

The One Holy Church

Holy

We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church

Holy.

One word, a word that we don't use often or probably don't have an instinctive understanding of in a culture that has been determined to deny public acknowledgement of God's being and greatness

But a word that speaks of the great privilege of being and belonging to the Church of our Lord Jesus, the privilege, entirely undeserved, of being welcome into the living God's presence as God's people, of being those who can live with God.

To understand that privilege, and to also understand how holy can be applied to local congregations like the Corinthians whom you heard Paul call the temple of God, holy, but who were far from holy in their life, tolerating open immorality and selfishness, to understand how holy can be applied to congregations like ours so transparently full of people who confess that we have not loved God or our neighbour as we ought, and which collectively, in our common life, can depart from God's standards, we will need to do a bit of work.

First, we have to think about our God, and what it means that He has declared Himself to be the holy God. As we do this we will understand why the church must be holy if we are to be God's church.

Secondly, we will need to remind ourselves of what this word of the Creed expresses faith in. It is not in the holiness the church possesses by its own work or in its own right. It is a confession of faith in Christ, in the finished work of Christ on the cross. It is only because, in the words of Ephesians 5:25-28,

Ephesians 5: ²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her ²⁶to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word. ²⁷He did this to present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and blameless.

that the church can be called holy.

Then thirdly, we should unpack the privilege of being the church that can be described as holy, the wonder of being included in that church.

And finally we need to think about how confessing the church as holy guides our relationship to our own congregation, the congregation that overlaps in membership with the church of God's elect, the one catholic church across time and space, the congregation which is the expression of the same saving purpose that has brought the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church into being, for Paul, as we have already said, is very clear that the local congregation is also holy and that has consequences for the way we behave towards it.

1 Corinthians 3: ¹⁶Don't you yourselves know that you are God's temple and that the Spirit of God lives in you? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is holy, and that is what you are.

One word, but embodying much Christian truth

The holiness of God – why the church must be holy

So, firstly, what does it mean that God's word declares God to be the holy God. If you have never thought much about this, the holiness of God is really important for understanding God's revelation of Himself – and so I am going to spend a bit of time on it

The holiness of God

Right from the beginning of God's relationship with His people God has said He is the holy God. "You shall be holy" He says repeatedly in Leviticus, for "I the Lord your God am holy."

Leviticus 19: The LORD spoke to Moses: ² "Speak to the entire Israelite community and tell them: Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.

Leviticus 11:44-45, 19:1, 20:7, 26

And as you heard in Isaiah the angelic beings declare

Isaiah 6:³ And one called to another:

*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Armies;
his glory fills the whole earth.*

And this is not just an Old Testament idea

At the beginning of the book of Revelation the four living creatures, who embody all created power and rule, praise God saying

Rev. 4:⁸ Each of the four living creatures had six wings; they were covered with eyes around and inside. Day and night they never stop, saying,

*Holy, holy, holy,
Lord God, the Almighty,
who was, who is, and who is to come.*

The threefold repetition of holy says God is superlatively holy, incomparably holy, immeasurably holy, holy through and through

You cannot think of God without thinking of Him as holy in all He is.

But what does 'holy' mean, what does it describe.

At its heart it speaks of God's apartness, His difference and distinction from all created being

It is saying there is an infinite – without limit, qualitative distinction between his being and ours.

Think of those differences

Exodus 3:¹³ Then Moses asked God, "If I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what should I tell them?"

¹⁴ God replied to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you."

God says His name is 'I am', His holy name

That is true of no created being

God says He has life in Himself, is dependent on no one and nothing else for His being – in either its origin or continuation

Whereas every creature is dependent on God for its life

I am who I am, I will be who I will be

His being is without any limit external to Himself

Unlike us, He is not limited in time, in space, in wisdom, in might – what we call His eternity, His omnipresence, His omniscience, His omnipotence or almightiness

We are limited by all those – we can only live in the present, in one place, the future unknown to us, our power so limited

And God cannot be acted on from outside to make Him be or think or feel anything other than He wills to be or think or feel

And this Holiness is not on a spectrum, as if we are a little holy and God is very holy.

God's declaration of His holiness is a denial that we and He can be measured on the same scale of being, that we share a common being

And holiness is true of every aspect of His being.

His wisdom is holy, His might is holy, His justice is holy, His love is holy – because it is His own, the love of the holy God

His justice needs no advisors, and it knows no compromise. He is and will be just

His love, in the eternal love of the Father, Son and Spirit, is pure, never faltering, never knowing or tolerating selfishness, never needy, never able to be bargained with, always other person centred

God's declaration of His holiness and our experience of His holiness is His categorical denial of the lie the devil has planted in our mind, and to which our race is wed

We in Adam have believed the lie that we could be like God

And since that time we have wanted to believe that God is like us, just a bigger version of ourselves

And so we can approach him by our own initiative and efforts, bargain with Him as if He needed us, impress Him with what we do, even storm heaven as the men of Babel thought

Collectively even become greater than Him and drive Him out

God's holiness says all that is doomed to failure

He is Not like us in His being. We remain creatures, He Creator

And He is Not like our idols, the creation of human imagination and desire, to whom we like to compare Him, our projections of power and wisdom. They are dead, lifeless, powerless

the very opposite of the holy God

And God's holiness means our sin is death.

Not arbitrarily, as if God has just decided He doesn't like sin, that He could choose to tolerate our sin but has just chosen not to

But necessarily, for He is, and HE is just and loving.

There is no place in the universe where HE is not, no part of Creation that is not sustained by Him, no life not dependent on Him

And who we are in our rebellion against God cannot abide His holy presence

Our sin, our rebellion is based on the lie that God will not do what HE has said, will not be who He has declared Himself to be. But His holy word, like Himself, is almighty and will prevail, its sentence carried out. It cannot be otherwise. We creatures cannot turn His word aside, and He will not be any other than He is

In choosing to love ourselves rather than God by giving Him thanks and obeying His word, our love has been corrupted, turning into selfishness, to the use and abuse of other creatures. That cannot continue in the presence of holy love

We justify and excuse our wrong actions – our breaking our word, our stealing from others, our sexual immorality – often as necessary to preserve our power or dignity, to give us life and pleasure, claiming that we have the right to decide right and wrong for ourselves – but God’s holy justice does not accept our rationalisations, does not accept the standards we set for ourselves, and will give what our deeds deserve. He cannot cease to be just and from ordering the universe by His justice

He is life, and our sin means we walk in death – and death has no place with the God who is.

All our proud modern claims – to be masters of our own lives, judges of our own actions, to live without God, founder on the rock of God’s holiness

God’s holiness is the denial of our lies, and the expression of the incompatibility of God’s being with the fruit of that lie, with our selfishness, our pride, our embrace of lies

How can any creature approach Him, how can anyone live in His presence?

That is what Isaiah instinctively realises –

Isaiah 6:⁵ Then I said:

*Woe is me for I am ruined
because I am a man of unclean lips
and live among a people of unclean lips,
and because my eyes have seen the King,
the LORD of Armies.*

⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, and in his hand was a glowing coal that he had taken from the altar with tongs. ⁷ He touched my mouth with it and said:

*Now that this has touched your lips,
your iniquity is removed
and your sin is atoned for.*

The mouth reveals the heart. It is his being at its core which is unclean, unfit for God’s presence

And we see in Isaiah that the holy God can provide a way for the unclean, the unholy, to live with Him through dealing with the guilt, through covering over, atoning for, the offence of our sin.

A coal is taken from the altar, the place of sacrifice

⁷ He touched my mouth with it and said:

*Now that this has touched your lips,
your iniquity is removed
and your sin is atoned for.*

Trusting the LORD, receiving His provision, Isaiah is and we can be cleansed, become holy in being separated from our sin

But the Old Testament teaches us that it is only as He provides the way. Without His provision there is no way

As creatures and as sinful creatures, we have no access of our own to the holy God

He is not an object to be discovered by us, an idea to be conceived by us

He is, and to approach Him in any other way than the way He provides, He commands – is death

Israel, rescued by God from Egypt to be His holy people, had to learn this, and the provisions made for priesthood and tabernacle in Leviticus and Numbers teach this.

Where Israel abided by, faithfully used God's provision in His law, they could live with God in their midst as His holy people, a people separated to Him and cleansed by Him, able to enjoy the blessings of being His people

But acknowledging God's holiness by only coming to Him in the way He provides is not something that comes naturally to either we of the Israelites, which led to the tragedy recorded in Leviticus 10

Let me read it to you

Leviticus 10: Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his own firepan, put fire in it, placed incense on it, and presented unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them to do. ² Then fire came from the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. ³ Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD has spoken:

*I will demonstrate my holiness
to those who are near me,
and I will reveal my glory
before all the people."*

And Aaron remained silent.

Coming to God in any other way than HE commands means we think we are equals with God – his greatness is just a matter of degree, and He somehow needs our attention – and so we can initiate the relationship, deal with him on our terms, when and where we want

That is a denial of God's holiness

And if that wrong idea took hold of the priesthood it would spread through Israel. They would think God ought to be pleased with the worship they wanted to give, not the worship he commands. It would enshrine the lie Adam believed – that we can be God's equals, at the heart of their life and they would cease to be the holy people of the holy God

We can only relate to God in the way He provides, the way He reveals in His word

And that also means that fundamental to relating to the holy God is believing His word and conforming all our actions to it

And again the history of Israel brings this home.

In Numbers 20 we hear of a time in the wilderness wanderings of the people of Israel when they became thirsty and had no water

They complained about it to Moses

The story continues

20:⁶ Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the doorway of the tent of meeting. They fell facedown, and the glory of the LORD appeared to them. ⁷ The LORD spoke to Moses, ⁸ "Take the staff and assemble the community. You and your brother Aaron are to speak to the rock while they watch, and it will yield its water. You will bring out water for them from the rock and provide drink for the community and their livestock."

God is clear – speak to the rock

God is going to show His might and power by bringing water from the rock, what is life giving from what is dead, just by His word

What happens

*Numbers 20:*⁹ So Moses took the staff from the LORD's presence just as he had commanded him. ¹⁰ Moses and Aaron summoned the assembly in front of the rock, and Moses said to them, "Listen, you rebels! Must we bring water out of this rock for you?" ¹¹ Then Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff, so that abundant water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

Moses is frustrated – we can understand that, but his striking the rock leads to a focus on his action.

Listen to what God says

*Numbers 20:*¹² But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust me to demonstrate my holiness in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this assembly into the land I have given them." ¹³ These are the Waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarreled with the LORD, and he demonstrated his holiness to them.

The issue was unbelief

Think about the character of unbelief. It is not just that we are choosing to not believe God. It is that we are choosing to believe ourselves rather than God, trust our judgement, not His.

That is why all our unbelief is an affront to His holiness, because it claims we can be like Him, even better – wiser, more powerful and effective, than the living Creator God

God is holy, immeasurably different from us in His being, holy in all He is

Which means in our creatureliness, our sin, our death, we can only relate to Him, can only live in His presence, as He provides a way

Can only relate to Him by faith in the way He reveals

The way of law did not work for our hearts are stubborn in our commitment to the lie that we can be like God, and so we can treat Him as if He is like us

So stubborn that we can even use the law to think we can put the holy God in our debt by our obedience, earn His favour

And so the gift of the law to Israel only led to their judgement, to them failing to be God's holy people

But when we confess that the Church is holy we are confessing our faith that God has provided a way for us to relate to Him, a way for us to be His holy people

And that way is Jesus

The work of Christ – how the church can be holy Eph 5:25-28, Heb. 10:10, 14, 13:12

This confession that His one church, the church He builds is holy, highlights the greatness of the work of Christ He sanctifies, He makes us holy, by offering Himself as a sacrifice for sin on the cross

This is what the Scripture says

Ephesians 5: ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word. ²⁷ He did this to present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and blameless.

Hebrews 10: ¹⁰ By this will, we have been sanctified [made holy] through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all time.

¹¹ Every priest stands day after day ministering and offering the same sacrifices time after time, which can never take away sins. ¹² But this man, after offering one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God. ¹³ He is now waiting until his enemies are made his footstool. ¹⁴ For by one offering he has perfected forever those who are sanctified.

Heb. 13: ¹² Therefore, Jesus also suffered outside the gate, so that he might sanctify the people by his own blood.

He sanctifies us, that is makes us holy in God's sight – and not just from the uncleanness of this sin or that, but from the uncleanness of all our sins.

And so this is not a holiness that is lost the next time you sin.

It is for all time

There is an infinite sufficiency in the death of our Lord Jesus as the sacrifice offered by God for our sin. It covers over the offence of all our sin in God's sight

And in saving through the death of God the Son, God vindicates His holiness, His difference from all creatures

Demonstrates that He is all that He says He is

Almighty and wise far beyond human wisdom and might,

Just and loving, righteous and merciful

Just in that He Fulfills His word of judgement on sin. It deserves death, and what our sin deserves is paid in the death of our Lord Jesus as He dies in our place.

And He, God incarnate as we confess in the Creed is only One who can justly substitute Himself for us. Being man, He can die the death every one of us must die. Being God He can rightly suffer the cost of God forgiving us by bearing in Himself the sentence of God's law.

There is always a cost in forgiveness, and only the one who forgives can bear that cost. If it is not the one who forgives, if another steps in and pays the cost, then not exacting punishment is not forgiveness, it is strict, even grudging, justice.

Say I have two sons and one of them smashes up my car

I can't say to the son involved in the collision – I forgive you, you won't have to pay for the cost of repairs – I will make your good brother pay for them – and still be just.

And if the good brother did pay then not making the brother involved in the collision pay is not forgiveness. There is then nothing to forgive.

But I can say to the son who wrecked the car - I forgive you, you won't have to pay for the cost of repairs because I will pay the cost myself. That is forgiveness

God, in the Father sending the Son and the Son going to the cross, the holy God – pays the cost. He justly forgives Fulfilling both His law and His word of mercy, that has promised the repentant that He will save from death.

The holy God in saving through the death of His Son is both just and righteous, and at the same time gracious and compassionate to sinners, loving with a holy love, a love so different from our own that in His mercy He can say ‘my ways are not your ways, my thoughts not your thoughts’ Is. 55:5-11

And receiving with faith God’s provision of His Son in His death, relating to the holy God on His terms revealed in His word – repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus, believers in Jesus, His church, enter into great privilege

The privilege of being Holy

Let me summarise the privilege that those who believe in Jesus, who are welcomed into His holy church receive. These overlap, but as a way of ordering our privilege you can think of it as

Inheritance Eph. 1:17-18, 1 Pet 2:9-10 [Deut 7:6, Ex. 19:3-6]

Ephesians 1: 17 I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, would give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him. 18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints,

An eternal inheritance. Christ’s holy people inherit all that God has promised His people,

Those promises are many and rich, so great that without the work of the Spirit opening our eyes we cannot start to grasp the greatness of this privilege

Where to start – Isaiah 11, or Ezekiel 37, or

Protection [Acts 9:4, 1 Cor. 3:16-17]

They know His protection.

What stopped Paul from, in his words, persecuting the church of God? 1 Cor. 15:9

It was the Lord Jesus, appearing to him and saying

Acts 9: 4 Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

His church matters to God, and HE is active to protect and defend it. You heard His commitment in 1 Cor. 3:17

1 Corinthians 3: 16 Don’t you yourselves know that you are God’s temple and that the Spirit of God lives in you? 17 If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him; for God’s temple is holy, and that is what you are.

Presence [Rev. 21:1-5, 22:1-5]

And as God’s holy people, His holy congregation, His church knows

Presence now – God’s Spirit in and amongst us collectively, as you heard in 1 Cor. 3

And the Promise of presence forever – let me read the little glimpse we are given of what it will be to live as the holy people in the presence of the holy God

Revelation 21: Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² I also saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband.

³ Then I heard a loud voice from the throne: Look, God's dwelling is with humanity, and he will live with them. They will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and will be their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more, because the previous things have passed away.

⁵ Then the one seated on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new." He also said, "Write, because these words are faithful and true." ⁶ Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will freely give to the thirsty from the spring of the water of life. ⁷ The one who conquers will inherit these things, and I will be his God, and he will be my son.

These words really need no commentary, just, as those who know in this life *Death, grief, crying, and pain*,
Meditating on

The same is true for Rev. 22

Revelation 22: Then he showed me the river of the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² down the middle of the city's main street. The tree of life was on each side of the river, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree are for healing the nations, ³ and there will no longer be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will worship him. ⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.

What will it be to serve God with pure hearts – no conflict of motives, no drop of self love

When you are confessing your faith in the one holy church you are confessing both the greatness of Jesus work, and the extraordinary generosity of God to you in making you holy through the death of our Lord Jesus

Just as we become members of God's one holy church by receiving God's provision in the death of His Son by faith in His word that reveals to us that provision for us,

So we are called to walk by faith in our dealings with the local congregation, the faith that relates to the congregation as it is revealed to be in God's Word

Walking by faith in relating to the church 1 Cor. 3:16-17, 1 Cor. 8:1-3, 13:1-13; 2 Cor. 10, 1 John

Genuine faith will relate to our local congregation, as the fruit of the purpose of God, as the achievement of the death of Christ

Relate to the church as God describes it – as Christ's body, as the temple of God in whom God's Spirit lives

1 Corinthians 3: ¹⁶ Don't you yourselves know that you are God's temple and that the Spirit of God lives in you? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is holy, and that is what you are.

The you is plural, the you collectively, not just individually

The you who gathers

What does that mean? It means we have to reckon the congregation, the gathering and those who gather, as precious to God

With all their faults and failings – for Paul is talking of the Corinthian congregation, a far from perfect congregation – in fact one divided by status seeking and a selfish insistence on rights, with thoughtlessness and immorality in the congregation

The gospel teaches us that the congregation is precious to God – that the people we meet with are people for whom Christ died. [1 Cor. 8:11-12]

The gift of the Spirit teaches us that the congregation is precious to God – people who are holy

Is that the way you think of the congregation you meet with week by week – precious to the God who gave His Son to save you, who loves you

Isn't there in those two truths sufficient reason to serve our brothers and sisters

Might, looking around you, think that's a bit overblown

Might even think of as just another human organisation – you can take or leave depending on whether its priorities align with yours

That is to walk by sight, and not by faith in the gospel

And if by faith you see the congregation as God sees it then you will heed God's warning ¹⁷ *If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him;*

And be guided by it in your interactions with the church. What guidance does it give

The word translated 'destroy' can also have the sense of 'corrupt' or 'spoil'

And so as you are thinking about the warning of this verse – four questions

What destroys and what does the opposite - What builds up

What corrupts, spoils the church – and what does the opposite, What maintains its purity

There is a wealth of talks in answering those questions. You could say the Corinthian letters are Paul answering those questions for the Corinthians

But let me give you the summary

Firstly What destroys – selfishness and the thoughtlessness and rudeness that accompany it'

What builds up – love [1 Cor. 8:1-3]

Chapter 13 is the climax of Paul's dealings with this divided church – where people seemed quite happy to exclude and humiliate

Let me read what Paul says

1 Corinthians 13: ⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant, ⁵ is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs. ⁶ Love finds no joy in unrighteousness but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Again – a wealth of talks there

But you can read those words at home and think

To whom, in the church, am I showing kindness and patience – the kindness and patience that includes and encourages

And you can also think am I being self-seeking

Irritable

Carrying resentments

And repent

Secondly – what corrupts – false teaching [1 Corinthians 15:32-34], 2 Cor. 11:1-4

What maintains its purity – the gospel, preached and applied by the apostles

2 Corinthians 11: I wish you would put up with a little foolishness from me. Yes, do put up with me! ² For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy, because I have promised you in marriage to one husband—to present a pure virgin to Christ. ³ But I fear that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your minds may be seduced from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. ⁴ For if a person comes and preaches another Jesus, whom we did not preach, or you receive a different spirit, which you had not received, or a different gospel, which you had not accepted, you put up with it splendidly!

It is by the gospel Paul betrothed the Corinthian congregation to Christ as a pure bride, and by the gospel they will be maintained in uncorrupted faithfulness to him

More next week when we speak of the church as apostolic

Holy - One word, and a lot to think about

The holiness of God

The effectiveness of Christ dying on the cross to deal with our sins

And the enormous privilege of being by faith a member of the holy church – knowing our great inheritance, confident of God's care and protection, living now by the Spirit and in the future in risen bodies in the presence of the almighty God

We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church

A wonderful confession to make knowing we are included by faith in Jesus in God's one holy church

And a confession that reminds us that we are to relate to our congregation as holy, to see it with the same faith with which we receive God's provision for us in the gospel

As the congregation of those HE loves, His holy temple

And To seek always to build it up in love, and to preserve its purity by gospel truth