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The attributes of the true church in the Nicene Creed and its relevance for ecumenism

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The Nicene Creed, formulated during the Councils of Nicaea (AD 325) and Constantinople (AD 381), offers a foundational statement of Christian faith, expressing key theological tenets about God, Christ, and the church. Among its most distinctive affirmations is the declaration of the 'one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church'. These four marks – unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity – are regarded as essential characteristics of the true church in Christian theology. Unity reflects the church's oneness in faith and communion; holiness its divine foundation and sanctifying mission; catholicity its universality and inclusiveness; and apostolicity its continuity with the teachings of the apostles.

Contribution: In the context of ecumenism, these marks play a crucial role in fostering dialogue and reconciliation among divided Christian denominations. Ecumenism seeks the restoration of Christian unity, often grounded in the shared acknowledgement of these core attributes. While differences in doctrine, worship, and governance exist, the marks provide a common theological framework for discussion between Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions. By focusing on these shared principles, the Nicene Creed serves as a potential foundation for healing divisions and fostering greater unity among Christian communities globally, encouraging mutual understanding and cooperation in the pursuit of Christ's mission.

Keywords: unity; holiness; catholicity; apostolicity; ecumenism; Nicene Creed; attributes.

Introduction

The Nicene Creed, formulated at the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325 and expanded at the Council of Constantinople in 381, is probably one of the most significant confessions of the Christian faith in the history of the church. Emerging from a time of theological controversy as an apology or response to the views of Arius (Schulze 1978:55) and boldly affirming the divinity of Christ and the relationship between the Father and the Son (Dreyer 2015), the Creed would become a unifying statement of orthodoxy in the centuries that followed.

While its primary aim was therefore to safeguard the gospel against heresies, it also provided the church with a concise summary of its identity. In this regard, one line has echoed through the centuries as a description of the essential attributes of the true church: 'We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church'.

This brief yet profound statement identifies the distinguishing features by which the authentic church of Christ may be recognised across history and geography. These four attributes – oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity – do not represent optional qualities or aspirational goals but essential characteristics flowing from the church's very nature as the body of Christ. They are not merely descriptive but normative: they tell the church what it is and what it must strive to embody more fully in the world.

The historical context of the Nicene Creed sheds light on the importance of these attributes. The early centuries of Christianity were marked by rapid expansion, theological disputes, and the need for clarity in defining the faith once delivered to the saints (Jud 3). Heresies such as Arianism threatened to distort the church's understanding of Christ's divinity, while schisms and competing sects raised pressing questions about what constituted the true church. Against this backdrop, the ecumenical councils sought not only to articulate the doctrine of the Trinity but also to reaffirm the unity, sanctity, universality, and apostolic foundation of the church.

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Throughout church history, theologians and church leaders have returned to these four attributes as a standard of ecclesial identity. Augustine, for example, emphasised that the true church must exhibit catholicity and unity even amid diversity. The Reformers of the 16th century, while challenging certain practices of the medieval church, nevertheless retained the Nicene affirmation of the church's four marks, often reinterpreting them in light of their theological convictions. Today, in a world marked by denominational fragmentation, cultural pluralism, and religious scepticism, the attributes articulated in the Nicene Creed continue to offer both a challenge and a compass for the people of God and for the broader ecumenical community.

Each attribute reveals a vital dimension of the church's calling. The church is 'one' because it shares in the unity of the Triune God and is bound together by one faith, one baptism, and one Lord (Eph 4:4–6). It is 'holy' because it is set apart by God, indwelt by the Spirit, and called to reflect the holiness of Christ in word and deed. It is 'catholic' not merely in the sense of belonging to one denomination, but in its universality: it transcends cultural, geographical, and temporal boundaries to embody the fullness of the gospel. And it is 'apostolic' because it is rooted in the teaching and mission of the apostles, faithfully preserving the gospel handed down through the ages.

Importantly, these four attributes are interdependent. Unity without holiness risks becoming mere institutional conformity; holiness without catholicity may turn into elitism or sectarian withdrawal; catholicity without apostolicity may devolve into relativism; and apostolicity without unity can fragment into competing claims of authority. The true church is marked by the balance and integration of all four characteristics, each illuminating and strengthening the others. An understanding of these attributes can contribute significantly to the ecumenical ideal, particularly considering the challenges the church faces in postmodern times.

The development of the confession about the 'church' in the Nicene Creed

Dreyer (2015) interestingly points out that, in its most primitive form, confession formation could not be founded on Scriptural exegesis, since the biblical text was still in a developmental phase at the time of the Nicaean Council. The canon had not yet been finalised and manuscripts were not readily available (cf. Pelikan 1971:115–120).

Confession formation took place within faith communities, and the confession received was carefully handed down from generation to generation [*paradosis*]. This same idea is found in 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul writes:

> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. (vv. 3–5)

The function of the early theologians was not to produce new and creative ideas or to act as exegetes of canonical books. Rather, their task was to proclaim, defend, and pass on to the next generation of disciples the Christian faith and confession as received from Christ and the apostles. Against this background, the Nicene Creed's profession of an 'ἀποστολικὴν ἐκκλησίαν', which can be translated as 'based on the teaching of the apostles', must also be understood.

The first ecumenical council was convened by Emperor Constantine in the city of Nicaea in AD 325. The purpose of the council was to formulate the doctrine of Jesus Christ and clarify the relationship between the Father and the Son, in light of the conflict that threatened to divide the church in Alexandria, mainly due to the views of Arius. The first part of the Nicene Creed was drawn up during this council. Significantly, because the council focused on Christology, the text contains no reference to the church (cf. Schaff & Wace 1999:3). Furthermore, neither the *Expositio Fidei* [Statement of Faith] of Athanasius (AD 328), delivered after the Council of Nicaea and probably during his confirmation as bishop (cf. Schaff & Wace 1978:83–85), nor his later letter *De Decretus* [Defence of the Nicene Definition], probably written between AD 346 and 356, contains a reference to the church (cf. Schaff & Wace 1978:149–172). In both writings, he mainly follows the Nicene Creed and focuses on the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as well as on the person and work of Jesus Christ (cf. Kelly 1983:31).

A letter written by Eusebius of Caesarea to his congregations after the Council of Nicaea (cf. Schaff & Wace 1978:74–76), in which the text of the Nicene Creed appears, likewise contains no reference to the church. The church came into consideration at Nicaea only in practical arrangements and in the canons.

After the Council of Nicaea, the struggle against heresy continued, and different variants of the Nicene Creed circulated. One of the best-known versions comes from Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem (†AD 386), who treated an expanded form of the creed in his catechetical lectures (cf. Dreyer 2016:76). In the Jerusalem variant, there is indeed an article dealing with the church. In AD 381, the second ecumenical council met in Constantinople (cf. Schaff & Wace 1999:163) under the patronage of Emperor Theodosius. At this council, attended by 150 bishops and convened to finally eradicate the Arian doctrine and establish the correct teaching, Cyril of Jerusalem was also present. The council probably used the Jerusalem variant of the Nicene Creed as a basis document. Regarding the church, it was formulated as εἰς μίαν ἁγίαν καθολικὴν καὶ ἀποστολικὴν ἐκκλησίαν [I believe … one, holy, catholic and apostolic church]. This formulation was later confirmed at the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) and has since formed the core of theological reflection on the church throughout history.

The rapid geographical and numerical expansion of the church after the Edict of Milan (AD 313), together with the protection granted by the emperor (cf. Schor 2009; Stark 1996), made it necessary to formulate an understanding – that is, a

confession – concerning the church. By the second half of the 4th century, churches already existed from India in the east to Britain in the west, and from Ethiopia in the south to Germany in the north. Maintaining ecclesiastical unity in doctrine, as well as a sound relationship between congregations, became increasingly both problematic and important.

Dreyer (2015) also points to Augustine's *De fide et symbolo* (AD 393), as another important factor in the formulation of confessional statements about the church. Augustine notes that heretics and schismatics also called themselves 'church' and organised themselves according to church customs. In doing so, they presented themselves as the true church, although they were not because they distorted pure doctrine. It is clear that the threat from outside, in the form of sectarian groupings, made it inevitable that the church would need to articulate clearly who and what the church of Christ is.

Finally, the canon had already begun to take its final form by AD 350 (cf. Pelikan 2005), although it had not yet been formally established. In the New Testament, the church occupies a particularly important place, with more than 80 metaphors referring to it. The comprehensive way in which the church is addressed in the New Testament naturally led some early church writers to give more systematic attention to the church. The church functioned as an existential space in which Christians shared their faith in Jesus Christ with one another. With the growing temporal distance between Christ and the church, the development of the office, the meetings of the offices, the primacy of the bishop of Rome, doctrinal differences and the emergence of sects, as well as the institutionalisation of the church in relation to imperial authority, theological reflection on 'the church' and its inclusion in the confession became necessary. By the end of the 4th century, it was important to demonstrate the historical connection with Christ, the apostles, and the earliest congregations, and to confess the unity and catholicity of the church.

The attributes of the church

The Nicene Creed indeed identifies four marks, or 'notes' [*notae ecclesiae*], or more accurately, attributes [*attributa ecclesiae*]. These attributes originally served an apologetic function, distinguishing the true church from heretical movements. However, in later centuries, particularly during the Reformation these attributes have seemingly become insufficient and somewhat ambiguous. Van der Kooi and Van den Brink (2017:626) explain that the function of the original attributes mentioned at Nicaea has shifted. Whereas their initial purpose seems to have been to differentiate the true church from others, they later became a guide for self-reflection. It may therefore be said that these attributes serve as a normative prescription of what the church ought to be in its essence, rather than merely a historical description of what outsiders observe of the church (Abraham 2001:186).

These attributes are ontological and theological: they describe what the church is in its essence and calling, even if this is imperfectly manifested on earth. Much later, during the 16th-century Reformation and amid competing claims to be the 'true church', the Reformers asked: How can the true church be recognised where it is found? This question led to the identification of the marks – outward, discernible signs by which the true church may be recognised. These include the pure preaching of the Word (according to Scripture), the correct administration of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper), and the faithful exercise of discipline (sometimes added as a third mark, e.g., in the Belgic Confession, Art. 29). These marks are functional and practical – they help believers discern a true congregation of Christ among many visible claimants.

Van Genderen (1990:283) states that the church's attributes (the four mentioned at Nicaea) indicate what the church is, while the church's marks indicate where the church is. Heyns (1977:113ff.) formulates this somewhat differently, suggesting that the marks are a condition for the church, while the attributes are the consequences of the church. If the marks are a condition for the church, they are also a condition for its attributes. What is clear from both formulations is that the church can neither truly be church outside the boundaries of its marks, nor without the outline of its attributes. The attributes relate to the nature and functioning of the church, while the marks concern the question by which the church is known and recognised (Heyns 1978:375).

The Reformers – Luther, Calvin, and the authors of the Reformed confessions – fully affirmed the Nicene Creed's four attributes: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. They did not see themselves as inventing a new church, but as reforming the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of all ages. Calvin, for example, writes in the Institutes:

> 'We confess the church to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic … This unity is grounded in the pure preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments' (IV.1.2).

For Calvin, the marks functioned as the concrete means by which the Nicene attributes could be discerned in practice. The Reformers understood that, outwardly, the church might conform to formal characteristics yet still fall short of being the true church of Christ. Because the empirical church, even when displaying outward features, might not necessarily be a true church, the need arose to test its authenticity. The Reformers therefore developed critical criteria for this purpose. For them, the marks functioned as the concrete means by which the Nicene attributes could be discerned in practice.

The church is united when it gathers around the one Word of God and the one baptism and communion. The pure preaching of the Word and the faithful administration of the sacraments preserve this unity. Holiness becomes visible when the gospel is rightly proclaimed and the sacraments rightly administered, setting apart the people of God; discipline (often considered the third mark) also safeguards holiness in practice. The true church is not bound to one nation, bishopric, or culture. Wherever the marks are present –

whether in Geneva, Wittenberg, or a small village – the church is truly catholic. The church remains apostolic when it adheres to the teaching of the apostles, now preserved in Scripture and faithfully proclaimed in Word and sacrament.

The four marks as foundation for an effective approach to ecumenism

Scriptural foundation for ecumenism

In the 21st century, new challenges to ecumenism have emerged. One significant development is the demographic shift of Christianity from the global North (Europe and North America) to the Global South (Africa, Asia, and Latin America). These developments have introduced new challenges in theological practices and emphasis, including differing liturgical traditions and ethical viewpoints. Contemporary issues such as human sexuality, gender roles, and postmodern critiques of ecclesiastical authority have further raised concerns about the limitations of the ecumenical ideal. Several denominations worldwide have experienced fragmentation and schism. All these raises questions about the fragility of ecclesiastical ecumenism and proper consensus within a broader global ecumenical context.

The four attributes of the church should not be directed only inward as a means of portraying the church independently or locally; rather, they should form the foundation of the church's outward engagement with the world. In this sense, these attributes must shape the framework of the church's work in the world. Moltmann (1977) expresses this clearly:

> We cannot therefore merely give the marks of the church bearings that tend in an inward direction, understanding them in the light of word and sacrament; we must to the same degree give them an outward direction and see them in reference to the world. They are not merely important for the internal activities of the church; they are even more important for the witness of the church's form in the world. The marks of the church will then become confessional signs in the conflicts which today are really splitting and dividing mankind. Let us therefore extend the ecclesiology of tradition, which is orientated towards unity, into an ecclesiology orientated towards conflict in the world situation of today. (p. 342)

The Greek word οἰκουμένη (*oikumené*) refers to the concept of the inhabited earth (see Mt 24:14; Lk 4:5; 21:26; Rv 3:10, among others). In its original sense, the term meant 'having relation to the entire inhabited earth' or 'being representative of the entire inhabited earth'. Over time, the original geographical content of the concept was expanded to include cultural and political dimensions, especially within the Hellenistic cultural world. In the New Testament's time, the term often referred to the Roman Empire, in contrast to what was perceived as the uncivilised world (Nijenhuis 1959:3).

Jesus Christ gave a completely new perspective to the concept of οἰκουμένη by shifting its focus from the world of the Roman Empire to the world to come (Mt 24:14; Heb 2:5). In this way, the church – as the embodiment of what is lasting – was contrasted with what is peculiar to the passing world. In the early church, the term came to denote that which relates to or represents the whole church in its catholic, universal appearance. Also, where church councils were recognised as valid representations of the whole church, the concept of ecumenism emerged. The term was first used in this sense in AD 381, when the Council of Constantinople referred to the ecumenical Synod of Nicaea held in AD 325. Consequently, the Councils of Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451) were also regarded as ecumenical, because they were historically viewed as representative of the universal church (Bronkhorst 1960:243; Goosen 1993:10; Nijenhuis 1959:3).

Over time, the term 'ecumenism' came to denote the worldwide relationships of faith shared by individual believers and church communities across denominational and national boundaries. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the phrase 'ecumenical mission' was used to describe the global mission of the church. At the same time, ecumenism also refers to activities that seek to express the worldwide 'belonging' of the church of Christ. In 1929, both the German and French names of the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work were changed to Oekumenischer Rat (Conseil *Oecumenique*). Since the Oxford Conference of 1937, this term has also been used in the English-speaking world.

In summary, ecumenism may be understood as a spiritual attitude that embodies both the awareness of and the longing for the unity of the church of Christ. The ecumenical movement has thus become a worldwide process aimed at expressing greater unity and cooperation among all Christians (Bronkhorst 1960:243; Goosen 1993:11; Nijenhuis 1959:3). Pelser (1976:344), for example, describes ecumenism as the sphere of the church's work – it is the space in which the church lives, proclaims the kingship of Christ, and claims the world for him who, in Hebrews 1:6, is called the firstborn of the οἰκουμένη.

Unity and Catholicity as foundation for ecumenism

The Nicene Creed's assertion that the church is 'one' is grounded in the biblical witness and must be interpreted within the broader framework of Christian theology. Unity is not merely an institutional ideal but an ontological reality deriving from God's own being and the salvific work of Christ. John 17:21 records Christ's intercessory prayer 'that they may all be one … so that the world may believe'. This petition frames ecclesial unity as both theological (participation in the divine communion) and teleological (ordered towards mission), and it is therefore impossible to understand Christ's salvation apart from the church (cf. Knoetze 2024:317).

The Pauline epistles further articulate this vision. In Ephesians 4:4–6, unity is enumerated in terms of 'one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father'. This list underscores the inseparability of ecclesial unity from the confession of faith and the sacramental life. Similarly, 1 Corinthians 12 deploys the metaphor of the

body, insisting that diversity of gifts and roles does not negate unity but constitutes its proper expression. Unity is therefore not the absence of difference but its ordered integration under Christ as head.

This biblical foundation suggests that ecclesiastical unity is both given (a spiritual reality rooted in Christ) and demanded (a practical imperative requiring embodiment in communal life). The church, in its essence, is one; yet it is also called to be one and is even regarded as the 'most necessary thing' (Coetzee 2016:158). Even in the New Testament, the division of the church is already evident (cf. 1 Cor 1:10–13). Paul contrasts these divisions in the church by pointing to Christ: 'Is Christ then divided?' (1 Cor 1:13). The direct connection this question establishes between the unity of the church and Christ indicates that the unity of the church is deeply rooted in its trinitarian origin – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 17:11b, 21–23) – just as the uniqueness of ancient Israel was deeply rooted in the uniqueness of Yahweh. Analogous to the distortion of the image of God in humanity after the fall, the division of the church on earth must be viewed as a direct result of sin.

The term 'ecumenism' encompasses the church's calling to universal unity precisely because of its catholicity. This calling involves the preservation and protection of church unity where it exists – also across national borders – the pursuit of discussions aimed at restoring unity where it does not exist, and the commitment to cooperation wherever there is agreement (cf. Snyman 1977:85).

Traditionally, the paths between churches in the Reformed tradition and the Roman Catholic Church over the centuries diverged over the doctrines of unity and catholicity. The Roman view of church unity and catholicity was inevitably determined by its understanding of the church: unity and catholicity were visibly expressed in the one Roman church structure. There was no consideration of an 'invisible' church broader than the Roman institutional church. The statement of the church father Cyprian, *quia salus extra ecclesiam non est* [outside the church there is no salvation possible] (Van Oort 1990:87), was applied in the Roman Catholic view specifically to the Roman Church itself. Accordingly, the saved – as God's people – were understood to be encompassed within this one institution of salvation, and unity and catholicity of the church were therefore confined to this single ecclesiastical structure (cf. Mörsdorf 1964:10). However, the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) introduced a cautious shift in this traditional view by including the Reformed churches within a broader circle of 'brotherhood'. In this way, Roman doctrines of unity and catholicity were *de facto* broadened in an ecumenical sense (Bosch 1992:461).

The views during and after the Reformation concerning the unity and catholicity of the church were strongly shaped by Calvin's vision of church unity. Calvin (1972:21–24) assumed the inseparable bond between unity and catholicity of the church when he sharply pointed out the untenability of a divided church. He argued that the church is called catholic or universal precisely because there cannot be two or three churches without Christ being divided – and that is impossible. Calvin further states that nothing is more alien to the Christian faith than for one believer to separate from other believers 'and thereby attack and abandon the core of the Christian faith' (Calvin 1972:21–24; cf. Inst. IV.1.2; IV.1.10; IV.1.15; IV.1.18; IV.1.19). Indeed, he insists that:

> 'two or three [*churches*] cannot come into existence without dividing Christ; and this is impossible' [*quia non duas aut tres invenire liceat quin discerpatur Christus: quod fieri non potest*] (Inst. IV.1.2)

This point of departure in Calvin's theology may be regarded as foundational for all his ecumenical activity (Nijenhuis 1959:277).

Berkouwer (1976:43, 77) similarly argues that the plural concept of 'churches' is as inconceivable as the plural concept of 'people of God' in the Old Testament. Yet we are confronted with the inevitable 'not yet' of a sin-torn reality in which church unity is already present by virtue of its essence though 'not yet' fully realised (cf. Berkouwer 1976:40).

The church must therefore be understood as the one church of Jesus Christ in the world. Ecumenism represents a scriptural way in which the church embodies unity and catholicity. Catholicity, like unity, apostolicity, and holiness, is one of the essential characteristics of the church; without it, the church cannot truly be church (cf. Grebe 2025:216). These essential characteristics of the church are integrally intertwined. Ecumenism concerns the unity of the church, and such unity is possible only because of the church's inherent catholicity. Küng (1978:303) expresses this succinctly: 'If the church is one, it must be universal, if it is universal, it must be one. Unity and catholicity are two interwoven dimensions of one and the same Church'.

The church is neither catholic merely because it is spread across the earth, nor because it consists of large numbers. The church was already catholic on the day of Pentecost, when all its members could be accommodated in a relatively small room. Catholicity therefore has fundamentally nothing to do with geography or statistics (Bosch 1992:464; cf. Heyns 1977:138). In its entire essence, the church is catholic, that is, universally and generally directed. Like the unity of the church, its catholicity rests in the one universal Lord as its Head. On the one hand, the church is catholic because it is the body of Christ that exists universally as a new creation. On the other hand, it is catholic because it continues to grow 'from the Head and to the Head – to the full measure of Christ' (Eph 4:13–16; cf. Du Plooy 1982:162–163). The church must grow into what it already is: the worldwide one body of Christ. This growth occurs through the proclamation of the Word and the powerful work of the Spirit.

The concepts of ecumenism and catholicity therefore imply that there are no boundaries for church communion within the framework of the church's essence. Church communities should therefore be in communion with one another worldwide. As the gospel is proclaimed in an ecumenical context – to make the whole world a 'Christ-inhabited world' –

one church grows out of another until the gospel has reached all nations. Each church that arises in this way is indeed independent, yet it retains a bond with the church through which it came into being, so that all churches remain interconnected. Scripture clearly expresses this principle (cf. Rm 15:27; 1 Cor 14:36). These texts suggest that when one church emerges from another, the proclamation of the gospel establishes a lasting bond and obligation between them to practice together. In 1 Corinthians 14:36, Paul reminds the church that one church must also learn from another and that no congregation should exist in isolation as though it alone were the church of Christ. Through the Word that came to them, an unbreakable bond was established with other churches that had already received the Word (Pop 1965:341). Regarding Romans 15:27, Ridderbos (1959:337) notes that Gentiles joining the church are the recipients of spiritual gifts through their incorporation into the church. They also bear the responsibility of sharing their material resources for the benefit of others.

Apostolicity and holiness as foundation for ecumenism

Ecumenism is deeply linked to the apostolicity and holiness of the church. Although these two essential characteristics are treated only briefly for the purposes of this article, they remain integral to the concept of ecumenism. On the one hand, ecumenism is a visible expression of these two essential characteristics of the church; on the other, apostolicity and holiness respectively provide both the foundation and the direction for Scripture-based ecumenism.

Because of fundamental differences between the Roman Catholic Church and the churches of the Reformed tradition regarding the apostolicity of the church, ecumenical paths diverge precisely at this point. According to the Reformed tradition, the church's apostolicity does not consist in a succession of places or persons but in adherence to the *doctrina apostolorum* [the teaching of the apostles] (Balke 1990:280). Through the apostolicity of the church, a historical connection is established between the church and the apostles. This connection is maintained by grounding the message and mission of the church in the unique and unrepeatable work of the apostles (Heyns 1977:147). Apostolicity thus involves submission to the authority of Holy Scripture: the apostolic teaching must be transmitted. It concerns the *successio doctrinae* – the succession of the apostolic teaching proclaimed by the church.

Because the church is rooted in its apostolicity, the foundation of ecumenism likewise rests on this essential characteristic (cf. Balke 1990:280). In this way, the church becomes the pillar and foundation of truth, preserving the true knowledge of God through the *doctrina Christi* [the teaching of Christ]. Scripturally grounded ecumenism can therefore be practised only based on this truth. Yet the apostolicity of the church should not be perceived as a limitation on ecumenism. Rather, the church cannot exist without its apostolic teaching. Where the apostolicity of the church – its foundation in the teaching of the apostles – is diminished, the church risks becoming merely a social body responding to socio-cultural needs or a pressure group concerned only with influencing historical developments.

Ecumenism is also, in a distinctive way, an expression of the holiness of the church. At first glance, ecumenism and holiness may appear to be seen as conflicting qualities. By definition, ecumenism implies 'reaching across borders', while holiness implies 'separation'. Yet their point of convergence lies in the question: 'By Whom, for Whom and to Whom?' At its core, ecumenism is a 'reaching across borders for Christ', while the holiness of the church is likewise a 'separation for Christ'. The central point of contact between ecumenism and holiness therefore lies in Christ, the Head of the one, worldwide church.

The holiness of the church neither imply sinlessness, nor a human effort to achieve perfection. Rather, it denotes the sanctification of God's children – a process culminating in a living relationship with him. Because of this relationship under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the holiness of the church does not entail withdrawal from the world but engagement with it (Calvin [1552] 1992:1290). Within an ecumenical context, the holiness of the church becomes an indispensable embodiment of its worldwide 'calling to be set apart for Christ'. Ecumenism, therefore, represents a 'reaching out for Christ' precisely for the sake of the church's global calling to be set apart for him.

Viewed in this way, ecumenism may also be understood as the work of the Holy Spirit across church boundaries, accomplishing what the church cannot achieve by its own efforts. It is the Spirit who brings about the sanctification of God's chosen children as his body on earth (cf. Balke 1990:269). On this basis, it appears that the apostolicity of the church entails the realisation of its holiness – or, in other words, that the church preserves its holiness through the living out of its apostolicity (cf. Balke 1990:281).

Challenges to ecumenism and the four attributes of the church

The Nicene Creed's confession of the church as 'one, holy, catholic, and apostolic' has for centuries provided the Christian church with a theological framework for understanding its nature, mission, and destiny. These attributes are not merely descriptive labels but deeply interwoven dimensions of ecclesial identity. To speak of the church in this way is to recognise that its existence is both gift and vocation, grounded in Christ, sustained by the Spirit, and ordered towards the glory of the Father (cf. Knoetze 2024:320).

The four attributes are inseparable. Unity cannot be divorced from apostolicity, for authentic communion must rest on fidelity to the gospel proclaimed by the apostles. Holiness finds expression in catholicity, because sanctity is not abstract but lived out concretely in the church's universal mission across time and space. Catholicity, in turn, requires unity if the church is to embody a true universality rather than a collection of disparate communities. Apostolicity itself must

be joined to holiness if the apostolic witness is to be credible in the world. When held together, these attributes illuminate one another and reveal a holistic vision of the church as the body of Christ extended through history.

It is indeed the case that the unity of the church is a unity in diversity (Van Wyk 1995:255). Such diversity, however, should consist primarily of 'non-theological factors', such as language and culture among others (Naudé 2003:436–437). It should not be a diversity regarding doctrinal or confessional matters such as homosexuality (cf. De Gruchy 2004:20; De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2005:64). The attributes of the church also possess ethical dimensions (Jesson 2003:13). Unity in truth therefore implies unity in doctrine and confession. Although the World Council of Churches in 1983 idealised structural unity as being 'one in faith and in one eucharistic fellowship' (cf. Bosch 1992:461), this is no longer regarded as a realistic expectation within contemporary ecumenism.

Bosch (1992:465), writing from a missiological perspective, suggests that ecumenism remains possible despite church and doctrinal differences when believers accept one another in Christ. He argues that the goal of ecumenism is no longer a fellowship devoid of conflict, but rather a community characterised by unity in reconciled diversity. Daecke (quoted by Bosch 1992:465) observes that, within the modernist paradigm, a particular choice was often proposed: diversity without unity, or unity without diversity. The postmodern paradigm, however, points towards a manifestation of unity that preserves diversity and a diversity that strives for unity. Diversity, therefore, is not merely a cause for concern but forms part of the church's ongoing struggle to become what God intends it to be. Amid all diversity there remains a centre: Jesus Christ, who exercises dominion in and over his church.

Conclusion

Ecumenism in its true nature is closely bound to the four attributes of the church as confessed at Nicaea: unity, catholicity, apostolicity, and holiness. Without ecumenism, the worldwide unity of the church cannot be visibly realised; in fact, without ecumenism, the catholicity of the church becomes a dormant characteristic. Ecumenism is therefore not an end, but a means by which the goal of church unity, grounded in the catholicity of the church, must be pursued. This implies that the ecumenical endeavour must proceed from the revealed truth of God and that ecumenical work must be sustained by the calling of the church to grow towards perfection in Christ (Eph 4:13; cf. Pelser 1976:348–349).

The goal of ecumenism is the unity of the church, arising from its catholicity, founded upon its apostolicity, and directed towards its holiness. It has been indicated above that ecumenism should be grounded in the essence of faith and that its goal is no longer fellowship devoid of conflict, but rather community characterised by unity in reconciled diversity. The approach should therefore rest on a firmer basis for ecumenism, namely the church's essential characteristics as a framework within the boundaries of its attributes. Within these boundaries it could be possible to focus on cooperation rather than on differences. Such an approach, rooted in the essential and confessed attributes of the worldwide church of Christ, allows for the preservation of diversity in culture and ethos within the boundaries of what the church must be to fulfil its calling as the church of the Lord.

In the present time, these attributes provide a foundational framework for ecumenical dialogue. They challenge Christians to work towards visible unity, to pursue sanctification through repentance and renewal, to embrace the church's universality beyond denominational confines, and to remain faithful to the apostolic witness in Scripture and mission. They remind the church that, despite existing divisions, believers already share in one body and are called to manifest that communion more fully.

The Nicene attributes are not only doctrinal affirmations but also imperatives. To confess them is to embrace a vocation to live into the reality they proclaim. They call the church to embody unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity in a fractured world, not as achievements of human ingenuity but as fruits of divine grace. They remind Christians that the church's identity is not self-constructed but bestowed, not inward-looking but outwardly directed towards ecumenism, not confined to history but oriented towards its eschatological fulfilment. In this way, the Nicene Creed continues to shape the life of the church in every age and place, calling it ever back to its centre in Christ.

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