

## REFORMATION 500 WEEK 21: HEIDELBERG CATECHISM, QUESTION 54-56

**Question 54:** WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE CONCERNING ‘THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH’?

**That out of the whole human race, from the beginning to the end of the world, the Son of God, by His Spirit and Word, gathers, defends and preserves for Himself unto everlasting life, a chosen communion in the unity of the true faith; and that I am and forever shall remain, a living member of this communion.**

Questions 54 and 55 explain the biblical basis of article 9 of the Apostles Creed: “I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints.” The words *holy* and *catholic* (which means *universal*) are used to describe the church, because the Bible defines *the church* as the total number of God’s chosen (elect) people in every nation, who are or shall be saved and sanctified through faith in Jesus Christ (Gen. 26:4; John 10:10; Acts 13:48; Rom. 8:29-30; Eph. 4:4-6; Rev. 5:9-10). “We believe and profess one catholic or universal Church which is a holy congregation of true Christian believers” (*Belgic Confession*, article 27). Jesus promised, “I will build *My church*, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18).

This one universal church is called the *invisible church*, because we cannot see the total number of believers in all times and places. Not every member of the visible church is a true believer. Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 7:21). Thus, the invisible church “lies concealed in the visible church” (Ursinus, 287).

This does not mean the visible church is unnecessary. The Bible commands believers to unite together with other believers in the outward and public profession of their faith, under the spiritual oversight of pastors and elders (Matt. 16:16-19; 18:15-18; 28:19-20; Acts 2:38-42; 1 Cor. 11:18-26; Heb. 10:25; 13:7). In fact, it is through the faithful ministry of God’s Word in the visible church that the Lord Jesus Christ saves and sanctifies (gathers, defends, and preserves) His chosen people by His Holy Spirit (Rom. 10:17; 1 Cor. 1:18-21; Eph. 4:11-16). “The elect are not always members of the church, but it is necessary that they should be brought into the church [invisible and visible], even if it should occur in the very moment of death [like the thief on the cross]” (Ursinus, 302). This will be explained more fully in Questions 64-85.

“What then is it to believe the Holy Catholic Church? It is to believe that there always has been, is, and ever shall be, to the end of time such a church in the world, and that in the congregation composing the visible church there are always some who are truly converted, and that I am one of this number; and, therefore, I am a member of both the visible and invisible church, and shall forever remain such” (Ursinus, 293).

**Question 55:** WHAT DO YOU UNDERSTAND BY ‘THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS’?

**First, that believers, one and all, as members of the Lord Jesus Christ, are partakers with Him in all His treasures and gifts; second, that each one must feel himself bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the advantage and welfare of other members.**

Since the church (the total number of all believers) is a *chosen communion in the unity of the true faith*, it follows that the church is a *communion of saints*. The

word “communion” means “fellowship, sharing things in common.” It refers to what all believers have in common. The word “saint” means “a holy one.” All believers (not just a select few) are saints or holy ones by virtue of being indwelt and sanctified by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 1:2).

Since all believers are united to Christ by the bond of the Holy Spirit (John 15:5; 1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 1:23), all believers *share with Christ* in all His treasures and gifts – all the benefits of salvation. Paul told his fellow believers: “all things are yours” (1 Cor. 3:21). In Christ, we possess the kingdom of heaven (Luke 12:32). All believers have communion with God and with each other as members of Christ’s body; “truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). All believers have in common the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), and are enabled by the Spirit to follow Christ as prophets, priests, and kings, out of thankfulness for salvation.

In addition to the gifts which all believers have in common, Christ also gives to every believer different spiritual gifts “which are necessary for the edification of the church” (Ursinus, 305). “For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them” (Rom. 12:4-5; cf. 1 Cor. 12:7; 1 Pet. 4:10). The extraordinary (miraculous) gifts, such as prophecy, tongues, and healing, were “the signs of an apostle” (2 Cor. 12:12), and therefore passed away with the office of apostle. The ordinary gifts are teaching, leading, giving, encouraging and showing mercy (Rom. 12:6-8). The Lord Jesus gives “pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:12). For example, Paul mentions the household of Stephanus, who “devoted themselves to the *ministry of the saints...they refreshed my spirit and yours*” (1 Cor. 16:15, 18). The body needs the mutual assistance of every member. Thus, “the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you” (1 Cor. 12:21). Out of the variety of spiritual gifts “arises unity in the church, as the various tones in music produce sweet melody” (John Calvin).

**Question 56:** WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE CONCERNING ‘THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS’?

**That God, for the sake of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember my sins, nor the sinful nature with which I have to struggle all my life long; but graciously imputes to me the righteousness of Christ, that I may nevermore come into condemnation.**

The forgiveness of sins (article 10 of the Apostles Creed) means that God will not punish our sins because Christ made satisfaction for our sins – He was fully punished for our sins on the cross. Christ was without sin, yet our guilt was *imputed* (transferred) to Him, which is why God punished Him as the sinner (Isaiah 53). Likewise, Christ’s perfect obedience and perfect sacrifice on the cross to pay for our sins is imputed (transferred) to us believers, as if we did it. This will be explained more fully in Question 60. For now, let us glory in the Lord’s forgiveness. He will remember our sins no more (Heb. 8:12)! “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). God loves us just as much as if we had not sinned! Jesus says to every believer, “Be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you” (Matt. 9:2).

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