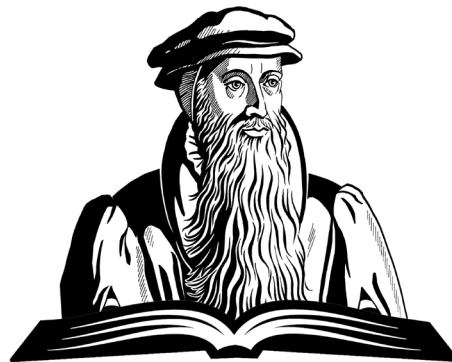

VIDEO LECTURE MODULE: THE APOSTLES' CREED

LECTURE 10 ARTICLE 9: THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

Lecturer Presenter: Rev. Cornelis Harinck



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

© 2021 by John Knox Institute of Higher Education

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means for profit, except in brief quotations for the purposes of review, comment, or scholarship, without written permission from the publisher, John Knox Institute, P.O. Box 19398, Kalamazoo, MI 49019-19398, USA.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the Authorized King James Version.

Visit our website: www.johnknoxinstitute.org

Rev. Cornelis Harinck is an emeritus minister of the Gereformeerde Gemeente in the Netherlands.

www.gergeminfo.nl

Module

THE APOSTLES' CREED

13 LECTURES

Lecturer Presenter: Rev. Cornelis Harinck

1. Introduction
2. Article 1—God the Father and Creation
3. Article 2—The Lord Jesus Christ, God's Only Begotten Son
4. Article 3—The Conception and Virgin Birth of the Savior
5. Article 4—The Suffering of Christ
6. Article 5—The Resurrection of Christ
7. Article 6—The Exaltation of Christ
8. Article 7—Christ as the Judge of the Living and the Dead
9. Article 8—God the Holy Ghost
- 10. Article 9—The Universal Church of Christ**
11. Article 10—The Forgiveness of Sins
12. Article 11—The Resurrection of the Body
13. Article 12—The Life Everlasting

THE APOSTLES' CREED

Rev. Cornelis Harinck
Transcript—Lecture 10

Article 9: The Universal Church

Dear listener, we have now come to article 9 of the Apostles' Creed. In this article the Christian confesses, "I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints." It is noteworthy to see that this confession about the church follows the confession, "I believe in the Holy Spirit." It is not without significance that the Holy Spirit is mentioned in connection with the church. The existence of the church is the result of the Holy Spirit's work in the hearts of men. He gathers a church of all generations, tongues, and nations. He sees to it that Jesus' suffering and death bear fruit by making sinners partakers of the salvation merited by Christ.

We notice, that the Christian does not say, "I believe in the church," but rather, believes that there is a church. He believes in God and in Christ. He does not believe in the church. The Christian does not base his faith on the church, as if the church would be able to save us. Such is the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, namely, that the church will secure your salvation as long as you comply with her dictates. The Christian believes in the existence of a church. He or she specifically believes in the existence of one church—one holy, catholic (universal), Christian church.

In this world there is a church. The church exists amidst a world estranged from God, consisting of a people who fear God, believe in Christ, and anticipate the eternal salvation. The word "church" is not such a suitable description of what the church is. The word "church" is too reminiscent of either the building, organization, and denomination. Therefore, the designation "congregation" is more biblical than the designation "church." The church is not made of wood and stone, but rather, she consists of living people. It is the gathering of all true believers. All believers in the world are identified as the church. Jesus promises, in Matthew 16, verse 18, "Upon this rock I will build my church: and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

The word "church" does not point at a massive building, or to a large number of people. It points to the gathering together of the believers. It can also describe a small house church, as, for instance, in Romans 16, verse 5, "Likewise greet the church that is in their house." The word "congregation" is always used in the book of Acts and the letters of the apostles. It is the translation of the Greek word "ekklesia," which means "a gathering of the people." In Greek cities, a herald would summon the citizens to assemble for a public discussion. This assembly is called a congregation. The Christian church, or rather, the church of Christ, is an assembly of people who have been called into fellowship by God. They are the citizens of God's kingdom who have been called forth from the inhabitants of the world.

We do not naturally belong to the church of Christ, but rather, to the fallen generation of Adam. The Bible, therefore, speaks of the church as "the called"—the ekklesia. God has called them "out of darkness into his marvellous light"—1 Peter 2, verse 9. Although there are various churches with different names and views, in reality, there is but one church. It is one family—her members are all brothers and sisters, "of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named"—Ephesians 3, verse 15. The apostle writes regarding the identity of believers, in Ephesians 4, verses 5 and 6: "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." They constitute the brotherhood of the church of Christ. The church is a gathering of people who are journeying toward their eternal salvation. "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved"—that is what we read in Acts 2, verse 47. After all, like the patriarchs, they are "strangers and pilgrims on the earth," looking "for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God"—Hebrews 11:10, 13.

The Apostles' Creed speaks of a "holy" and "catholic" (universal) Christian church. These adjectives describe the character of the church. The Christian church is holy. The word "holy" in the Bible has the meaning of being set apart and consecrated unto the service of the Lord. The Sabbath, the firstborn, the people of Israel, Mount Zion, the temple, and all the instruments of the temple are designated as holy, that is, set apart for the service of the Lord. They belong to the Lord, are selected for his service, and are therefore holy.

In the New Testament, believers are called "saints." In his letter to the Christians at Corinth, Paul therefore writes, "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours"—1 Corinthians 1, verse 2. The apostle addresses Christians as those who are "called to be saints." They have been called by God out of the masses of the world, to be God's particular property. They are, according to the words of Peter, "A chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people" (1 Peter 2:9). Peter calls them saints in Christ Jesus. They are not holy in themselves, but rather, they are sanctified in Jesus Christ. They are made holy because of being inwardly renewed by the Holy Spirit, and the washing away of sins through the blood of Christ. The word "holy" defines for us the nature of the church. The church consists of people who have been called out by God, from a sinful world that has rejected God. Their sins have been washed away by the blood of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit has renewed their nature. The church is, therefore, a holy Christian church—a people set apart by God.

The Christian church is "catholic" or "universal." It means that she is no longer limited to the descendants of Abraham, for she consists of men of every people, race, and language: "For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek"—Romans 10, verse 12. In Christ, the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile, between slaves and freemen, as well as between men and women, has disappeared. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus"—Galatians 3, verse 28. There is no racism in the church. The ancient words of Genesis 22, verse 18, have been fulfilled: "And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." The church has become worldwide in scope. The church of Christ is universal and therefore not limited to either a particular nationality, race, or skin color. As the great Shepherd of the sheep, Christ gathers his congregation from all nations. Upon the conclusion of the history of this world, there will be a church from all peoples, languages, and nations: "After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb"—Revelation 7, verse 9.

Finally, the church is "Christian." The church is Christ's church. He bought his church, not with silver or gold, but with his own blood: "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot"—1 Peter 1, the verses 18 and 19. These believers had once been the devil's captives and slaves, but Jesus redeemed them—he paid the ransom for them. They are the wages upon his labor. Jesus is the head of the church: "And he is the head of the body"—Colossians 1, verse 18.

The early Christians confessed, "Jesus is kurios," that is, he is Lord. It was the highest title one could ascribe to a person in the culture of the ancient East. Jesus was, for Christians, the undisputed Lord of all things, and then particularly of the church. It was an inexpressible privilege to belong to him. No one can assume that position without dishonoring Christ. The pope of the Roman Catholic Church appropriates to himself the title that he is the head of the church of Christ on earth. It has been said, in so doing, he beheaded the church. However, we confess that, just as the man is the head of the woman, Jesus is the head of the church—1 Corinthians 11, verse 3. The church is Christ's church. No pope, no earthly king or ruler may or can say, "I am also king of the church." In the church, Christ is King and Lord. He rules there, and no one else. Jesus has said, "One is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren"—Matthew 23, verse 8.

The church has a task in the world. The church has been commissioned by God to proclaim the Gospel to all people and nations, and to instruct and nourish her members through the Word. How can she fulfill that task in a world where nations are often ruled by governments that do not recognize Christ as King of the church? How often this results in conflict, oppression, and persecution!

But in the midst of all this opposition, the church is God's instrument of spreading the Gospel of Christ in a lost world.

In the Bible, the church is called "the body of Christ," as well as "the temple of the Holy Spirit," in which God dwells. In connection with the sin of fornication, the apostle asks the Christians in Corinth, "Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ?"—1 Corinthians 6, verse 15. And in verse 19, he says, "Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you?" These names teach us that the church is so much more than either a building or an organization. The church is an assembly of people who are the body of Christ, and in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells. These are spiritual matters that are invisible to us. We cannot say the Holy Spirit dwells in this man or woman, and not in that man and that woman. We see that which is visible, but God alone beholds what lives in the heart.

Nevertheless, invisible graces do not remain hidden. In one's walk of life, it will become visible who is a member of Jesus' spiritual body, and in whose heart the Holy Spirit dwells. Jesus taught, "Ye shall know them by their fruits"—Matthew 7, verse 16. The invisible work of the Holy Spirit becomes visible in the world, when believers form a congregation—that is, when they come together to pray, sing, hear God's Word, and provide for the poor. Thus, wherever the ministry of the apostles was blessed, congregations were instituted, office-bearers were appointed, and a place of worship was established.

In the apostolic epistles, we read of shepherds and teachers, elders, and deacons—Ephesians 4, verse 11. As for the elders, a distinction is made between teaching elders and ruling elders. We read about this distinction, in Acts 11, verse 30, and 1 Timothy 5, verse 17. Regarding the deacons, we read that they assisted the poor—1 Timothy 3, verses 8, 10 and 12. When Paul writes a letter to the congregation of Philippi, he addresses it to "all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons"—Philippians 1, verse 1.

The church thereby became, and becomes, visible in the world. Therefore, we speak of both a visible and an invisible church. The visible church is that which becomes manifest when people profess the name of Jesus Christ. Together they constitute the visible church, which becomes visible when she assembles in her church buildings, forms a community, and ministers to one another. The invisible church is that aspect of the church only seen and known by God. It consists of the hidden work of the Holy Spirit in the heart, whereby people are born again and believe in Christ. The visible church, with her offices, the ministry of preaching and teaching, and her care for the needy, constitute the divinely ordained manifestation of the Christian church in the world. The Scriptures call the visible church, "the pillar and ground of the truth"—1 Timothy 3, verse 15. The visible church manifesting herself in the preaching of God's Word, the administration of the sacraments, the education of the youth, the care for the needy, and overseeing life and doctrine of believers, is God's chosen instrument to bring sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, as well as to nourish and instruct believers.

John Calvin's famous and entirely Biblical saying is: "Whoever has God as his Father must have the church as his mother." That is how we ought to think about the church. God's redemptive work becomes visible in the church. The church manifests herself in the world as an entity that differs radically from the kingdoms of the earth. She is a spiritual entity, for she is a revelation of the kingdom of God. It is thus a kingdom amid the kingdoms of the world. She has Jesus as her Lord and King and lives in conformity to his commandments. She has no national borders, races, and languages.

The question follows, What relationship is there between that spiritual kingdom and the secular, earthly powers and kingdoms? I believe it is fitting to say something here about the relationship between church and state. Scripture shows us that both are of divine origin and have divinely mandated responsibilities. The government is called God's servant, "For he is the minister of God to thee for good"—Romans 13, verse 4. God, who rules the world as King, has established governments and powers that rule over men in his name. To that end, he has vested them with authority. Although powers and governments may think that they derive their power from themselves, it is God who has given them that power. They have been vested with that power to protect the good and to punish evildoers. The church is a divine and spiritual institution. Her existence originates in God. Jesus rules as the King over the church: "Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of

Zion”—Psalm 2, verse 6. She is the church of Christ, “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone”—Ephesians 2, verse 20. She is called the wife, the body, the bride, and the church of Christ. The church is the manifestation and revelation of God’s redeeming intervention in a fallen world. The church is God’s property.

God gathers unto himself, from a fallen human world, a church chosen to eternal life. He initiated this work immediately after the fall of man, and will continue to be thus engaged until the last day—the day of Jesus’ return. We can, therefore, view the church as consisting of people who have been called by God to be his particular property. The church of Christ is of divine origin and has a spiritual character.

Scripture shows that church and state have different tasks. The church is a society or community that is distinct from all other authority structures known on earth. In obedience to Christ’s will, believers unite with other believers to constitute a congregation by making a public profession of their faith. Faith does not remain hidden in their hearts, and also is not limited to the living room—instead, it is openly confessed and practiced by a Christian walk of life. The calling of the church is to bear witness to her faith in the world. Jesus gave his disciples—and in them, to his entire church—the commission, “Ye shall be witnesses unto me”—Acts 1, verse 8. In the arena of the world, the church testifies that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. She testifies of his death and resurrection, and declares, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved”—Acts 4, verse 12. The church is engaged in the world among men, to preach to them the Gospel, and to make them disciples of Christ. Jesus commanded, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you”—Matthew 28, the verses 19 and 20. The state may not hinder the church in this, but rather, its calling is to promote this work.

Besides the church, there is another society on earth, differing in nature and character from the church, namely, the state, or civil government. It has been instituted by God to uphold justice, order, and discipline in the world. The question is, how do these two powers relate to each other? Are they meant to assist each other, or to be in conflict with each other? Scripture teaches that both societies are established by God, to accomplish his plan of salvation. The church’s calling is to preach the Gospel, and to promote the spiritual wellbeing of men. The state promotes the physical wellbeing of people, and its calling is to keep the world from descending into chaos, by maintaining law and order. The church will thus be enabled to accomplish her task in the world.

The church and the state represent two different kingdoms. Jesus said to Pilate, “My Kingdom is not of this world”—John 18, verse 36. The ancient Scots said to King Charles, “There are two kingdoms in Scotland. There is the Kingdom of Scotland, of which you are King. But there is also the kingdom of God, in which Christ reigns as King.” It resulted in war and persecution. The state or civil government does have a calling to protect the church, so that Christians can freely profess their faith. However, the state has no authority in the church. Conversely, although the church has no jurisdiction in the state, nevertheless, she must teach the state. She must stir up the government to rule according to God’s laws. She must pray for all levels of government, and must teach Christians to honor and obey their government.

However, there is always a limit to the extent of the church’s obedience to the government. If the state demands disobedience to God and actions contrary to his commandments, the Christian must obey God more than the state. When the Jewish authorities demanded that the apostles stop speaking about Jesus, Peter refused to oblige, for he said, “We ought to obey God rather than men”—Acts 5, verse 29. In the past, and in some countries today, this has led to oppression of the Christian church, and even the persecution of Christians.

The Apostles’ Creed speaks about “the communion of saints.” The Christian believes in the communion of saints. The word used in the Greek New Testament for the communion of Christians is “koinonia,” which means to participate—to partake. It is expressive of solidarity. A common cause unites Christians. The communion of saints is a union rooted in their being united to a person, namely, Jesus Christ. The believer is, first of all, united to Christ, and in Christ, united to other believers. Christ is at the very center of the communion of saints. A person’s faith is a faith that first and foremost unites him or her to Jesus Christ. However, it also unites the believer to

every other believer. The redemption the believer has experienced in Christ is not a self-centered redemption. It is a redemption that one desires to share with others. Believers long to speak of, hear of, sing about Christ their Lord, and praise God with fellow Christians. The believer will not isolate himself. He or she will never be a solitary Christian. The Christian seeks fellowship and finds it with other believers. The Holy Spirit unites us with Christ, but also with each other.

The children of God all over the world are united to Christ with the same faith, the same love, and the same hope. They will all have escaped the same peril, and have been saved by Jesus from sin, death, and destruction. They have all been cleansed from their sins in the blood of Jesus, and are anticipating the eternal salvation of soul and body. They also have the same struggle with sin, the world, and the devil. They fight the same battle with the remains of the old man. They have so much that binds them together! When they meet, speak, pray, and sing, as well as listen to the preaching of God's Word, and partake of the Lord's Supper, they do experience this spiritual communion. It is a communion that not only leads to sharing each other's hope, faith, and love, but also to the sharing of each other's joy and sorrow. Paul writes, "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep"—Romans 12, verse 15. It is a communion that even prompted the young Christian congregation in Jerusalem to share their property with the poor: "And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common"—Acts 4, verse 32.

The apostolic epistles continually admonish Christians to maintain communion with one another: "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that you walk worthy of the vocation wherewith you are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"—Ephesians 4, verses 1 through 3. The division among Christians is a serious indictment of the church. It contradicts Jesus' prayer for unity: "That they all may be one"—John 17, verse 21. That is what Jesus prayed. It does not mean, however, that we must unite with believers who deny the fundamental truths of Christianity. However, it does mean that we must seek unity with all who profess the doctrines of the Bible. Despite the sad division among the different denominations, we nevertheless continue to believe in the communion of saints.

If it were possible to gather all the true believers of the world together in one place, and let them speak to each other about their hope, faith, love, and struggles, they would still feel united—even though they never before had seen or known each other. In heaven, this communion will be fully realized and experienced. Therefore, we confess, "I believe an holy catholic church, the communion of saints."