

The One Church

In T.F.'s presentation of the Trinitarian theology that undergirds and shapes the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (commonly called the Nicene Creed), we come to the clause that addresses the Church:

[We believe] ...in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

This clause flows from the one preceding it concerning the Holy Spirit. As TF notes, the Church exists because of the Spirit's work, not independently from the Spirit. We believe in the Church because we believe in the Spirit.

TF then notes that the Creed declares the Church to have four identifying characteristics ("marks"): *one*, *holy*, *catholic* and *apostolic*. TF evaluates these marks within the incarnational and Trinitarian context of the Creed:

1. The Church is one

The Creed declares the Church to be *one* in the sense that it is rooted in and thus expressive of the essential oneness of the triune God. TF comments:

[The Church is] the empirical community of men, women and children called into being through the proclamation of the Gospel, indwelt by the Holy Spirit in whom it is united to Christ and through him joined to God. Far from being a human institution it was founded by the Lord himself and rooted in the Holy Trinity. As Ignatius of Antioch [an early Church leader who may have been a disciple of John] taught that the members of the Church are united with Jesus Christ just as he is united with the Father. Hence whatever the Church does from beginning to end is done 'in the Son and the Father and the Spirit'. The Church is what it everywhere is in the world as a manifestation of the saving union with God incarnate in Jesus Christ.... Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the universal Church. (p. 253)

Referring to the writings of Irenaeus (which preceded, but heavily influenced, the writing of the Creed), Torrance continues:

The [Church] is what it is through the incarnation of the Son of God in Christ who has gathered up and reformed the human race in himself, and through the astonishing event at Pentecost when God poured out his own Spirit upon the apostles and disciples of the Lord Jesus thereby giving birth or rather rebirth to the Church and making it participate in his own divine life and love. (p. 254)

This Christocentric understanding of the Church tells us that that the Church is formed to be a servant of Christ who, in the power of the Holy Spirit, is a servant of the Father's mission and kingdom. Thus "the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit occupied the unqualified center of Christian faith and life empirically as well as spiritually" (p. 255).

One through one baptism

It's vital to note that the Creed grounds the Church's oneness in the "one baptism" in the one name of the triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This baptism is seen as the means by which people enter the one Church. As Torrance notes, the early Church prepared candidates for baptism with thorough instruction in the Gospel. Thus baptism is grounded in the Holy Trinity and related directly to the truth of the Gospel. In this context, Torrance expands his definition of the Church:

Thus the Church may be described as the place in space and time where knowledge of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit becomes grounded in humanity, and union and communion with the Holy Trinity become embodied within the human race. Expressed the other way round, the Church is constituted by the Holy Spirit as the empirical counterpart of his sanctifying presence and activity in our midst, for in the Spirit we are made members of Christ the incarnate Son and through him have access to the Father... As Irenaeus... expressed it: "This Gift of God has been entrusted to the Church, as breath was to the first created man, that all members receiving it may be vivified, and the communication of Christ has been distributed within it, that is, the Holy Spirit, the earnest of incorruption and the confirmation of our faith, as the ladder of ascent to God... For where the Church is there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church, and every kind of grace; but the Spirit is truth." As such the Church is constituted by Christ to be the receptacle of the Gospel proclaimed and handed on by the apostles... It was ultimately in the Gospels themselves that Irenaeus located the vivifying deposit committed to the Church, and handed on by the apostles. In this conception of the Church Irenaeus was clearly drawing out the implications of the New Testament injunction about "the faith once for all delivered to the saints." (p. 257)

In this way we are given to think of the Church as indwelt by Christ himself, who comes "clothed with the Gospel" (p. 258). In this we see the importance of the Church's calling to proclaim the Gospel as it is presented in the writings of the Apostles (the New Testament). Through this proclamation, Jesus himself is proclaimed and through that proclamation the saving Word and power of God is at work in people's lives. In that context, Torrance adds this to his definition of the Church:

The Church [is] the community called to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and brought into union and communion with God the Father through baptism and the regenerating gift of the Holy Spirit. By its very nature, therefore, the Church is tied up with the tradition of the apostolic...Gospel which is handed on from generation to generation with baptism: instruction in the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints and baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are thus inseparable. (p. 261)

One through union and communion with the triune God

It's also vital to note that the Creed grounds the Church's oneness in its union and communion with the Holy Trinity. TF notes that the Trinity is, "The regulative center to which all the worship, faith and mission of the Church take their shape: from the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit, and to the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit" (p. 263a). The Creed thus proclaims a Christ-centered, incarnational (participatory) Trinitarian ecclesiology (doctrine of the Church). T.F. continues:

Everything we say of the Church must be consistent with the consubstantial oneness between the Son and the Father and be an expression of the union and communion between God and man effected in the incarnate life and reconciling work of the Mediator [Jesus Christ]. That is to say, the doctrine of the Church must be expounded in terms of its internal relation and not some external relation, to Jesus Christ, for it is in Christ and his inherent relation to the Father and the Holy Spirit that the essential nature of the Church is to be found. (p. 264)

This vital truth is the heart of Athanasius' biblical doctrine of the Church as the one Body of Christ. Note T.F.'s commentary here: "It is not due to some external relation in moral resemblance to Christ that the Church is his Body, but due to a real participation in him who is consubstantial with God the Father" (p. 265). This participation (koinonia, communion) with Christ, which makes us his one Body, "is not one of nature but one of adoption and grace effected through the gift of the Spirit who comes to dwell in us as he dwells in God" (p. 265).

Thus this union and communion is deeply personal in that it happens within the incarnate person of Jesus himself, who in his dual nature as God and man, has united God and humanity in one person (p. 266). Moreover, Jesus...

...Makes our humanity in him partake of the Holy Spirit with which he has been anointed and sanctified as man for our sakes, and thereby unites it through himself with the Godhead... The Church is thus to be regarded as constituting all who are reconciled to God in one body through the Cross and are made one in Christ, united with his humanity in such a way that he now comprises both in himself, their humanity and his own, as 'one new man,' for he is in them as they are in him. (p. 267)

T.F. then emphasizes that the Church is the one Church of Christ only as it...

...Looks away from itself to its objective source and ground in the Godhead, and dwells in the Holy Trinity, for it is in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that the Church and its faith are rooted and founded.... The Church is truly Church in so far as it dwells in the Holy Trinity and embodies the truth of the Gospel in its empirical life and worship. (p. 268)

The Church's dwelling in the Holy Trinity is in Jesus, who in his representative humanity is the Church (p. 270). As members of this Church we are given to participate in the one Body of Christ. This participation is actualized through the one faith and one baptism of the Church (pp. 269, 278).

With this understanding our definition of what constitutes the one Church is being focused. Though all humanity has, via the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, been (objectively) united to Christ, it is not accurate to say that all humanity is the Church. Rather, Jesus himself is the Church and we humans are part of his one Body as we, through the power of the Holy Spirit, personally (subjectively) participate.

Though the Spirit is at work in all people (poured out on "all flesh"), he is sent from the Father and the Son with a particular ministry of sanctification in the lives of those who are participants in the Church. As T.F. notes, "The Church constitutes the sanctified community within which we may draw near to the Father through the Son and in the Spirit and share in the eternal life, light and love of God himself" (p. 275). Thus through the communion (*koinonia*, participation) of the Holy Spirit imparted to it by Christ, the Church is united to Christ as his body (p. 277). Through the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon it, the Church is constituted the unique 'place' where access to the Father through the Son "is grounded in space and time among the nations of mankind" (p. 278).

2. The Church is holy

As noted by TF on p. 252, the Creed shows that the Church is holy because it is formed by the Holy Spirit (note in that regard, that the Creed's section on the Church follows immediately its section on the Holy Spirit). We are to revere and honor the Church as holy because upon it is the imprint of the character of the Holy Trinity. The Church's holiness is not its own, but rather its sharing in the holiness of God himself. Though, as noted by Torrance, holiness is God's will for the Church, it "does not derive from any moral goodness or purity of its members, but from the holiness of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The holiness of the Church is thus objectively grounded in the utterly transcendent holiness, glory and purity of God's being" (pp. 280-281).

God comes among his people, the Church, and in doing so sanctifies them, or as T.F. says, "implicates them" in God's own holiness. Coming among them as a holy God would annihilate his people, except that he comes with grace and mercy, and, ultimately, through the incarnation of his Son. In Jesus Christ, God takes our diseased humanity into himself where it is sanctified (made holy). T.F. comments:

Since the Church was brought into being through [the Son of God's] assumption of our fallen and enslaved humanity into himself, the self-sanctification of Christ as the Holy One in its midst brings the holiness of

the Holy Spirit to bear upon it in conviction and judgment of its unrighteousness, but nevertheless in such a way that the Church is justified in Christ and made holy with his holiness. (pp. 281-282)

Thus the holiness of the Church (its righteousness and sanctification) is not its own, but is derived from Christ, “who is Righteousness in his own being” (p. 282). Jesus then presents his sanctified humanity to the world through his body, the church:

Through the self-sanctification of Christ in its midst and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon it, the Church has been chosen by God and set apart as a spiritual house and a royal priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... [it is thus] the unique place where God is immediately present to us through the Holy Spirit in his very own being as God. (p. 282)

3. The Church is catholic

In saying that the Church is “catholic” the Creed is saying that it is “universal” or “all-inclusive”:

The Catholic Church is to be understood as embracing all dimensions of the people of God and their existence throughout space and time, for by the very nature of its unique foundation of Christ upon his apostles, and in virtue of the faith once and for all delivered to it by the apostles, the Church must ever be one and the same in all ages and places. (p. 283)

The Creed thus correlates the catholicity of the Church with its apostolic faith, which is the basis for the Church’s one doctrine. The church’s catholicity is also correlated with the “universal range of the incarnation and atonement,” for the Son of God “died and rose again for all people irrespective of who they are” (p. 284).

T.F. comments further:

The oneness of the Church arises out of the interlocking of the incarnation and the atonement... the indivisibility of the Person and work of Christ as the one Mediator between God and man. This one Church is intrinsically catholic because it is the one Body of Christ in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily in whom all things visible and invisible are gathered up and reconciled to God, and because as the Body of such a Christ the Church is itself the fullness of him who fills all things.... The catholicity of the Church, then, refers to the intensive wholeness and fullness of the Church in Christ, to the coordination of the Church, everywhere, in every place, and throughout all space and time, with the wholeness and fullness of Christ himself. (p. 285)

4. The Church is apostolic

Torrance defines the Church’s apostolicity as follows:

In its simplest sense the apostolicity of the Church refers back to the original foundation of the Church once for all laid by Christ upon the apostles, but it also refers to the interpenetration of the existence and mission of the Church in its unswerving fidelity to that apostolic foundation. (p. 285)

The Apostles were chosen and sent by Christ as a link between himself and the Church. They would be this link by both teaching and embodying the truth of the gospel (the deposit of faith), which is “the unrepeatable foundation on which the Church was built” (p. 286). This deposit includes the content of the gospel found in the Apostles’ writings (the New Testament, which points back to, and thus includes and interprets the Old Testament). However, this deposit is more than information on a page, for the gospel itself points directly to the life-giving reality of Christ himself. This is vital to understand, for as Torrance notes:

It is only in Christ and not out of itself, and only through union and communion with Christ in its faith and mission and not through its own piety, that the Church is continuously sustained...That the Church is apostolic as well as one, holy and catholic, signifies, therefore, that it is ever one and the same with the Church once for all founded by Christ in the apostolate... That is to say, apostolicity has to do with the continuing identity of the Church as the authentic Body of Christ in space and time. (p. 287)

To be truly apostolic in both its belief and ministry, the Church must focus continuously and faithfully on the interpretation, exposition and application of Holy Scripture, which contains the apostolic witness to Christ, “For it is through faithful transmission of the preaching and teaching of the apostles that the Church is itself constantly renewed and reconstituted as Christ’s Church” (p. 287).

The bishops and theologians of the Church who assembled at Nicaea grounded their deliberations in careful exposition of Scripture, even though, at times, they had to coin new terms to adequately express and thus faithfully convey the deposit of faith contained in Scripture. This was particularly needful in formulating statements concerning the triunity of God and the Incarnation of the Son of God. According to Torrance, these church leaders and teachers

were concerned in wrestling with the Holy Scriptures to express what they were compelled to think and hold within the context of the apostolic tradition under the impact of God’s self-revelation through the Word and Spirit of Christ, and on that basis alone, to confess their faith in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And thereby they sought to provide continuing generations of people in the Church with an evangelical and apostolic framework within which continuing interpretation of Holy Scripture, proclamation of the truth of the Gospel, and instruction in the faith could be carried out. (p. 289)

We are richly blessed to have inherited this “evangelical and apostolic framework,” which defines and thus defends the deposit of faith once and for all given to the Church by Jesus through his Apostles. By remaining true to this framework, the Church remains connected to Christ himself, who is the one Apostle in the absolute sense. That connection includes faithfully reading, understanding and teaching the deposit of faith given in Holy Scripture, and it includes faithful participation with Christ in his ongoing apostolic mission to the world, through his body, the Church.

We come now to the Creed’s final clause:

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The Creed’s declaration of the Church’s apostolicity provides the basis for this concluding statement concerning the Church’s one baptism and issues pertaining to eschatology (the resurrection and the life to come).

One baptism

The framers of the Creed apparently took the phrase *one baptism* from Paul’s letter to the Church in Ephesus (Ephesians 4:4-5). Paul exhorts that congregation to a unity grounded firmly in the fact that there is but “one body and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith [and], one baptism.” Why do Paul and the Creed highlight baptism but not the Eucharist? According to Torrance, it is because of the important “inner connection between baptism and the wholeness of the apostolic and catholic faith.” Indeed, “The whole substance of the Gospel of grace...[is] concentrated in one baptism for the remission of sins” (p. 290).

In making this point, T.F. references Athanasius’ understanding that the “fullness of the mystery” (the gospel) is found in baptism, which “is given in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (p. 290). Like other early Church

fathers, Athanasius regarded baptism as, “The great seal... the all-embracing sacrament bound up with one Body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, and one God and Father while the Eucharist was regarded as celebrated only within the Church’s participation in the great mystery of baptism and as properly included within it” (p. 290).

One baptism thus points directly to Jesus as the one Lord of the Church. Indeed, it was through Jesus’ vicarious life, death and resurrection that the Church came into being. According to T.F., “baptism in his name signified incorporation of the baptized into Christ as members of his Body” (p. 291).

T.F. then shows that one baptism also points to the Holy Spirit:

For it is in one Spirit as well as through Christ that the Church has access to the Father. It is through the koinonia [communion/fellowship] of the Holy Spirit that the Church shares in the incarnate mystery of Christ, and through the power and operation within it that the unity of the Church as the Body of Christ is progressively actualized among the people of God. The Church is thus respected as the Temple of God in which he dwells through his Spirit. (p. 291)

For the forgiveness of sins

Why does the Creed declare “one baptism for the forgiveness of sins”? Does baptism bring about forgiveness? Torrance answers that “baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit initiates people into the sphere in which all the divine blessings [including forgiveness of sins]...are bestowed and become effective” (p. 292). In saying this, Torrance is not suggesting that we are forgiven (and thus saved) by baptism (or at the time of baptism). Rather he is noting that in the rite of baptism we experience subjectively (personally) all that Jesus accomplished for humanity objectively (universally), including what he accomplished through his baptism in the Jordan. What is true objectively, is personally experienced (actualized) in our baptism. It’s one thing to be forgiven, it’s another to experience that forgiveness and thus have it become effective in our personal lives.

What is personally (subjectively) experienced is grounded in a greater objective reality. It is to this reality that Torrance points. In doing so he notes that Athanasius (like other of the Greek Church fathers) regarded Jesus’ baptism as a vicarious baptism, which was “a decisive point” for all humanity. Torrance explains:

In his baptism in the Jordan, the incarnate Son of God received the Spirit upon the humanity he had taken from us, not for his own sake, but for our sake. That is to say, it was our humanity that was baptized, anointed, sanctified and sealed in him. Thus when he was baptized for us we were baptized in him. Our baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity, therefore, is to be understood as a partaking through the Spirit in the one unrepeatable baptism of Christ which he underwent, not just in the Jordan river, but throughout his life and in his death [and] resurrection on our behalf. That vicarious baptism was the objective truth behind the one baptism of the Creed in which its depth of meaning was grounded....We are [thus] directed through the rite of baptism to its objective ground and reality, [which is] Christ clothed with the saving truth of his vicarious life, death and resurrection.... Baptism is the sacrament of that reconciling and atoning exchange in the incarnate Savior. When we understand baptism in that objective depth, we are directed away from ourselves to what took place in Christ in God. (pp. 292-293)

Thus we understand that it is the objective sense of baptism that is addressed in the Creed’s declaration of one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. This phrase then points to the Creed’s related phrase concerning eschatology:

We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Note that the Creed links the resurrection with forgiveness of sins. As noted by Torrance, this linkage was of particular importance to the Creed’s framers, “for it meant that forgiveness was not in word only but enacted in

the concrete reality of human physical existence” (p. 298). This linkage also served to expose certain heresies that denied that the Word of God really did become flesh, and really did die and then rise from the dead in flesh (bodily), remaining forever fully God and fully human (now a glorified human). T.F. explains:

In his incarnate life, death and resurrection the Son of God established a binding relation between his divine reality and humankind; he not only bridged the gap between the creature and the Creator but triumphed completely over the separation between man and God due to human sin and alienation. The resurrection of Christ demonstrated the fact that all division between man and God has now been removed in atoning reconciliation through the blood of Christ. Moreover, the resurrection of Christ in body demonstrated that the saving work of Christ on our behalf was fulfilled within the concrete reality of our actual human existence, and in such a way as to set it upon an entirely new basis in the regeneration or renewal of human being in the risen Lord. That was the great message of forgiveness proclaimed at once by the apostles on the day of Pentecost and sealed by the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism.

To be united to the crucified and risen Christ through the baptism of his Spirit, necessarily carries with it sharing with him in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. ‘Our resurrection is stored up in the Cross,’ as Athanasius once expressed it. Through his incarnation the Son of God took up into himself our physical existence enslaved to sin, thereby making our corruption, death and judgment his own and offering himself as a substitute for us, so that through the atoning sacrifice of his own life, he might destroy the power that corruption and death have over us. Through the resurrection of our physical human nature in himself Christ has set us upon an altogether different basis in relation to God in which there is no longer any place for corruption and death. ‘Now that the Savior is risen in his body, death is no longer terrible; for all who believe in Christ trample over it as if it were nothing, and choose rather to die than deny their faith in Christ. They know that when they die, they are not lost, but live and become incorruptible through the resurrection. Thus the central focus of Christian belief is upon the incarnate, crucified and risen Savior, for he has burst the bands of death and brought life and immortality to light – that is the forgiveness of sins and resurrection of the dead into which we are once for all baptized by the Holy Spirit. Far from being just a promise for the future, it is an evangelical declaration of what had already taken place in Christ, and in him continues as a permanent triumphant reality throughout the whole course of time to its consummation, when Christ will return with glory to judge the quick and the dead, and unveil the great regeneration which he has accomplished for the whole creation of visible and invisible realities alike. (pp. 298-9)