



Small Community Notes – Holiness

3rd to 24th March 2024

Building a community that is holy

Introduction

Ephesians 5:1–10

¹Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children ²and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God ... ³[you are] God's holy people ...⁸For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light ⁹(for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) ¹⁰and find out what pleases the Lord.

One of scripture's main claims about God is that he is holy – blameless, without fault, perfect, unable to abide or entertain sin. It's an extraordinary thought that God has never had to reproach himself for any thought, word or deed. Can you imagine ...?!

And on several occasions – not least from the lips of Jesus – scripture calls us to be holy as God is holy.

Leviticus 19:2b

Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.

Matthew 5:48

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

1 Peter 1:15–16

But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do;
for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'

Sadly, Christian holiness has become something of a caricature: many of us will have been accused of being *Holier than thou* ...

John McGinley uses the geometric analogy of concave and convex shapes

- Concave curves inwards away from you and feels reductionist.
- Convex curves outwards towards you and has a sense of fullness

He points out that

Too much of our history in the Church has produced a concave holiness that has focused on sin avoidance and withdrawal from the world ... It was legalistic and Pharisaical ... And the attitude that often accompanied this was a judgment and condemnation of the world around us. John McGinley

Sadly, Christians have been known more for what we're against, suggesting that to follow Jesus involves a miserable dieting from everything that most human beings consider fun.

It's not that we shouldn't repent of our sins. But we do this in order to be devoted to God alone and filled with the fulness of God. So being holy is not focused on a concave whittling away of things from our lives, but ... on being Christlike and offering a convex holiness that expands with the fulness of God towards the world. When Jesus comes to live in our hearts the holy one has come to dwell in us. This is the only reason we can hope to grow in holiness, because of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Without his presence, seeking holiness becomes a miserable dieting that avoids any possible contaminating experience. But with him it becomes the joyful journey of him setting us free from the things that spoil Christ's image in us. And we can confidently move towards the world around us, sharing our lives and carrying God's love and presence. John McGinley

It's really important to state that *judgmentalism* is a human and not a Christian characteristic.

The Greek word *hagios* (like its Hebrew equivalent *qadash*) means set apart, distinct. Jesus calls his followers to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-14) and to be either hot or cold (Revelation 3:15). In other words, we're to stand out – people should notice the difference when they are in the presence of a Christian. The last thing our world needs is insipid, tasteless, tepid followers of Jesus who are no different from anyone else.

If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to secure a conviction? Billy Graham

How can we be holy, set apart, useful to Jesus and the world around us ...? Well, as we saw in Week 6, repentance plays a key role, as we seek to be filled with THE HOLY ONE himself.

During the Welsh revival, Evan Roberts issued four requirements

1. Confession of all known sin
2. Repentance and restitution
3. Obedience and surrender to the HS
4. Public confession of Christ

As is clear, this can only be done in community.

John McGinley goes on to talk about *Dirty Holiness*. Under the Old Testament, a holy thing lost its holiness if contaminated by contact with anything that was ceremonially unclean, leading to an instinctive avoidance of anything that might threaten a person's status as clean. Although not spelled out, it's likely this is the reason the priest and then the Levite avoided the victim in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). If they were going to Jerusalem to serve in the Temple, contact with what might have been a dead body would have disqualified them.

Here we see the consequences of a concave holiness – it elevates rules at the expenses of the needs of our fellow human beings.

Building a community that is holy

Leviticus 19:2b

Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.

1 Peter 1:15–16

But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do;
for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'

Notes

God calls his people to be holy, and to live holy lives.

The Greek word *hagios* means holy or sacred – set apart by or for God. In other words, we're called to be different, or distinct from, the world.

We're given a snapshot of what this meant for one particular group of Christian believers can be found in this anonymous letter, written in the 2nd century AD to someone named Diognetus:

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines.

But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers.

They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they

are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.

This account paints a vivid picture of Christians living out the biblical calling to be, at one and the same time, completely engaged in the world and yet distinct from it. This is holiness in action, observed by others.

Paul begins many of his letters by greeting 'God's holy people' – and almost every letter contains a call to holiness.

Romans 12:1–2

¹ Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Colossians 3:12–13

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

1 Thessalonians 4:7

For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.

2 Timothy 1:9

He has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace.

Having described the Ephesian Christians as God's holy people, he writes:

Ephesians 5:8–13

⁸ ... you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light ⁹ (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) ¹⁰ and find out what pleases the Lord. ¹¹ Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. ¹² It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. ¹³ But everything exposed by the light becomes visible – and everything that is illuminated becomes a light.

With God's light inside us, we will stand out in a culture of darkness. This requires very careful understanding. Not everything – and certainly not everyone – around us is dark. There is much goodness and light too. But we cannot ignore the reality of this world's darkness – in its boardrooms as much as on its battlefields; in its oppression of women; in its economic & social injustice and inequality; in its disregard for the poor and the different; in its pursuit of self rather than God. In a world whose values and lifestyles are often very different from the way of Jesus, it is vital that we point people to him, by living differently.

Sadly, the church has often been known for what John McGinley calls a *concave* holiness which withdraws inwardly, becoming judgmental and condemnatory to those “outside the club.” Not surprisingly, such an attitude is deeply unattractive and off-putting to the world.

A *convex* holiness, by contrast, moves outward, expanding with God's fullness and love towards the world. Holiness is not something miserable, but something filled with the joy of the Spirit as we share our lives with others and carry God's love, light and presence wherever we go.

Jesus is our supreme example, being holy, set apart – most wonderfully *in* the world, and yet not *of* the world. His holiness was clearly not judgmental or condemnatory, because people found him so magnetic and attractive – especially the sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes and the poor who flocked to him and found acceptance and the call to new life. In fact, the only ones repelled by Jesus seem to have been the religious leaders.

In John 17, Jesus left his followers with a call to be in the world but not part of it.

John 17:13–19

¹³ “I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. ¹⁴ I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. ¹⁵ My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. ¹⁷ Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

Questions

- What does *God is holy* mean to you? How do you see holiness?
- What have the effects been on the world of a church that withdraws from the world (concave holiness) and a church that expands into the world (convex holiness). Give examples.
- What challenges do you face in seeking to live distinctive lives today?
- Which examples can you see today of Christians living holy lives in the world, what ideas as a small community can we learn and follow from their life and behaviour?

Application

- Over the coming week ask your non-Christian friends and colleagues how they would describe a “holy person”.
- Then ask them how they would describe “a Christian” and “the church”.
- Come back next week ready to share your findings.

Building a community that is holy

Acts 4:23–5:11

²³ On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. ‘Sovereign Lord,’ they said, ‘you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. ²⁵ You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

“‘Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?

²⁶ The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.

²⁷ Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸ They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. ²⁹ Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. ³⁰ Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.’

³¹ After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there was no needy person among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means ‘son of encouragement’), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.

^{5:1} Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. ² With his wife’s full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles’ feet. ³ Then Peter said, ‘Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ⁴ Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God.’ ⁵ When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶ Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. ⁷ About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ Peter asked her, ‘Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?’ ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘that is the price.’ ⁹ Peter said to her, ‘How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.’ ¹⁰ At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

Notes

What a stark and distressing contrast between the end of chapter 4 and the events in chapter 5.

Acts 4 shows how the early church lived. Holiness required them (as it does us) to live differently – not cutting ourselves off like a reclusive sect but remaining engaged with the world. Paul expresses it beautifully when he writes



Romans 12:2

Do not conform to the pattern of this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Holiness is made possible when we allow the Holy Spirit to renew our minds, to the point where, as he writes to the Corinthian churches, *we have the mind of Christ. 1 Corinthians 2:16*

The human mind and heart is instinctively selfish, putting self above others. Jesus, by contrast, *did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Matthew 20:28*

Holiness is no less than a call to be like Jesus, obeying God's word as he did, living each moment in dependence on the Holy Spirit.

Ananias and Sapphira cheated not just the rest of the church but God himself by their deliberate, deceitful actions. We cannot hide anything from God. God is holy and cannot be mocked; the consequences of disobeying Him are severe. We may not experience that in so dramatic and manifest a way as this couple in the early church who lost their lives. But repeated and determined disobedience will surely sap our spiritual life – and corrode our relationship with God.

God's word applies not just to our individual lives but to the corporate life of the whole church family. What reputation does our church have? Do we see ourselves as better than others ... or as a group of beggars who can now tell other beggars where to find food ...?

In past revivals there have been times of public confession, repentance, righting wrongs, surrendering to the Holy Spirit. There was accountability to others. God is calling the church today to wake up, to take sin seriously, and to lead holy lives devoted to God.

Questions

- Why do we find the story of Ananias and Sapphira so hard to read? What does it teach us?
- Read Colossians 3:1-17 three times
 1. Read it at normal speed
Pause to pray before the second reading: “Holy Spirit, show me something in this portion of your word to which I [or we] need to pay attention.”
 2. Read it again, more slowly
Pause to pray before the third reading: Holy Spirit, show me [us] something in the life of our church or small community that needs to be addressed.
 3. Read it once more, even more slowly
Share anything you sense has emerged from the passage for you / the group.

Colossians 3:1–17

¹Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ, who is your^[a] life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

⁵Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.^[b] ⁷You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. ¹¹Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

¹²Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

¹⁵Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Application

- Last week we asked you to survey some non-Christian friends and colleagues to see how they would describe a “holy person”, “a Christian” and “the church”. What did you find out?
- As a group, make a list of the behaviours listed in Ephesians 5:3-7 which Paul says are inappropriate for God’s holy people. Looking at our own culture and setting, can you rank these in the order that we are likely to find them amongst or around us (1=most likely etc). Are there any behaviours missing? What does this tell us about the temptations we are likely to face within our own culture?
- Turn what you have discovered into prayer for our church family.

Building a community that is holy

Acts 5:12–21

¹² The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. ¹³ No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. ¹⁵ As a result, people brought those who were ill into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. ¹⁶ Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing those who were ill and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed.

¹⁷ Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. ¹⁸ They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. ²⁰ 'Go, stand in the temple courts,' he said, 'and tell the people all about this new life.'

²¹ At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.

Notes

Last week, we read about the disastrous consequences of the disobedience of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). News quickly spread, and in today's reading we discover a rather perplexing paradox:

¹³ No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people.

¹⁴ Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.

It seems that, before the incident with Ananias and Sapphira, people came along to see what went on when Christians gathered. As news of what happened to Ananias and Sapphira spread, casual observers who'd previously attended out of curiosity melted away.

And yet, the Christian community maintained its positive reputation. And second, nothing could prevent people coming to faith – and so the church continued to grow.

It seems counterintuitive, but holiness – even with such consequences – is magnetic. Why? Because holiness is in fact Christlikeness. The bible speaks of three phases of salvation:

- Justification – being put right (made righteous) through the blood of Jesus
- Sanctification – being made more like Jesus day by day by the Holy Spirit
- Glorification – being welcomed into the new creation when Jesus returns

The first is a defining moment in time; the third lasts for ever; the second will take our whole lives. Paul writes:

2 Corinthians 3:17–18

¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate^[a] the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Through his Holy Spirit, we carry the presence of Jesus wherever we go, and become more like him as we welcome him further and deeper into our lives. And if we become like him, we will go to the places and people he sought out. Are we willing to mix with “the wrong sort,” to spend time with the broken, to bring his light, love and hope into dark places? As John McGinley reminded us in *The Church of Tomorrow*, we are called to be a creative minority: holy, yes, but also in contact with people day to day.

In the Old Testament, if you touched something or someone unclean or unholy, you ‘caught’ and were tainted by what contaminated them. Contagiousness only moved one way.

But Jesus reversed the polarity. When he touched unclean or unholy things, they were cleansed and made holy. When he touched lepers, he didn't catch leprosy but healed them. We see the same effect in the early church – in today's reading, just being in Peter's shadow brought healing (vv 15,16). It's now holiness that is contagious.

Churches need to be inclusive, messy places, including and welcoming everyone, loving everyone, while holding onto God's word and obeying Him. In the past, some churches insisted that people **behave** (properly!) and **believe** certain things before being allowed to **belong**.

Jesus reversed that polarity as well, extending **belonging** to everyone, without prior expectations of **believing** or **behaving**. Our work is to invite everyone in, not determine who should be in (and who shouldn't). Once people find and follow Jesus wholeheartedly, the Holy Spirit will help conform their beliefs and behaviour to the pattern of scripture. After all, that's what becoming like Jesus means. We are all in that process, and have the privilege and joy of inviting others to join us on the journey.

That's why we long for our church family to be marked by our values, because we believe that when people **encounter** Jesus, discover christian **family** and experience **generosity**, **transformation** will follow. But please note – it can take a long time!

Jesus is radically inclusive as he welcomes us into relationship with him, but he loves us too much to leave us undisturbed in our sin and unchanged. He calls us to be holy. Holiness is Christlikeness. (The Church of Tomorrow, p.126)

How can we be like Jesus to our broken, confused, hurting world?

Having described the Ephesian christians as God's holy people, Paul writes some words that are as challenging today as they were when fresh from his pen:

INVITING EVERYONE TO FOLLOW JESUS

www.ccweb.org.uk/build


Ephesians 5:1–7

¹ Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

³ But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for **God's holy people**. ⁴ Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. ⁵ For of this you can be sure: no immoral, impure or greedy person – such a person is an idolater – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. ⁶ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. ⁷ Therefore do not be partners with them.

This comprehensive list covers our sexuality, relationships, thinking, speaking, and our desires.

As Tim Keller writes:

 The early church was strikingly different from the culture around it in this way – the pagan society was stingy with its money and promiscuous with its body. A pagan gave nobody their money and practically everybody their body. And the Christians came along and gave practically nobody their body and gave practically everybody their money.

Questions

- Reread Acts 5, what were the consequences of being this distinctive holy creative minority, the early church?
- Behave ~ belong ~ believe ... or ... belong ~ believe ~ behave? Which order and why? How have you seen this at work in a church or small community?
- How is Jesus radically inclusive? What does that mean in practice for our church?
- What does the church have to say to a world that is confused, broken and in pain by its misunderstanding of God's design for human sexuality, relationships and flourishing?

Application

- Revisit the list of people to pray for who don't yet know Jesus that you made as a group in the autumn last year (if you don't have a list, why not write one now). Have you seen any answered prayer over the past 6 months?
- What can you do as a small community to become an inclusive messy place? How will you actually put this into practice (rather than just talk about it)?

Building a community that is holy

1 Peter 2:9–12

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God,
the Father, the almighty,
maker of heaven and earth.

...

**We believe in one holy catholic
and apostolic Church.**

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.

Notes

The heading for the passage from Peter in my bible is *Living godly lives in a pagan society*. In the previous chapter Peter wrote

¹⁵ *But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do;* ¹⁶ *for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'*

We are called to be holy, as God is holy. We are to be both holy people individually, and a holy community. As we have seen, the personal and corporate aspects of being holy are equally important. We've also seen that holiness is to be lived out in practice in whatever society we live in. The ancient church father Irenaeus wrote that the Church is planted like the paradise of the Garden of Eden in the world. (*Church of Tomorrow* p. 126)

Is our church or small community like a piece of paradise to walk into? The church is not a human do-good organisation, but God's chosen and appointed vehicle to bring the transformation, healing, restoration, and justice of heaven to the people and culture around us. The church's holy purpose is to bring a piece of God's kingdom to earth – for us, that's right here in Bristol. We exist for the heavenly transformation of the people and culture of Bristol.

The Nicene Creed is a summary of what Christians believe. We believe in one Church across the world, united in Jesus Christ. It is a holy church set apart for Jesus, called to be distinctive for him. The word **catholic** (small c) means *universal* or *worldwide*: it describes the entire church, which is the people of God throughout history, rather than one particular denomination.


Apostolic means that we follow the teachings of the apostles and God's call to go into the world. As the church brings God's kingdom to earth, old denominations and divisions will be broken down.

We are called to a **holy** church, in the world but not of the world. Remembering the painting in our church of the lifeboats, we are meant to be out in the rough waters in our lifeboats – not sheltering (or hiding) in the lifeboat station. People do see how we behave, towards one another and them. Peter reminds us that this world is not our home, that we are foreigners and aliens here. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it:

Hebrews 11:9–16

⁹ By faith [Abraham] made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God ... ¹³ ... All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. ¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

In *The Radical Disciple*, John Stott wrote

 I remember vividly the major question which perplexed me (and my friends) as a young Christian. It was this: What is God's purpose for his people? Granted we had been converted, but what next?

Of course we knew the famous statement of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, 'Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.' We also toyed with a yet briefer statement of only five words such as 'Love God, love your neighbour.'

But neither seemed wholly satisfactory. So I want to share with you where my mind has come to rest as I approach the end of my pilgrimage on earth. It is this: God wants his people to become like Christ, for Christlikeness is the will of God for the people of God.

This is a very high standard. Peter exhorts us to lead good lives, so good that others see the good deeds and know it is God living in us, and so glorify him. What would others notice about our small community or our church if they looked in? Does our holiness overflow to practical actions in the world?

Questions

- Reread 1 Peter 1:15,16 and 2 Peter:9-12. Why are we called to be holy?
- How can we live in this world but not be of the world?
- What does a holy church look like in reality?

Application

- Spend some time individually reflecting on the picture by Malcolm Bourne which hangs at the front of Christ Church (below).
- Where are you in the picture (honestly)? Where would you like to be?
- In pairs, share your thoughts with another person and pray for each other.



INVITING EVERYONE TO FOLLOW JESUS

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