

Why Reformation Christians Should be Catholic Christians

Outline

A key passage from the Nicene Creed: “We believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.” The Nicene Creed is used by Eastern Orthodox churches, and the Roman Catholic Church, but it is also used by many Protestant churches in worship. My question today is what does it mean for Protestants, the children of the Reformation, to be catholic Christians?

I am not going to argue that Protestants should be catholic Christians. I start with the assumption that they should. This assumption is not arbitrary, since all the great Reformers saw themselves, not as separating themselves from the catholic Church, but as reforming that Church.

This talk has two parts: Part 1. What does it mean to be catholic? Part 2. Can a Protestant be catholic in this sense?

Part I: What Does It Mean to Be Catholic?

I. The first and most obvious point: “catholic” here means “universal” and does not designate one particular Christian body over against others. Unless a Christian denomination is willing to claim that all other Christian bodies are not genuinely Christian at all, that denomination cannot consistently claim that the catholic Church is simply identical to their particular version of Christianity.

II. A second point follows from the first: If the catholic Church includes a variety of Christian denominations, traditions, or communities, then “catholic” cannot mean “completely homogenous.” It is obvious that there is diversity of belief and practice among Christians.

III. This diversity must, however, have limits, if the phrase “Christian Church” is to have any useful meaning. The true Church may be diverse but it must also be “one” in some sense.

IV. The question as to what counts as a genuine Christian Church must be distinguished from the question as to which individuals will finally be saved by God. God alone knows who are the elect, but we must be able to make distinctions between communities that are Christian and those who are not. The visible Church must be visible, even if it is never identical to the invisible Church.

V. “Genuine Christianity” and “true Church” are interdefinable expressions. If we know what genuine Christianity is, the true Church will be composed of those communities that embody that form of Christianity. If we know what the true Church is, we can say that genuine Christianity will be that form of Christianity found in that Church.

VI. Which do we start with? Let me try to start by asking what is “genuine Christianity,” understanding it in the manner of Richard Baxter and C. S. Lewis as “mere Christianity.” To define mere Christianity we must say what is essential to Christian faith. The essentials of the faith should not only be distinguished from what is not important, but also from what is important but not essential.

VII. Vincent of Lerins: “All possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all.” Many argue that “Vincent’s canon” is useless, but I think it has value. To put Vincent’s principle to use it must be taken in connection with another principle: Vincent appeals to “antiquity.”

VIII. What does “antiquity” mean? I think it means that the Church gets its identity from its beginnings. It is the Church founded by Christ through the apostles Christ appointed to be his witnesses. Thus, a Church cannot be catholic without being apostolic as well.

IX. This appeal to the apostolic origins of the faith must be distinguished from “primitivism,” the recurrent view that the true Church has vanished and must be restored. Primitivism lacks faith in God’s Providence and does not believe Christ’s promise that his Church will endure and prevail.

X. If Christ founded the Church, and we believe in Providence, we should believe that on matters *essential* God would ensure that the early Church faithfully transmitted the “apostolic deposit” and thus that the doctrines of the early Church, enshrined in the ecumenical creeds, *and* the Church’s acceptance of the Bible as God’s Word, faithfully reflect what God wills for His Church to accept. “Genuine Christianity” can then be defined as the union of those doctrines found in the ecumenical creeds, understood as giving a distillation of the message from God found in the Bible, understood as God’s authoritative revelation.

XI. This account of “genuine Christianity” then allows us to define “true Church.” I propose that the true Church is composed of all those Christian communities that embody genuine Christianity, accepting the doctrines the early Church arrived at, including the doctrine of Scripture.

XII. Vincent’s Canon can now be put to use, because we can qualify the scope of the quantifier when we speak of what has been believed always, everywhere, by *all*. We should include in the “all” only those communities and traditions that are committed to the doctrines enshrined in the early, ecumenical creeds and to the Scriptures the Church recognized as divine revelation. Groups that deny essential Christian doctrines do not get a vote, because they have chosen to cut themselves off from the Church that is “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.”

XIII. Appealing to Vincent’s Canon, we can now offer a slightly more expansive account of what “mere” or “genuine” Christianity is. In addition to those beliefs enshrined in the early creeds, we can add the intersection of the beliefs and practices of all those bodies that constitute the true Church.

Part II: Can a Protestant be Catholic in the Above Sense?

I. Protestantism is often defined in terms of three “*solas*.” Protestants affirm *sola Scriptura*, *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. Of these, it is “Scripture alone” that might most easily be thought to create a problem for a Protestant who wants to be a catholic Christian. My account gives great weight and authority to the early creeds of the Church. Is this consistent with “Scripture alone?”

II. To decide, we must say what “Scripture alone” means. I argue it does not mean that Scripture is the sole source of truth for a Christian, or even the sole source of religious or theological truth. Rather, in the words of Stephen Davis, it means that “*Scripture is our source of religious truth above all other sources, our norm or guide to religious truth above all other norms and guides.*”¹

III. However, even this does not mean that appeals to Scripture always trump appeals to other sources of truth. The reason this is so is that Scripture has this highest authority only when properly interpreted. In the past Scripture has been used to defend mistaken scientific theories and sometimes immoral and even racist practices.

IV. How then do we decide when an interpretation of Scripture is sound? Part of the answer is that we must appeal to historical and linguistic learning. Interpretations cannot be correct if they do not make sense of the text.

V. However, historical learning, while necessary, is not sufficient. We also need the kind of spiritual discernment Paul describes in I Corinthians 2, where he claims that the “man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

VI. The problem is inherent in the fact that the Scripture are a long and complex *text*. It is a commonplace of hermeneutics that texts underdetermine their meaning. This is true of the Bible as well. Hendrikus Berkhof: “The Bible is a library full of heights, depth, and plains, with central and marginal sections. To gain entrance and to find its central perspective the reader needs help. The community of believers must offer an introduction, a guide, a summary.”²

VII. Where do we get this introduction or guide? Berkhof is right: we must get it from the Church, from the community of believers. It is helpful to remember that the Bible is not composed of *data* to be explained, but is *testimony*, given through human authors but ultimately from God. One does not usually seek to *explain* testimony, but to hear and respond to it.

VIII. So the Scriptures should be the highest authority for Christians. But the Scriptures have this authority only when properly interpreted. They can only be properly interpreted when they are read as God’s word, God’s address to us humans. To read them this way we must read them as God’s Church reads them. Proper interpretation must be governed by the “rule of faith” embodied in the ecumenical creeds.

IX. This does not mean that the Church is an authority that is higher than Scripture, or that it can be seen as competing with Scripture. That would contradict “*sola Scriptura.*” The same Spirit that inspired the Bible also providentially guided the Church to recognize the Bible and helps the Church today recognize the creeds as a faithful expression of what God intends to say through Scripture.

¹ Stephen T. Davis, “Scripture, Tradition, and Theological Authority,” in Davis’s *Christian Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), Oxford Scholarship Online DOI: 10.1093/0199284598.001.0001.

² *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, trans. Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 93. I owe this reference to Stephen Davis.

X. *An objection*: Protestants have always affirmed that creeds and councils of the church can err. Does not this mean that the creeds of the early Church should be subjected to critical scrutiny in light of the teachings of Scripture? *Answer*: Councils and creeds can and do err, and *in principle* all such documents must be supported by Scripture, *properly interpreted*. In *practice*, however, I think it is only later creeds that are not ecumenical in nature, and therefore are not accepted by the universal (catholic) Church, that could seriously be questioned by Christians.

XI. Therefore, the authors of the “Reforming Catholic Confession” are surely right to say, as they do in their “Explanation” of the Confession, that “given the weight of orthodox judgment and catholic consensus, individuals and churches do well to follow the example of the Reformers and accept as faithful interpretations and entailments of Scripture the decisions of the councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451) concerning the nature of the Triune God and Jesus Christ.”

XII. The appeal to “tradition” and “church teaching” is only problematic (for a Protestant) when it is used to justify doctrinal claims as essential to Christianity that are *not* rooted in Scripture. However, no doctrines enshrined in the early creeds are of this nature. On my understanding, the doctrine of Scripture is itself part of “mere Christianity” and should not be understood simply as a Protestant distinctive.

XIII. A few weeks ago I was happy to sign a theological confession that attempted to be a “mere Protestant” statement of faith. I long for and pray for the day when I could be invited to sign a new confession of faith that embodies not just “mere Protestantism,” but truly catholic, “mere Christianity.” Until that day arrives, I must remind myself of what I do have and be grateful for it: the Nicene Creed, understood as the distillation of what God teaches me through Scripture.

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