***Humble Presbyterianism[[1]](#footnote-1)***

INTRODUCTION: THE QUESTION

The church of Jesus Christ is one church. In John 17, immediately before his crucifixion, Jesus spent time praying for his followers, saying, 20“My prayer is not for [the disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21that all of them may be one.” Years later Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus that was splintered and fractured along racial lines and said, “3Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

4There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—

5one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” The Church is not a sectarian body but a unified whole.

As a result, since the second century Christians have said in the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in…the holy catholic church.” And since 325 AD when the Nicene Creed was adopted, Christians have declared, “I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.”

Yet we must also admit the sad reality that, since its inception, Christ’s body has been prone to division. Even while walking with Jesus, the disciples displayed a propensity toward competition and divisiveness as they argued about who would be the greatest (Mark 9:34; Luke 9:46, 22:24, etc.). And the first-century churches started by the apostles were also prone to splinter. For example, Paul rebuked the church in Corinth for divisions that formed around certain personalities (1 Corinthians 3:1ff.). This sectarian spirit has continued well beyond the New Testament church. Two of the church’s most well known events are the East-West Schism and the Reformation. And ever since the Reformation, denominations abound, leading one pastor to describe the denominational chaos of the 21st century as “the Reformation run mad.” Instead of the one universal (catholic) church, we see multiple church denominations that all name the name of Christ. Sectarianism has trumped our unity.

Too often this chaos leads Christians to disparage other denominations. Followers of Christ will draw bold lines between themselves and other Christians, describing themselves in terms of differences and disagreement. Instead of stating what they are *for*, many choose to describe themselves in terms of what they are *not*. But this tendency to define ourselves totally in the negative is not healthy and often enlivens our sectarian attitude.

How are we to respond to this situation? In the midst of differences and chaos, how are we to define ourselves? This week we turn to consider “Our Presbyterian Identity,” and the following are some introductory thoughts. We consider ourselves to be a reformed evangelical catholic congregation. Let’s consider these descriptors in opposite order.

1. A Catholic Identity

When we say that we are *catholic*, we mean that we are a part of the catholic (small “c”), universal church. We stand with anyone who agrees with the historic creeds of the Christian faith.

Our catholicity forces us to resist sectarianism and helps clarify who “our family” is. To borrow an illustration from Walker Percy, if a husband and wife are arguing in their garage when a madman starts shooting at them, the couple very quickly discovers who their family is and who their enemy is. So, too, our enemies are not other denominations or other churches. Our enemy is the evil one and his forces that strive to steal, kill, and destroy all that Jesus came to accomplish. Our brothers and sisters consist of anyone who names the name of Christ and believes in him. As one person said, our family is made up of the people who can “say the Apostles’ Creed without crossing their fingers.” We long and pray for unity in Christ’s church.

1. AN Evangelical Identity

Though evangelicalism is a broad movement and the term is difficult to define, we—our denomination and congregation—categorize ourselves as evangelical.1 To be evangelical means that we agree with those doctrines and practices commonly agreed upon by the historic evangelical movement, such as the inerrancy and inspiration of scripture, the reality of sin and the necessity of personal conversion, the real return of Jesus, and an obligation to witness and evangelize our neighbors. Thus we are a catholic, evangelical congregation.

1. A Reformed Identity

Finally, to fully understand who we are one must also understand that we are a reformed congregation. This means we trace our roots back to the Reformation and to the system of theology contained in the representative confessions and catechisms of the reformed tradition.

Reformed theology draws on rich readings of scripture that see God’s covenants with His people unfolding through scripture; what was promised and hinted at in the Old Testament is fulfilled and becomes clearer in the New Testament. But it is one story, with one beautiful message of redemption. Reformed theology also stresses that the Holy Spirit speaking through *Scripture alone* must be the ultimate authority in matters of doctrine, that *Christ alone* can save and redeem us, and that that salvation and redemption come by *grace alone* through *faith alone,* not by our efforts or goodness. All of this displays God’s glory and brings great joy into our lives. As Reformed people love to say, “the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.”

Conclusion: Living out our Identity

In the life of our church, we desire to express that we are evangelical and catholic (universal), not simply reformed. We would never want to use our reformed doctrines like a baseball bat to beat up other churches. We want to hold our doctrines with humility. We understand that Jesus’ church is much bigger and broader than the PCA. Whenever possible, we strive to work with others, pray with others, and enjoy fellowship with others.

This attitude displays itself in a variety of places at Trinity, but here are a few examples. For those who are looking for them, our worship service has many classic Presbyterian elements. But you do not have to be a Presbyterian in order to enjoy our worship. Before a baptism, we will say the Apostles’ Creed. Repeating this historic creed reminds us that we are not baptizing this person into the Presbyterian Church but into the universal (catholic) church of Jesus. When we have communion, we often mention that the table is not a Presbyterian table but it is Christ’s table. You do not have to be Presbyterian to take communion at Trinity. You simply have to be a Christian united to Christ’s universal (catholic) church. We also partner with other churches and groups, praying for them in our worship. We may not agree on minor things, but we can easily work together as an expression of our unity. Or, as a last example, consider our policy for church membership. We would never require that someone agree with Presbyterian doctrine in order to be a member of our church. Our leaders (officers) must subscribe to it all, but our members simply must believe in Christ and his gospel and long to be a part of this local church. You can be a member and still not agree with our views on baptism or election or polity or whatever.

More will be said about this in next week’s class, but for now we simply wanted to introduce you to these ideas and to our reformed evangelical catholic identity. The chapter that follows will give you more in-depth information about the Presbyterian and Reformed aspect of our church.

1 Unfortunately in our culture to be evangelical has political overtones, but we do not intend to insinuate or imply this.

1. This paper was written by Greg Thompson at Trinity Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Charlottesville, VA. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)