

Introduction

Words mean things. That might be an obvious statement but words are important. The labels we use for things matter a great deal for they will shape our understanding of them. For example, you won't hear me call this room a "sanctuary". That term comes from the temple in Jerusalem and refers to the Most Holy Place where God's presence was manifested. The space itself was sacred.

In the church I was converted in the auditorium was a *sanctuary*, which meant one had to be quiet and reverent whenever in that space. This means even after a worship service were concluded kids couldn't run around and make kid noises—as if Jesus himself weren't more holy than an auditorium yet told his disciples that kids running around him and being kids was perfectly all right.

The words we use shape our understanding of things. You won't hear me call our Council of Elders a "board"—and if you ever hear one of the other elders do this, he will also immediately duck out of instinct. A board is a group of people with managerial and supervisory authority over an organization. If we think of ourselves as a "board" this will shape our understanding of our role in shepherding the flock of God.

Using the right word for a thing is quite important. Let me illustrate this for you. If I were to ask you to list the four highest selling cars in the history of the world and I gave you twenty guesses, I highly doubt any of you would get it right—and I would even spot you the first three. The top-selling car of all time is the Toyota Corolla, with more than 50,000,000 sold. The second-highest is the Ford F-Series, with well over 40,000,000 sold. The third highest-selling car in the world is a bit of a surprise to me: the Volkswagen Golf, at more than 35,000,000.

Picture The fourth-highest selling *car* of all time is the Cozy Coupe, manufactured by Little Tikes. Since it's first, um, *model year* more than 30 years ago, it has sold over 25,000,000 cars. *Cars*. See, words matter.

I've been asked a number of times what kind of church New City is. People are looking for labels, because labels can help define a thing. A label shapes our understanding of a thing. Oftentimes, however, labels actually confuse and obfuscate and do not offer clarity. We see this with American politics. People want to know if you're conservative or liberal, libertarian or progressive. Oftentimes judgments are made about a person with no specifics beyond a particular label one may prefer, as if being "conservative" or "liberal" explains your exact position on every single issue in America today.

A couple years ago in a sermon I offered a rubric to help us understand who we are as a church. As a number of folk have joined us since then the Elders have decided I should do what I've never done before: preach a second topical series in a row. We want to understand who we are by going *beyond* the labels, but not so that we exalt New City Church. We want to better understand who we are, but the point of doing so isn't to praise this church, but to make much of Jesus. This is my aim this morning.

I've updated the rubric a bit but here it is. Who is New City?

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We are . . .
catholic, not Catholic
reformed, not Reformed
baptist, not Baptist
presbyterian, not Presbyterian
orthodox, not Orthodox
charismatic, not Charismatic
Christian, not christian

The letter casing matters a great deal, for to be Capital-C Catholic means something quite different from lower-case c catholic, and so forth. In this series I'm going to explain what it means that we are catholic and reformed and baptist and presbyterian and orthodox and charismatic and Capital-C Christian, and I will explain why we are not the capital version of each particular label, with the exception being the last one. We are most certainly not lower-case c christian.

We cite the Apostles' Creed each week as we close our worship service. This creed formed in the early centuries of the church first as a baptismal creed. We find an early form of it in the work "On the Apostolic Tradition" attributed to Hippolytus, likely written in the third century. The creed declares, "We believe in the holy catholic church", which can cause some people to stumble a bit as many Protestant traditions teach people to shun the word—or more accurately, *the label*. This is unfortunate because the word catholic is one of those words that carries a great deal of meaning and so has been largely transliterated throughout the centuries rather than translated. This is similar to the word "amen", which is the same in nearly every language. So, too, the words baptize and baptism. It carries such great meaning that we should not abandon the word to those who actually twist its meaning.

Picture

In this picture we see the word transliterated into a variety of languages from Welsh to Xhosa, which is the language of a Bantu group in South Africa. If you were to go to Google Translate and check out the word in non-Latin character sets and look at the phonetic pronunciation, you would see a similar thing for most languages.

What does it mean to be *catholic*? The word was first used by Ignatius in his letter to the church in Smyrna. In that letter he declared that wherever Jesus is, "there is the catholic church". This was in the early second century. Contrary to popular opinion, understanding "catholic" to mean "universal" doesn't quite work. The word is made up of two words in Greek: $\kappa\alpha\tau\acute{\alpha}$ and $\delta\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ — $\kappa\alpha\theta\omicron\lambda\iota\chi\omicron\varsigma$. It means "according to the whole".

When we say together that we believe in the holy catholic church, we mean we believe in the *whole* church. We are welcoming and accepting of all true believers in Jesus, even if they are not from our particular faith tradition. This makes us *catholic*, for we are *according to the whole* church of Jesus Christ.

This brings us to our text in Hebrews 12.

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Heb 12:18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.

²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” ²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Hebrews 12:18–24

Mount Sinai

The author and purpose of the letter to the Hebrews is debated. Several years ago I read a very convincing doctoral dissertation arguing the author was an elder from the church in Jerusalem who was visiting the church in Rome and writing to encourage the church in Jerusalem to leave the city because of the destruction coming when Titus would march Rome’s armies against the city. Eventually the city was overthrown and the temple destroyed and many thousands of Jews died in the battle and then by crucifixion after the city was defeated. Interestingly, not a single Christian died, for they had already fled the city and went to Pella where they remained safe.

With that in mind, let’s look at the author’s argument in our text. He tells the recipients they have not come to a physical location, and he describes the location to which they have not come: “a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them”. I don’t know about you, but that does not sound like a wonderful place to be. If someone told me I had not come to that place I’d be thankful. What is shocking is the author is describing an actual place and an actual event: Israel’s assembly at Mount Sinai.

After leaving Egypt God led the Israelites to Mount Sinai. There he appeared at the top of the mountain to make a covenant with Israel. The words the author of Hebrews uses to describe this event are terrifying words, and they come from Moses! In Deuteronomy 4 Israel is nearing the end of their wandering in the wilderness, getting ready to enter the land. Moses recounts their experience all those years earlier when they first received the covenant. He instructs them to teach their children about how “the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom”, and how they heard the voice of the Lord speak. After repeating some of the law they received, Moses reminded them of their response to God’s voice.

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Deut 5:25 Now therefore why should we die? For this great fire will consume us. If we hear the voice of the LORD our God any more, we shall die. ²⁶ For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of fire as we have, and has still lived? ²⁷ Go near and hear all that the LORD our God will say, and speak to us all that the LORD our God will speak to you, and we will hear and do it.’

Deuteronomy 5:25–27

The Israelites remembered that day and remembered how *terrifying* it was. In verse 20 of our text the author says they were terrified because of the order that was given: “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” If any creature other than Moses, whether man, woman, or animal, were to climb the mountain, that creature must be immediately killed, but notice the method: with stones. Any man who would attempt to enter into God’s presence on the mountain would be executed, but only from a distance, for any man who dared get too close to pure holiness could not himself be touched.

So often we think of such events in the past with a bit of nostalgia. How amazing would it have been for us to have been there, to see the visible manifestation of God’s presence, to hear his voice declare his covenant with us, to see his power on display! We don’t see such visible demonstrations of God’s power and glory today, but wouldn’t that be something?! Verse 20: “Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear.’”

The problem for Israel was the covenant, while a gracious covenant that enabled God to dwell among his people in the tabernacle, was incapable of making them holy. It is simply dangerous for a holy God to be among an unholy people. Rather than an incredible experience everyone wanted to replicate, Israel’s collective response was, “Yeah, *let’s not do that again*. Moses, *you* talk to God and tell us what he says.”

The covenant given at Sinai could not change the hearts of God’s people. It could not remove the idols from their hearts. It could not bring about the transformative work God desired to do in them. This is why God promised a new covenant that would result in God dwelling among his people, but not in a tabernacle—within each one of his people. In this new covenant God would take away the sins of his people and grant them holiness, and actually make them holy as his Spirit works in them to bring about real and lasting change.

Mount Zion

Then we come to verse 20. The difference between verse 18 and verse 20, that is, the difference between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion is Jesus. God became one of us to bring about the new covenant he promised his people. In chapter 5 of Hebrews the author tells us Jesus is not like the priests given to Israel at Mount Sinai, priests who first had to offer sacrifice for their own sins and then for the sins of the people.

In chapter 8 he says Jesus is the high priest of a far greater covenant, the very one in which God sends his Spirit to change his people and to dwell among them. In chapter 9 he says the first covenant had all sorts of rules and regulations limiting access to God’s presence. Only the high priest could enter directly into God’s presence on behalf of the people, and only very briefly—and only once *per year*. He could only do this after an elaborate purification ritual. Then he says Jesus offered himself as a pure sacrifice to God, one without blemish.

In chapter 10 the author tells us the things required in the law had to be done over and over again, for if the sacrifices had made the people of Israel perfect they wouldn’t have to be repeated. This is because, the author says, “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Hebrews 12:4).

The law could not make its worshipers perfect. God commanded Israel to be perfect for he is perfect, yet the law could not do this. All it could do is temporarily account for their sins, but then they had to sacrifice again. And again. *And again*. Later in that same chapter

The spirits of the righteous made perfect seem to be those who are in Christ. They have believed in light of Christ's death and resurrection. While the assembly of the firstborn are those who died while waiting for Christ, those who believe after Christ has come are the spirits of the righteous made perfect. But notice who is listed in between these two groups: "God, the judge of all".

Why does the author insert this terrifying depiction of God as judge in between the peoples of two different covenants? It was God the judge of all whom the people feared at Mount Sinai who came to this world in a blazing fire and darkness and gloom. It was God the judge of all who then came in the form of a human, lived, died, and rose again in order to save his people from their sins. The difference between verse 18 and verse 20, that is, the difference between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion is Jesus. Jesus enables us to enter boldly into the holy places, directly into God's presence, for his work is finished. He has reconciled us to God.

This is why in verse 24 he says we have come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. He adds an interesting detail: "and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel". Abel was murdered by his brother Cain and when God confronted Cain he said Abel's blood was crying out to him from the ground. What was it crying out for? Vengeance. Justice. *Retribution*. The sprinkled blood of Jesus speaks a better word: *Τετέλεσται* . *It is finished*. Justice has been met. Mercy has been poured out. Grace is overwhelming. The difference is Jesus.

The catholic Church

What is happening in this text? The author is telling the church in Jerusalem the good news that when they assemble in the name of Jesus, they enter into the holy places and therefore into God's presence. The recipients were Jews who followed Jesus, yet still worshiped in the temple. They were still culturally Jewish and while they did not offer sacrifices for sin, they still worshiped God through the various other sacrifices. The author is telling them their faith is no longer tied to the temple in Jerusalem, to a specific *sacred space*, the one that would soon be destroyed, nor was their faith tied to the Jewish priesthood, for our great high priest has ushered in the new covenant long promised.

They do not need to remain attached to the Jerusalem temple because something greater is here: the church—the gathered assembly. The church is God's temple where his Spirit dwells. Because Jesus finished the work he came to do and purified for himself a people, this new temple is holy and is no longer a physical space, and because of the work Jesus did God's Spirit is able to remain.

When a local church assembles in the name of Jesus something extraordinary happens. We symbolize this in our service with a lit candle. This is the Christ candle. In Revelation John uses the imagery of lampstands that offer light. The lampstand is the church and the light is Jesus. It is in the local church that Jesus is manifested. What happens when we assemble in his name is we come to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, except we don't go anywhere. Wherever a church assembles, whether in a building dedicated to that purpose, a school gymnasium, a mud hut, or an open field that church "has come" to Mount Zion.

Since that church doesn't go anywhere physically, heaven comes to them. God in Trinity enters into his assembly. When New City Church assembles on Sunday mornings, God enters

the assembly, but he's never alone. Innumerable angels are with him. The assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven are with him. The spirits of the righteous made perfect are with him.

Think of it this way. In chapter 11 the author highlights a number of Old Testament saints who died in faith. Though they are unnamed, he also lists countless individuals who followed Jesus who died in faith. Then he says this at the beginning of chapter 12 after listing so many faithful men and women:

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Heb 12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, ~~the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.~~

Hebrews 12:1–2

Who is that great cloud of witnesses? Those who are ever in God's immediate presence. God never leaves them behind, therefore when God enters into our assembly we are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses. Listen: this is the *catholic* church. Ignatius said wherever Jesus is, there is the *catholic* church—there is the church *according to its whole*. When we assemble in the name of Jesus we are in God's immediate and full presence. It isn't as though we get his left elbow and Sunshine gets his right ankle and Indwelling Church gets his left index finger and Fourth Reformed gets his right ear and Calvary, being much larger, gets his entire left leg. God in his *fullness* enters into his assembly and because God crosses space and time, we assemble with the fullness of God's people—his eschatological, final, complete assembly.

This is where our unity with all true believers and all true churches is found: when we assemble in the name of Jesus we assemble with those churches, too, even those that assembled a thousand years ago, for every one of those believers is with the Lord. We are united with that church in Ktindi in the Congo because God is in that assembly in his fullness, and we are united with that church in Turin, Italy because God is in that assembly in his fullness. We are united with the ancient church in Philippi because God is in that assembly in his fullness and we are united with the megachurch in California because God is in that assembly in his fullness.

Scripture illustrates this for us in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Paul is addressing the issue of a member of that church living in unrepentant sin and instead of disciplining this man, the church did nothing. Paul commands them to remove him from membership—to “hand him over to Satan”—with the goal that this would lead to his repentance. Look at what Paul says about this.

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¹ Cor 5:3 For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. ⁴ When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

1 Corinthians 5:3–5

When Paul says he is “present in spirit” he doesn’t mean his thoughts are with them. What makes his spirit present with them is their assembly in the name of the Lord Jesus. When they assemble in the Lord’s name, the Lord is present with the angels and with the assembly of the firstborn and with the spirits of the righteous made perfect. This includes Paul, though Paul is likely in Ephesus when he wrote this.

Because Paul assembled with the church in Ephesus and therefore was in God’s presence and because the Corinthian church assembled and was in God’s presence, Paul could say he was present in Corinth as well, for he was with the Lord and the Lord was in both places.

This is what it means when we say we believe in the holy catholic church. We mean we believe in the work of God in Christ creating his final, complete assembly that one day will assemble together physically with Jesus on the new earth when the Lord returns and finishes his work of re-creation. *That* assembly, that final eschatological assembly, is the *whole* church. Until then, when we assemble in the name of Jesus, we are the catholic church, for we are God’s church in its fullness. So is Sunshine. So is Fourth Reformed. So is Indwelling.

Application

It is important to note that when we say we believe in the holy catholic church we are not saying we believe in the *Roman Catholic* church. Over the centuries Rome has claimed more and more authority for itself, culminating in the determination at the First Vatican Council in 1869–70. It was just 150 years ago that Rome claimed the Pope was infallible when he speaks “ex cathedra”, or from his throne as bishop of Rome. This council also elevated tradition to the level of Scripture when it comes to authority.

Further, Rome has dogmatized certain teachings that were clearly not taught by the early church. To dogmatize a teaching is to claim it is an essential teaching that all true believers must believe. For example, in 1854—think of how recent that is!—Rome dogmatized the doctrine of the “Immaculate Conception”, the belief that Mary was conceived without original sin. Then in 1950, Rome dogmatized the belief that Mary was bodily taken into heaven at the end of her life. By dogmatizing these, Rome has added to the gospel, claiming one must believe and embrace these things or one is outside the Christian faith. To reject either of these dogmas is to be outside the Christian faith. To say we are lower-case c catholic and not capital c Catholic is significant.

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Word

It is important for us to hold on to the word catholic, *for it is our word*. It is the word that describes God’s relationship to his people. They are members of his catholic church, his church according to its whole. This is why we gladly fellowship with believers from Fourth Reformed and Sunshine CRC, though we differ with them on a number of theological issues. These issues are not central to the gospel, however. To be truly catholic, that is, to believe in the church according to its whole, we welcome and receive all true believers in Christ.

In a real sense, we’re more catholic than Rome! I said this to my brother once. He is Roman Catholic and is a true believer. He trusts in Christ alone for his salvation. He asked me what I meant so I told him that if he were to visit New City, I would gladly serve him communion, for I know he is a follower of Jesus. We have some serious theological disagreements but he is a true follower of Jesus! Then I asked him this: if I were to visit your church, would your priest serve me communion? Of course he would not. Then I said

to him, “I am more *catholic* than your priest, for I believe in the *whole* church and not just the parts that are in line with my particular tradition.”

Why does any of this matter? It matters because we worship the Lord Jesus who promised to build his church—his whole, entire church. Every time we assemble together on a Sunday morning in his name, we experience the very real benefits of Christ’s work on our behalf, for we are bold to enter into the holy places. We experience God’s unique presence in our assembly.

When we assemble together, we do not assemble in fear, for we have not come to Mount Sinai, to a physical place that can be touched, to a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest, and even more, we have not come to a holy God who is judge of all and who is ever ready to dole out judgment.

Instead, we have come to Mount Zion, to countless angels celebrating, for God in Christ has saved a countless multitude of people and while God the judge of all is present, none of his people approach him in fear for his justice has been satisfied and all he has for us is his mercy and grace poured out in ever-increasing measure.

We experience the power of God whenever we assemble in the Lord’s name. When we assemble in Jesus’ name, God enters into our assembly in his fullness. We saw last week that Jesus came to create a people among whom the Spirit of God could dwell, and the result of his work is that his church is the temple of the Holy Spirit where the Spirit will dwell forever. New City, this means we are the true church. We come from a particular tradition within the whole church, yet, because God is present among us, we are the true church, the holy catholic church.

Think of the incredible privilege we have been given. Why should God pay any attention to a small church in the near northeast of Grand Rapids? Why should God choose to make such a church his dwelling place where he appears in his fullness? Why should God pay any attention to our singing, our praise and worship, our prayers for one another, our Scripture reading, our declaration of his death and resurrection through communion? Why should he endeavour to be present here every Sunday morning as we assemble in his name?

The very existence of God’s church is a demonstration of his love and mercy and grace. None of us has a claim on God for inclusion among his people. There are no natural born children of God. All are adopted. What a gift we’ve been given! The gift is not merely that we are counted among God’s people, but that we are also given *God’s people*. When God saves us he saves us into his church. We are rescued out of sin and death and placed in his church.

We’ve seen over and over again in Scripture that through his church God encourages us, and through his church God strengthens us, and through his church God empowers us, and through his church God corrects us, and through his church God changes us, and through his church God provides for us. The work of God in Christ in this world is centered on building his church, driving toward that day the work is completed, when the Lord Jesus re-creates the world and God dwells among us forever and ever. God calls us to participate in that work by being his people—by being *his church*.

This is the reason your background does not determine your worth. This is the reason your skin color does not define you. This is the reason your income or your social status or your religious background is not your identity. Your identity in Christ is this: God in Christ through his Spirit has claimed you as his own and has adopted you into his family,

the church of Jesus Christ. This is who you are.

New City, let us never take lightly what it means to be God's church—his holy *catholic* church. Let us praise him for who he is and what he has done for us to make us his people. Let's live our lives in community, *in his church*, and therefore live out our true identities as God's chosen people.