Empire and united it under the banner of Christianity. And they did it without a single group of more than a hundred people, and with nothing more than homes that were opened up to the people around them. Long before Christianity became a dominant POLITICAL POWER, it was a divine movement of God. Long before Christianity found a comfortable home in church buildings, it was an active body of passionate believers:



1 Christians Were Bound and United By A Common Truth

Early observers of the movement recognized that the first believers were committed to the objective truth that Jesus Christ is God Himself and the only way to enter into a personal relationship with the creator of the Universe. This common truth and relationship to Christ became the unifying force behind the movement of God. Look at what Tertullian (a church scholar who lived in North Africa c. 160-225AD) had to say as he described the young Christian believers:

*"We are a body knit together as such by a **common religious profession**, by **unity of discipline**, and by the **bond of a common hope**. We meet together as an assembly and congregation, that, offering up prayer to God as with united force, we may wrestle with Him in our supplications. **This strong exertion God delights in**. We pray, too, for the emperors, for their ministers and for all in authority, for the welfare of*

the world, for the prevalence of peace, for the delay of the final consummation.”



Christians Were Characterized by Uncommon Joy

In the midst of terrible persecution and hardship, these early believers were able to stay focused on God instead of their own situation. As a result, regardless of their personal situation, they were able to live lives of JOY. Read these words from unknown author of the Epistle to Diognetes (written c. 130AD):

*“They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. **When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life;** they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.”*

Aristides presented a letter to the Emperor Hadrian (c. 117-138AD) and described the uncommon joy of early believers:

*“Every morning and all hours on account of the goodness of God toward them, they **render praise and laud Him over their food and their drink;** they render Him **thanks**. And if any righteous person of their number passes away from this world, they **rejoice** and **give thanks** to God and they follow his body as though he were moving from one place to another. And when a child is born to them, they praise God, and if again it chances to die in its infancy, they **praise** God mightily, as for one who has passed through the world without sins.”*



Christians Were a Fearless and Animated People, Not a Passive Church

Early Christians did not GO to church, they WERE the church; they did not attend church services, they impacted their culture as the people of God. They assembled not as the end goal, but as a way to equip themselves to be the people God intended them to be and do the work God intended them to do. Listen again to Tertullian:

*“**We assemble to read our sacred writings . . . and with the sacred words we **nourish** our faith, we **animate** our hope, we **make our confidence more steadfast;** and no less by inculcations of God’s precepts we confirm good habits... “***



Christians Were Known By Their Love

Because they had surrendered so completely to God's call on their lives, they began to live as the children of God. And the world took notice. Again from Tertullian:

"But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. 'See', they say, 'how they love one another', for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred. 'See', they say about us, 'how they are ready even to die for one another', for they themselves would sooner kill."

And again from the Apology of Aristides

"They abstain from all impurity in the hope of the recompense that is to come in another world. As for their servants or handmaids or children, they persuade them to become Christians by the love they have for them; and when they become so, they call them without distinction, brothers. They do not worship strange gods; and they walk in all humility and kindness, and falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another. When they see the stranger they bring him to their homes and rejoice over him as over a true brother; for they do not call those who are after the flesh, but those who are in the Spirit and in God."



Christians Gave Sacrificially to the Needy

These early believers understood why God had given them the limited wealth that they had. They did not have the burden of having to support programs or pay a church building lease. Meeting in homes, and led by regular men of character, these first believers were able to pour all of their financial gifts into the care of the needy. In fact, over and over again in scripture, this is the only thing offerings are used for! Listen to Tertullian:

"Though we have our treasure-chest, it is not made up of purchase-money, as of a religion that has its price. On the monthly day, if he likes, each puts in a small donation; but only if it be his pleasure, and only if he be able: for there is no compulsion; all is voluntary. These gifts are . . . not spent on feasts, and drinking-bouts, and eating-houses, but to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house; such, too, as have suffered shipwreck; and if there happen to be any in the mines or banished to the islands or shut up in the prisons, for nothing but their fidelity to the cause of God's Church, they become the nurslings of their confession."

And from the Apology of Aristides:

*"And there is among them a man that is poor and needy and if they have not an abundance of necessities, **they fast two or three days, that they may supply the needy with the necessary food.**"*

6 Laymen of Character Led the Movement

Over and over again the New Testament reveals that small groups of believers were being led by laypeople called elders. These elders were not paid staff, but simply men of character who rose to leadership based on their passion and gifting. Look at what Tertullian observed:

*"The tried men of our elders preside over us, obtaining **that honour not by purchase but by established character.** There is no buying and selling of any sort in the things of God."*

7 Christians Were God's Holy Ambassadors in a Dying World

The world also quickly recognized that there was something very different about these Christians. They represented something noble and pure, and were influential in their communities. Read these words from the Epistle to Diognetes (c. 130AD) as this ancient letter describes how powerfully Christians reflected God's nature in the world:

*"For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they **display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life...**" "...They dwell in their own countries, but **simply as sojourners.** As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things **as if foreigners.** Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. **They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh.** They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives." "...To sum up all in one word--**what the soul is in the body, that are Christians in the world.** The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, yet is not of the body; and Christians dwell in the world, yet are not of the world. The invisible soul is guarded by the visible body, and Christians are known indeed to be in the*

world, but their godliness remains invisible. The flesh hates the soul, and wars against it, though itself suffering no injury, because it is prevented from enjoying pleasures; the world also hates the Christians, though in nowise injured, because they abjure pleasures. The soul loves the flesh that hates it, and [loves also] the members; Christians likewise love those that hate them. The soul is imprisoned in the body, yet preserves that very body; and Christians are confined in the world as in a prison, and yet they are the preservers of the world. The immortal soul dwells in a mortal tabernacle; and Christians dwell as sojourners in corruptible [bodies], looking for an incorruptible dwelling in the heavens. The soul, when but ill-provided with food and drink, becomes better; in like manner, the Christians, though subjected day by day to punishment, increase the more in number. God has assigned them this illustrious position, which it were unlawful for them to forsake."

Early Christians stood apart from the world because they had been transformed by the power of God and had surrendered themselves to their Lord in both word and deed. From the Apology of Aristides:

*"They observe scrupulously the commandment of their Messiah; they live **honestly** and **soberly** as the Lord their God commanded them.*

Clearly the early believers were LIVING their faith, and not merely GOING to church. In fact, there was NO institutional church to go to, even if they wanted to! Yet the movement was impossible to stop, and it eventually covered the known world. Where did these early believers come up with this notion of the Christian life that is NOT dependent on buildings, paid staff, or programs? They got the model from their predecessors as described in the scriptures:



Acts 2:42-47

*And they were continually devoting themselves to the **apostles' teaching** and to **fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer**. And everyone kept feeling a **sense of awe**; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, **as anyone might have need**. And day by day **continuing with one mind in the temple**, and breaking bread from **house to house**, they were taking their meals together with **gladness** and sincerity of heart, **praising God**, and having **favor with all the people**. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were **being saved**.*

The first community of saints reflected the power and design of God in their lives as a family of believers. This early history of the church simply reflected the teaching of the Bible as it recorded the nature and essence of the very first community of saints in this passage in the Book of Acts. As we read through this first description of the Church, it's

possible for us to understand and extract the essential truth about God's design for the community of saints. Let's examine this design in detail...



Learning the Truth

The Church must be passionately committed to the pursuit of truth:

*"...and they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' **teaching**..."*

There is a truth about God. There is a truth about whether or not He exists and a truth about His nature (if He does exist). Now, you may make the argument that no one can really know this truth, but that's another matter altogether. Jesus certainly had a position about the nature of truth and the nature of God. He believed that objective truth does exist and that this truth can be grasped. Jesus was all about evidence and truth; the evidence that demonstrated his deity and the truth about God's Kingdom. Jesus provided His followers with proof and convincing evidences (even after appearing to them in the resurrection!)



Acts 1:3

*To these He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many **convincing proofs**, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.*

The earliest believers learned from this example. Peter's first sermon at Pentecost (Acts chapter two) is an effort to get his listeners to examine the evidence of fulfilled prophecy! He describes Jesus as "a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst". The Greek word for attested is "apodeiknumi" and it means to 'demonstrate' or to 'prove' or 'show'. In essence, Peter is saying, "Hey, God gave you proof that Jesus was God through the miracles that Jesus worked, including His resurrection!" Peter wasn't just making a statement to the crowd; he was developing a persuasive argument for the deity of Jesus. And as the first disciples spent time together, they came to understand the difference between teaching and training. Teaching that does not equip us to be the church in a lost world, is of little value to those in our world who are hurting and seeking answers. When believers come together to learn about God, we are focused on more than just the truth we are learning. We know we are preparing for something that we are about to do and something we desperately want to be:



Ephesians 4:11-13

*It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, **to prepare God's people for works of service**, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

The Church ought to come together to train. It should come together to prepare. We must realize that we are here to love and serve those around us so that we can reason with those who are seeking answers to life's deepest and most important questions. The Church must be persuaded that objective, absolute truth does exist and that it is transformational. We must remember that Salvation by GRACE ALONE is the distinctive truth of the Christian Worldview. We've seen God work in our own lives and we've seen God work in the lives of others. We should spend our time together trying our best to understand the truth and the culture that often denies it.



Striving for Unity

The Church must be connected by a common Father, a common truth, and a common cause:

"...and they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer..."

Christians are a diverse people. We have different histories and different stories to tell. But we are connected powerfully by a common truth that calls us to action. The Greek word used for 'fellowship' (koinoonia) describes our connection as a common set of actions and activities. We have a common spiritual father, and we believe the scriptures that describe Him so clearly. We believe that this truth about the nature of God calls us to His cause and plan for our lives. As a result, we are united around the cause of Christ to love and reach the lost with life saving good news.



Ephesians 5:1-2

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.

We have become a new creation. Not just as new individuals, but as a new family of God; a new movement; an unstoppable rising tide. We understand that as a family of God we are called to love and live as a family. We meet regularly to share meals, to remember Jesus through the Lord's Supper and to pray. But while this is often an expression of our love for one another, we know that this is not the only cause to which we are called. We know that we are connected by God's desire to care for the needy and reach those who are still outside the walls of our homes.

The earliest believers understood fellowship as an act of sharing. We too understand that true fellowship occurs when we are transparent and sincere about who we are. Movements form around people who are committed to a cause and committed to each other. We are united by God's desire for us to share who we are and what we have with those who are in need and those who are seeking the truth. We are not willing to live dual lives, one inside the walls of a church, and another in our communities. We understand that we are not called to go to church, but to be the church in a lost and hurting world.

The Church ought to meet regularly to affirm our love for God and for one another. We should understand the power of a meal, so we shouldn't let a week go by without eating together. We ought to understand the power of group prayer, so we should share in the joy of communicating with God. And we should take time to remember that our relationship is more than just a common understanding of God; it is also a love relationship with each other. We ought to understand that loving each other means listening with compassion and asking the difficult questions. We ought to be accountable to each other by name, just as we are accountable to our Lord.



Living in Awe

The Church should be in awe of God's handiwork and continuing involvement in our world:

*"...and they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. **And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe**; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles..."*

We don't have to look far to be amazed at the power and wisdom of God. Sometimes the only reason why we aren't in surrendered awe of our creator is because we aren't looking carefully enough at the world He created or how He has worked in our own lives. When we examine the natural world around us, carefully using the same scientific approach that the secular world cherishes, it doesn't take long for us to marvel at the complexity and specificity of the creation. This reality alone should put us in a position of awe. The very fact that we are here (in all our complexity and interdependency) is truly miraculous. But sometimes our failure to be in awe of our Creator isn't a matter of ignorance on our part; it's a matter of willful and prideful denial. Sometimes we simply don't want to admit that there might be something bigger than us. Sometimes we suppress the truth of God's power and work in our lives because we simply don't want Him to exist:



Romans 1:18-21

*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who **suppress the truth in unrighteousness**, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.*

In addition to this, we often take for granted the supernatural way that God has already guided and provided for us. It's easy to forget those events in our lives that once confirmed God's power so clearly. It's easy to develop a faith that requires some emotional experience to be repeated over and over again so we can have confidence that God is real. All the while, God has given us evidence of His power that we often take for granted. The earliest believers were fortunate enough to have the apostles in their midst, showing them wonders and signs to remind them of God's incredible power.

The Greek word used for 'wonders' (terata) is used to describe those things that are clearly impossible to explain through naturalistic mechanisms. Some things can only be understood and explained if we can accept (the possibility, at least) that the supernatural does exist. The Greek word used for 'signs' (semeia) describes the meaning that we should infer from the impossible. When we encounter something that cannot be explained naturally, we should accept the fact that we may be looking at a piece of evidence for the existence of God. The miraculous wonders we see all around us everyday are signs that God does exist and is working powerfully in our world.

The Church ought to be looking closely at our environment and at the biological diversity around us every time we meet. We ought to be looking for evidence of the supernatural. We ought to be in awe of God's power as a result of this close examination. We should examine God's work in our own lives as we serve together. We should record our adventures of service and revisit the many ways that God has worked through us. We should share the stories of how God continues to use fallen and fragile humans such as ourselves to advance the cause of his Kingdom, and we ought to be in awe as we see His ability to transform lives. The Church must be careful to remember who He is and what He has done, and as a result we should share the awe and respect felt by the earliest of believers.



Serving in Love

The Church should live a surrendered life of sacrificial love for those in need:

"...and they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need..."

It's not enough to simply say we are Christians. The Christian life is a life of evidence. When we examine the evidence in our world, we eventually understand the reality and nature of God. And when we surrender our lives to Christ, there is to be evidence that we are now children of God. The 'fruit' of a transformed life is a love that the world doesn't understand; a love that few of us have ever truly lived; a love that was evident in the lives of the earliest believers. Tertullian (a church scholar who lived in North Africa c.160-225AD) had this to say about the way that the early Christians were described by non-believers:

"But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. 'See', they say, 'how they love one another', for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred. 'See', they say about us, 'how they are ready even to die for one another', for they themselves would sooner kill."

Over and over again, the scriptures describe the early Christians as people who gave a significant portion of their wealth and time to the cause of the needy. This desire to love others enough to care for them with our time, our talent and our money is simply an expression of our love for God. We know that we cannot say we are Christ followers if we are not concerned with the plight of those who are in need:



1 John 3:16-17

But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?

The Church should be able to use its resources to bless those who are less fortunate. For this reason, the Church ought to be hesitant to spend its money on buildings or on staff. We ought to understand that a movement of God can easily become an institution of man, and we should be careful to dedicate our money to the care of the needy and to sharing the truth. We should recognize that the earliest Christians were able to spend 100% of their contributions on the cause of those in need, and we too should want to be able to give with this kind of unbounded love.

The Church ought to be looking for those in our community who are in need. We should be sensitive to their situation and refuse to walk or drive past them any longer. Serving the needy must become an integral part of our lives and our faith. We know that we will be known by our love for one another and for those who are in need. For this reason, serving the needy is something we must plan for, make time for and integrate into the fabric of our lives and the nature of our relationship with God.



Sharing with Courage

The Church must live a bold and fearless life surrendered to the cause of Christ:

*"...and they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. And day by day continuing with **one mind in the temple...**"*

While the early believers certainly had their eye on those in their faith family who were in need, they also courageously communicated the truth of the Gospel with the world around them. The scriptures tell us that they were of 'one mind in the temple'. What was this 'mind' that they shared? Over and over again, and in spite of intense opposition, the apostles and their disciples entered the temple and preached the truth about Jesus. This courageous stand for the truth often brought them into conflict with the world around them:



Acts 4:1-3

*And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees, came upon them, being greatly disturbed because **they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.***

But opposition became a part of the lives of the first believers. They grew to understand and accept it and live their lives with courage. Over and over again they returned to the most hostile of environments to share their faith because they knew that in spite of any hardship they might suffer, God had a cause they wanted to join, and He was ultimately in control of their destiny. The first believers were continually directed right back into the eye of the storm:



Acts 5:19-21

*But an angel of the Lord during the night opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out he said, "Go your way, **stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life.**" And upon hearing this, they entered into the temple about daybreak, and began to teach.*

The Church must live with courage. We need to be prepared and ready to share our faith with people who hold differing views. We know that the first believers didn't wait to be asked about their faith and their God; they entered into the most dangerous and hostile of territories and tactfully reasoned with non-believers, even before they were invited. We should live with this kind of wisdom and courage. We need to look and plan for opportunities to engage people with the Gospel. We should have the courage to talk to people who hold differing views. We should understand what it is that they believe and where they are coming from. This passion and courage will often lead us into hostile territory; into the heart of other faith systems, onto university campuses, into ideological communities. But we ought to combine our time of training with a life of courage to advance the cause and mission of Jesus.



Overflowing with Joy

The Church must be focused on God and all that He has done for us:

*"...and they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with **gladness** and sincerity of heart, **praising God**, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved..."*

We look at the lives of the early believers and we are amazed at the joy they demonstrated even in the most difficult of situations. They were often persecuted on all sides and lived in primitive environments that were harsh and difficult. Yet in the midst of unbelievable pain, they were still filled with joy. Look at this description from the unknown author of the Epistle to Diognetes (written c. 130AD):

*“They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evildoers. When punished, **they rejoice as if quickened into life...**”*

These early believers understood that joy is a choice. And they understood that joy is often the product of our choice of focus. In the midst of persecution and hardship, the earliest of believers kept their eyes on the prize. They kept their eyes focused on the life that awaited them and they found purpose and abundant meaning in living lives that were surrendered to God and to serving and loving others. They understood that persecution and suffering were often earmarks of the surrendered life. They knew that a life of comfort was probably a life of complacency. So they rejoiced when they found themselves in a place of discomfort as a result of their commitment to God. It simply served as evidence that they had surrendered their lives to the God of the universe. The early believers rejoiced at this evidence, and their joy was noticed by all those who were in their company:



Acts 16:23-25

*“And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison, and fastened their feet in the stocks. But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and **singing hymns of praise to God**, and the prisoners were listening to them...”*

The Church needs to be careful to resist our inclination to focus on ourselves. We need to be committed to a new life centered on God’s moral will and the gifts that He has already given us. We need to be committed to being wise stewards of these gifts and to make God the focus of our lives. Like the early believers, song should be a huge part of our lives. We ought to sing not so that we can be ‘ushered into God’s presence’ (we know we are already there), but in spontaneous response to what He has done for us. Our songs shouldn’t be the limit of our worship, but the spontaneous result of our focus. We should sing, because we cannot help but sing.



So, What is the Essential Truth?

Church groups have taken every shape and form possible in the two thousand years since the first community of saints. The final form is not nearly as important as the final purpose of God’s people here on earth. As we look deeply at the nature of the first community, we see God’s design for the Church; not as a place to meet, but as a people to be.