

## Sanctam Ecclesiam Catholicam:

### The Historical—and Biblical?—Origins of Catholicity in the Apostles' Creed

Evangelical churches that print the Apostles' Creed for their congregations often insert an explanatory footnote, or re-translate, or even remove the word “catholic” from their text as being unbiblical or confusing. This terminological fretting has a long pedigree. The Lutherans were the first to kick off the Protestant discomfort with the word “catholic” when the original 1580 German edition of *The Book of Concord* translated *sanctam ecclesiam catholicam* with *eine heilige christliche Kirche*.<sup>1</sup> This was how Martin Luther himself translated the text in his *Small and Large Catechism* of 1529. Luther seems to ignore the existence of *catholicam* in the text, or else give it the novel meaning of “Christian.” Then the 1851 Henkel edition of *The Book of Concord*, the first ever in English, likewise used “holy Christian church,” and for a long time, this was standard. The now authoritative 2000 edition restores the reading, “the holy catholic Church,” yet includes an explanatory footnote which asserts that the “Christian church” translation was current in German even before the Reformation.<sup>2</sup> Today’s online version of *The Book of Concord* uses “catholic” but adds the cautionary warning, “catholic means ‘universal’ and is not a reference to the Roman Catholic Church.”<sup>3</sup> This sort of liturgical caveat to the congregation is something I have experienced many times in various church contexts. It appears to be fairly common among evangelicals. But should we really be so concerned about this word when it appears in the Apostles' Creed?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://bookofconcord.org/german-creeds.php>

<sup>2</sup> “[T]his word, lacking in many texts of the Old Roman Creed, is translated ‘Christian’ in both the German (already before the Reformation) and the traditional English version.” Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles P. Arand, et al. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000) 22, n. 12.

<sup>3</sup> <http://bookofconcord.org/creeds.php>

An investigation of the creed's textual history does not give us any reason to fear the word "catholic." Admittedly, some people today might misunderstand the word or hear certain confusing resonances in it. But that is a separate issue, to be discussed pastorally as may be appropriate. When it comes to the word itself and what it was intended to signify, the historical evidence shows catholicity to be an ancient and original idea, indeed a biblical one in its theological intent.

To prove this point, my paper will trace the terminology of catholicity, especially as it appears in a creedal context, backward from the eighth century to the first. Once we have reached this starting place, it will be clear that there was a continuous line of development from the New Testament materials straight through the centuries to the Latin text that stands behind our translations when we recite the Apostles' Creed today. Therefore, the phrase "catholic church" in the creed cannot be construed as foreign to the intention of Scripture, nor as a medieval insertion that cropped up long after the time of the apostles. The central idea of catholicity—and even its terminology—can be traced back to the very beginning of Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Text of the Apostles' Creed**

The Latin text of the Apostles' Creed is designated by J.N.D. Kelly in his 1950 work on creeds as *T*, that is, the *Textus Receptus*.<sup>5</sup> This has become the standard designation. It is also

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<sup>4</sup> The earliest Christian usage of the term "catholic" referred to universality, the wholeness of the church, the spiritual interconnectedness of separate congregations, and the unity of believers in Christ across a broad geography. To this original core, other ideas accrued over time, such as doctrinal orthodoxy, obedience to the papacy, and membership in certain ecclesial or episcopal institutions. These latter concepts are not the ones I am tracing in this paper, though I do recognize that they were gradually added to the original idea of universality and wholeness.

<sup>5</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (New York: Longman, 1950; 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1972) 369. This nomenclature originated with Ferdinand Kattenbusch, who wrote, "ich werde diesen Text fortab der Kürze wegen T nennen," in *Das apostolische Symbol* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1894) 189.

used by Liuwe Westra in his definitive work on the Apostles' Creed.<sup>6</sup> *T* first shows up in a book published by Melchior Hittorp, canon of Cologne Cathedral, in 1568.<sup>7</sup> However, the origins of this Latin creed go back much earlier than Counter-Reformation Germany. The text was initially recorded (with some minor variations<sup>8</sup>) by the Merovingian monk St. Pirmin, who evangelized Bavaria, Swabia, and the upper Rhineland area.<sup>9</sup> He gives us the text in a popular missionary manual, the *Sayings of Abbot Pirmin*, datable to the early 700s.<sup>10</sup> In two separate places, Pirmin's quotation of the creed contains the phrase *sanctam ecclesiam catholicam*.<sup>11</sup> Virtually all of today's versions of the Apostles' Creed use this Latin text, in the later form known as *T*, as the basis for whatever modern language the creed is being translated into. So we can say with assurance that from the inception of the Apostles' Creed *per se*, which is an eighth century text, it has contained the phrase, "catholic church." But where did this phrase come from as part of that creed?

One text on which St. Pirmin's *Sayings* certainly depended was *On the Castigation of Rustics* by Martin of Braga (520–79).<sup>12</sup> During Martin's lifetime, Braga (in modern Portugal) was under the dominion of the Suebi, but it was about to become part of Visigothic Spain. In a

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<sup>6</sup> Liuwe H. Westra, *The Apostles' Creed: Origin, History, and Some Early Commentaries* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002) 21.

<sup>7</sup> Kelly, *Creeds*, 368–369.

<sup>8</sup> Westra notes that Pirmin's variations from *T* are more substantial than Kelly indicates (*Apostles' Creed*, 22 fn7; cf. 136–37). Even so, the differences are still very small. Westra acknowledges that Kelly's basic conclusions about the creed's origins are "generally accepted" by scholars (23 fn8).

<sup>9</sup> One of the abbeys founded under Pirmin's direction was Amorbach, only 150 miles from Cologne Cathedral. Clearly, a liturgist like Hittorp would have had access to Pirmin's writings. Hittorp's work which records the text of *T*, known as *De divinis catholicae ecclesiae officii et mysteriis* [or sometimes, *ac ministeriis*], was based on the *Pontificale Romano-Germanicum* compiled at St. Alban's Abbey, Mainz, ca. 950. See Michel Andrieu, "Melchior Hittorp et l'Ordo Romanus Antiquus," *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 46 (January-April, 1932) 3–21.

<sup>10</sup> *Dicta Abbatis Pirminii de singulis libris canonicis scarapsus* (Patrologia Latina 89, 1029–1050).

<sup>11</sup> *PL* 89, 1034D (this clause supposedly having been contributed by Simon the Zealot); and 1035D. See also the reproduction of the text in Westra, 137.

<sup>12</sup> The dependence is noted, for example, by Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999) 203; and by Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: Volume 3, The Medieval Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 138. Pirmin also modeled his work on Augustine's *On Catechizing the Uninstructed*.

section addressed to the faithful who have come forward for baptism, Martin supplies the three articles of the creed to which they must assent. Using language very reminiscent of St. Pirmin's, Martin records the third article as, "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the forgiveness of all sins, the resurrection of the flesh, and eternal life?"<sup>13</sup> This acknowledged source text for St. Pirmin's creed pushes the identification of "catholic church" back to the sixth century (ca. 574).

While we do not know all the documents that St. Pirmin had before his eyes, we can nonetheless examine the theological environment from which he came by looking for other late antique, western European creeds where the word "catholic" appears. We find it again in the fifth-century Gallic text which is piously though erroneously called the Athanasian Creed because of its pronounced Trinitarianism, but is more accurately named by its incipit as the *Quicumque Vult*. It does not use the exact expression "catholic church," yet it insists repeatedly that one must hold to the *fides catholica*. This creed is first quoted in a sermon by Caesarius of Arles (470–542), and it also appears to have been the subject of remarks made by Vincent of Lérins (died before 450) in his *Excerpta*. Based upon these quotations, scholars consider the creed's likely provenance to be southern Gaul. Since St. Pirmin was originally from Narbonne<sup>14</sup> until he embarked on mission work among the Germans, we can deduce that his Apostles' Creed had its roots in precisely these intellectual circles of Visigothic Spain and southern Gaul whose

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<sup>13</sup> *De Correctione Rusticorum* 15. For the Latin, see *Martin von Bracara's Schrift De Correctione Rusticorum*, ed. C.P. Caspari (Christiana, 1883), 26–28. Translated in J.N. Hillgarth, ed., *Christianity and Paganism, 350–750: The Conversion of Western Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1986) 62. Martin's text, *Credis in spiritum sanctum, sanctam ecclesiam catholicam, remissionem omnium peccatorum, carnis resurrectionem, et vitam aeternam?* is exactly the same as Pirmin's, except Pirmin inserts *sanctorum communionem et* after *catholicam*, and he omits *omnium*.

<sup>14</sup> Narbonne was the capital of the historical region known as Septimania, carved out by the Visigoths from the old Roman province of Gallia Narbonensis. Some historians note that Pirmin's presence in Frankish Europe coincided with the flight of Christians after the Umayyad invasion of Spain in 711 and Septimania in 719, deducing therefore a possible Spanish origin for Pirmin. See, e.g., Norman Roth, *Jews, Visigoths, and Muslims in Medieval Spain: Cooperation and Conflict* (Leiden: Brill, 1994) 58; and Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 203.

literature St. Pirmin certainly knew. Several other Gallic and Spanish creeds of this era contain the phrase “catholic church” as well.<sup>15</sup> So, the credal use of this term is thereby pushed back to the mid-fifth century.

Going back even earlier, and moving over to the eastern environment now, we find that today’s so-called Nicene Creed, more properly known as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, contains that well-known fourfold confession of ecclesiology, “the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” This has come to be known popularly as the Four Marks of the Church. The specific Greek expression is (just as we would imagine), εἰς μίαν, ἁγίαν, καθολικὴν καὶ ἀποστολικὴν Ἐκκλησίαν, with an earlier Πιστεύομεν [We believe] as the main verb. This creed likely comes from the Council of Constantinople in 381. Although we do not actually have any extant record of this creed until it was brought forth at Chalcedon in 451, most patristic reference sources, as well as scholars such as Kelly or R.P.C. Hanson,<sup>16</sup> nonetheless attribute it to the council of 381 as an expanded version of Nicaea’s creed of 325 (a creed which, by the way, did *not* include the word “catholic”). The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed therefore gives us a late fourth century attestation that the phrase “catholic church” was an important part of the Christian’s baptismal confession. This fact is corroborated by Emperor Theodosius, who

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<sup>15</sup> Among the creeds that Kelly calls “daughter creeds” of the Old Roman Symbol, the following include the word “catholic”: Remesiana (in modern Serbia, 4<sup>th</sup> cent.); two from Spain (6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> cent.); and two from Gaul (Riez, 5<sup>th</sup> cent.; Arles, 6<sup>th</sup> cent.). It also appears in the Greek creeds of Jerusalem, Mopsuestia, and Alexandria, and in the *Apostolic Constitutions* of Syria. However, the expression “catholic church” does not appear in any of the early Italian or North African creeds (Kelly, *Creeds*, 172–89). Westra covers these same texts and many others in great detail (*Apostles’ Creed*, chs. 2–4), and he summarizes their various Latin locutions in a helpful appendix (539–562). The early creeds that contain “catholic” which Westra adds to what Kelly had already uncovered are: a fifth or sixth century stone inscription from the Adriatic island of Cres (217–19); a pseudo-Ambrosian text from the Latin Balkans, possibly from the fourth century (280–91); an anonymous fifth-century exposition of the creed from southern Gaul (307–18); and an anonymous fifth-century sermon on the creed from northern Spain, or possibly from Ireland, which had close ties to Galicia (371–78). Thus we discover that while the Old Roman Symbol did not originally contain the word *catholicam*, its later variants in certain regions—Spain, Gaul, and the Balkans—quickly added it; yet elsewhere, it remained absent.

<sup>16</sup> Kelly, *Creeds*, 331; R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318–381* (London: T&T Clark, 1988) 815.

declared in his famous *Cunctos Populos* decree of 380, which made Christianity the official religion of the empire, that only those who follow Trinitarian orthodoxy can claim “the title of catholic Christians” (*Christianorum catholicorum nomen*).<sup>17</sup>

A few years prior to this, around AD 350, Cyril of Jerusalem likewise attests very clearly to the importance of a “catholic” ecclesiology among the Christian essentials. Lecturing to baptismal candidates about the creed they will soon be reciting in the font, he remarks, “the Faith has securely delivered to thee now the Article, “And in one Holy Catholic Church.”<sup>18</sup> Cyril goes on to discourse with the catechumens about the dangers of schismatics such as Marcionites and Manichaeans, and he even offers an ecclesiology so lofty it would have been agreeable to much later popes like Innocent III or Boniface VIII: “And while the kings of particular nations have bounds set to their authority, the Holy Church Catholic alone extends her power without limit over the whole world.”<sup>19</sup> Clearly, by the mid-fourth century, catholicity was considered an essential article of the Christian faith.

Interestingly, and perhaps detrimentally to my paper’s thesis, the expression “catholic church” does *not* appear in the fourth century Old Roman Symbol, of which the Apostles’ Creed is widely acknowledged to be a later derivative.<sup>20</sup> Does this then bring our search for the

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<sup>17</sup> *Codex Theodosianus* 16.1.2, accessed at [https://la.wikisource.org/wiki/Codex\\_Theodosianus/Liber\\_XVI#I.2](https://la.wikisource.org/wiki/Codex_Theodosianus/Liber_XVI#I.2).

<sup>18</sup> *Catechetical Lectures* 18.26. Translation from Edwin Hamilton Gifford in Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, 7:140.

<sup>19</sup> *Catechetical Lectures* 18.27 (NPNF2 7:141).

<sup>20</sup> The sources of this creed are a Latin version from Rufinus of Aquileia, *Commentarius in Symbolum Apostolorum*, ca. 400; and a Greek version from Marcellus of Ancyra, *Letter to Pope Julius*, ca. 340. Kelly considers the evolution of the Old Roman Symbol (*R*) into the Apostles’ Creed as a “fact [which] has never been denied” (*Creeds*, 369). However, since Kelly’s day, the seemingly assured origin of *R* as the creed in use at Rome has been challenged by two contemporary scholars, Wolfram Kinzig and Markus Vinzent. After undertaking a great deal of textual examination, Liuwe Westra refutes them and defends the “time-honoured” linkage of *T* to the baptismal creed of fourth-century Rome (*R*); and he even postulates a reconstructed proto-*R* from the third century (*Apostles’ Creed*, 404, and *passim*). This debate, though interesting, isn’t directly relevant to this paper because the word *catholicam* is absent in *R*. However, see footnote 15 above for a discussion of which “daughter creeds” soon added it.

fountainhead of catholicity to a screeching halt? Or can we, like the intrepid explorers of old, keep pressing upstream in our quest for the elusive source of the Nile?

While there is no impassable Aswan Dam on the river of our creedal quest, we do discover as we continue upstream that “catholic” becomes a scarcer term in the headwaters of the third and second centuries. Without a doubt, catholicity is conceptually represented during these centuries. That being said, it does not show up as a term in the creedal material of this era, the so-called “rule of faith” (*regula fidei*).<sup>21</sup> In two earlier studies of mine, both appearing in works edited by my academically prolific friend Paul Hartog, I identified twenty-one instances of the rule of faith in ante-Nicene patristic writings, thirteen of which could be considered full-fledged *regulae* deriving from the third or second centuries.<sup>22</sup> The general contours of these texts are similar, and among them there is often (though not always) an explicit reference to the Christian church.

But more directly to the point of our inquiry, we must ask, Does the rule of faith explicitly mention the “catholic” church? Catholicity is sometimes discussed in the immediate context of a creedal quotation. Cyprian, for example, refers to a single *symbolum* (the first western use of this term to indicate a creed) with which the “catholic church” baptizes its people.<sup>23</sup> Tertullian also refers to “the doctrine of the catholic Church at Rome” in his *Prescription Against Heretics*, which is one of our main sources for the ancient rule of faith.<sup>24</sup> Or

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<sup>21</sup> Other terms used for this creedal material are “rule of truth” and “ecclesiastical rule.” All these terms are, generally speaking, synonymous.

<sup>22</sup> Bryan Litfin, “Learning from Patristic Use of the Rule of Faith,” in *The Contemporary Church and the Early Church: Case Studies in Ressourcement*, ed. P. Hartog, Evangelical Theological Society Monograph Series 9 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010) 80–94; and Litfin, “Apostolic Tradition and the Rule of Faith in Light of the Bauer Thesis,” in *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christian Contexts: Reconsidering the Bauer Thesis*, ed. P. Hartog (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015) 162–65.

<sup>23</sup> Cyprian, *Epistle* 69.7. Translated in S.L. Greenslade, *Early Latin Theology* (Louisville: Westminster, 1956) 154.

<sup>24</sup> *Prescription Against Heretics* 30.2 (translated in Greenslade, 50). Likewise in 26.9, where Tertullian is refuting the heretics’ belief in secret apostolic tradition, he rejects the notion that the apostles could have introduced a rule of

in a lengthy section of Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis*, in which he refers numerous times to the "church's rule," he says that "the ancient and Catholic Church [stands] alone, collecting as it does [all predestined believers] into the unity of the one faith."<sup>25</sup> However, despite texts like these, the word "catholic" does not appear in any direct quotations of creedal material until the early fourth century.<sup>26</sup>

Given the state of the evidence, though, we should probably expect this. The early quotations of the *regula fidei* were typically fragmentary or partial. They often appeared in an author's stream of thought rather than as a hard-and-fast citation of a fixed text. At that time, Christian creeds were still dynamic and inchoate, a period that Kelly defines as "The Movement toward Fixity."<sup>27</sup> And yet, when we dig into the writings of the fathers from the third and second centuries, we do indeed find catholicity to be an attested ecclesiological concept. As I have said already, this was not an alien notion foisted upon the church in the late antique or early medieval periods. The roots of this idea go back to very early times, which explains why it finally made its way into the church's formal creeds in the fourth century.

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faith that differs from what they gave out *catholice in medium*, "generally in public." Note that a textual variant which is accepted in the main printed text of the CCSL vol. 1, and by Refoulé in SC 46, gives *catholicae in medium*, which would mean, "in the midst of the catholic [church]." In other words, if this manuscript reading is correct, Tertullian is claiming that the apostles distributed their creed into the catholic church.

<sup>25</sup> *Stromateis* 7.17.107.5. Translated in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:555.

<sup>26</sup> In addition to the mid-to-late fourth century sources already mentioned, the term shows up around AD 324 in the baptismal creed of Alexandria, quoted in a letter from Bishop Alexander which is preserved in Theodoret's *Church History* 1.4. Alexander wrote, "We confess the one and only apostolic Catholic Church which does not decay but lasts forever" (accessed at <https://www.fourthcentury.com/urkunde-14/>). The term "catholic" is also found in the baptismal creed contained in some Egyptian papyrus leaves from Deir el-Bala'izah (P.Bala'izah). This famous text is difficult to date, but probably comes from the early fourth century. Alistair C. Stewart concludes, "Thus whereas a fourth-century date for these fragments is entirely possible, an earlier date is feasible, and a later date is also conceivable." *Two Early Egyptian Liturgical Papyri: The Deir Balyzeh Papyrus and the Barcelona Papyrus* (Norwich, UK: Hymns Ancient and Modern, 2010) 21.

<sup>27</sup> Kelly, *Creeds*, 62–99.

## Catholicity in Patristic Ecclesiology

Let us now examine some patristic uses of the term “catholic” from the third and second centuries. One example comes from Pope Cornelius, bishop of Rome from AD 251–253 (his brief episcopate being cut short by martyrdom). In a letter to the bishop of Antioch, Cornelius complains that the schismatic anti-pope Novatian “did not know that there should be one bishop in a catholic church,” i.e., a single urban leader who presides over numerous subsidiary clerical offices, which Cornelius then proceeds to list.<sup>28</sup> Around this same time, during the Decian persecution, the Smyrnaean martyr Pionius was asked by his judge, “What church do you belong to?”, to which he replied, “The Catholic Church . . . with Christ there is no other.”<sup>29</sup> This same assertion was made by his martyred companion Sabina.<sup>30</sup>

Another text that mentions catholicity is the so-called *Muratorian Fragment*, a canon list whose anonymous author offers various observations about the books of the New Testament. Commenting on Philemon and the Pastoral Epistles, the list’s author notes, “these [books] are held sacred in the esteem of the Church catholic for the regulation of ecclesiastical discipline.”<sup>31</sup> The date of this text is debated, being traditionally ascribed to the late second century due to its self-attestation, though a minority of scholars considers it to be from the fourth.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The letter is preserved in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.43.11. Translation from J.E.L. Oulton, *Eusebius: The Ecclesiastical History, Volume II, Books 6–10*, Loeb Classical Library 265, ed. J. Henderson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1932), 119.

<sup>29</sup> *The Martyrdom of Pionius the Presbyter and His Companions* 9.2. Translation from Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) 147.

<sup>30</sup> *Mart. Pion.* 9.6 (Musurillo, 149).

<sup>31</sup> *Muratorian Fragment* 62–63. Translation from Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) 305–07.

<sup>32</sup> One scholar who holds to the fourth century date is Geoffrey Mark Hahneman, “The Muratorian Fragment and the Origins of the New Testament Canon,” in *The Canon Debate*, ed. L.M. McDonald and J.A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002) 404–415. But if he is wrong, and the text is actually from the second century as many scholars suggest, this would be one of the earliest attestations of the word “catholic” in patristic literature.

An undoubtedly second-century text that mentions the term “catholic” is the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, datable to within a few years after his death in AD 156. In the opening salutation, the hagiographer who is writing the story of the martyr greets “all the communities of the holy Catholic Church everywhere.”<sup>33</sup> Later, Polycarp prays for “the entire Catholic Church scattered throughout the world.”<sup>34</sup> And at the close of the document, a doxology lauds Christ as “the shepherd of the Catholic Church throughout the world.”<sup>35</sup>

Together, all these texts prove that in the third and second centuries, some Christians held an ecclesiology in which the church was “catholic” in the sense of being unified and worldwide. Since this is a diverse selection of texts in terms of their date, provenance, and genre, we can probably consider catholicity to be a widely held aspect of patristic ecclesiology during this time. Though the meaning of the term was still quite flexible, it centered on the ideas of unity, harmonious agreement, and oneness.

### **Origin of the Term “Catholic Church”**

The most important text that mentions the “catholic church”—because it is the first in church history to do so—comes from the pen of Ignatius of Antioch. The key statement, set within its surrounding context, is found in *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 8.1–2:

Flee from divisions, as the beginning of evils. You must all follow the bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and follow the presbytery as you would the apostles; respect the deacons as the commandment of God. Let no one do anything that has to do with the

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<sup>33</sup> *Martyrdom of Polycarp* Inscr. (Musurillo, 3).

<sup>34</sup> *Mart. Pol.* 8.1 (Musurillo, 9).

<sup>35</sup> *Mart. Pol.* 19.2 (Musurillo, 17).

church without the bishop. Only that Eucharist which is under the authority of the bishop (or whomever he himself designates) is to be considered valid. Wherever the bishop appears, there let the congregation be; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church.<sup>36</sup>

Scholars have debated much about this text, particularly with regard to exactly what Ignatius meant by “catholic,” and whether or to what degree the term should be connected to later concepts. Cardinal Avery Dulles, in his magisterial work *The Catholicity of the Church*, does not find the text to be of much value. “[U]nfortunately,” he says, “the fleeting appearances of the adjective *katholikos* in [Ignatius and Polycarp] lend themselves to various interpretations.”<sup>37</sup> Steven R. Harmon is more optimistic when he writes, “I contend that in light of the larger anti-Docetic polemic in *Smyrnaeans* and the rest of the Ignatian correspondence, we may speak of a much more fully orbed notion of what it meant for Ignatius and his contemporaries to say that the church is ‘catholic’ than Dulles allows.”<sup>38</sup> Harmon’s conclusion is that Ignatius was referring to “a *quantitative* catholicity—one that encompasses the wholeness or totality or universality of the church.”<sup>39</sup>

The most comprehensive investigation of what Ignatius meant by “catholic” comes from the French patristic scholar André de Halleux (1929–1994), who offered five distinct possibilities, with representative advocates of each within the academic community.<sup>40</sup> The five views, each with its own nuances, are: 1. The Universal Church; 2. The Orthodox Church; 3. The

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<sup>36</sup> Ign. *Smyrn.* 8.1–2. Translation from J.B. Lightfoot, J.R. Harmer, and M.W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1992) 189–91.

<sup>37</sup> Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 14.

<sup>38</sup> Steven R. Harmon, “Qualitative Catholicity in the Ignatian Correspondence—and the New Testament: The Fallacies of a Restorationist Hermeneutic,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 38 (Spring 2011) 36.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> André de Halleux, “‘L’Eglise Catholique’ dans la lettre Ignacienne aux Smyrniotes,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 58:1 (April 1982) 5–24.

Spiritual Communion [of the Invisible Church]; 4. The Fullness of the Local Church; and 5. An Intrinsic Perfection [from being in Christ]. None of these views seems to appeal very much to de Halleux. His final conclusion is worth representing fully here, if for no other reason than because it is so negative:

Ultimately, the first patristic attestation of the expression ἡ καθολικὴ Ἐκκλησία undoubtedly has nothing to do with the theology of catholicity. At the time when Ignatius described the church as ‘catholic,’ the Christian tradition had not yet promoted this adjective to the dignity of an ecclesial attribute, neither in the sense of universality, nor in the sense of orthodoxy. It is therefore a purely verbal coincidence that led to explaining the Ignatian *katholikos* in terms of subsequent developments, as the first milestone in a history that he did not in any way inaugurate. In fact, the adjective of *Smyrnaeans* 2.8 [sic, 8.2] does not provide the slightest indication of the ecclesiology of the bishop of Antioch. But this is sufficiently expressed in his letters . . . so that one can safely overlook an expression which has, until now, only led exegetes astray in the dogmatic interpretation that it almost irresistibly suggests.<sup>41</sup>

I find de Halleux’s conclusion overly skeptical; for while we don’t want to anachronistically read later meanings into the Antiochian bishop’s words, neither can we deny

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 24 (translation mine). The French reads: “En définitive, la première attestation patristique de l’expression ἡ καθολικὴ Ἐκκλησία n’a sans doute rien à voir avec la théologie de la catholicité. Au moment où Ignace qualifiait l’Église de catholique, la tradition chrétienne n’avait pas encore promu cet adjectif à la dignité d’un attribut ecclésial, ni au sens de l’universalité, ni au sens de l’orthodoxie. C’est donc une coïncidence purement verbale qui a conduit à expliquer le *katholikos* ignacien en fonction de développements ultérieurs, comme le premier jalon d’une histoire qu’il n’inaugure aucunement. En fait, l’adjectif de *Sm* 2, 8 [sic] ne fournit pas la moindre indication sur l’ecclésiologie de l’évêque d’Antioche. Mais celle-ci se trouve suffisamment exprimée dans ses lettres . . . pour qu’on puisse négliger sans dommage une expression qui n’a fait, jusqu’à présent, qu’égarer les exégètes dans l’interprétation dogmatique qu’elle suggère presque invinciblement.”

that his highly developed ecclesiology did set the tone and trajectory for a word that was about to take on a life of its own. Yet in the end, de Halleux's negative assessment need not concern us too much, for we are not trying to drill down into the exact nuances of catholicity over the centuries. I am fine with thinking of it as a fluid concept that evolved over time. The creedal pedigree for the term itself, which attests to a general notion of catholicity,<sup>42</sup> is all that I am really trying to sort out in this paper.

What all of these Ignatian investigations have in common is a desire to understand what kind of forward-looking trajectory this first use of the term might have initiated.<sup>43</sup> However, our study is moving backward in time, tracing our way from the eighth century text of the Apostles' Creed back to its original roots. Few scholars have ever thought to take Ignatius's term as possibly being derivative of something prior, prompting them to go searching for its origins. This is undoubtedly because Ignatius's locution is the inaugural use of the term ἡ καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία, so the search for anything earlier might seem futile. "Isn't this the wellspring?" we might ask. The only extant Christian documents prior to the Ignatian correspondence are the New Testament books, *I Clement*, portions of the *Didache*, and maybe a few Gnostic texts. These sources would seem to be useless for our purposes, since we know that an ecclesiological use of the term "catholic" does not appear in them—or does it?

I believe *Smyrnaeans* 8.2 bears a noteworthy resemblance to Matthew 18:20, both in syntactic as well as semantic content. Ignatius's expression is:

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<sup>42</sup> See footnote 4, above.

<sup>43</sup> William Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, Hermeneia, ed. H. Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 243–44.

ὅπου ἂν φανῆ ὁ ἐπίσκοπος, ἐκεῖ τὸ πλῆθος ἦτω<sup>44</sup>, ὡσπερ ὅπου ἂν ᾖ Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, ἐκεῖ ἡ καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία.

Wherever the bishop appears, there let the congregation be; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church.

As de Halleux has noted, the rhetorical structure of this text consists of two colons, each comprised of two commas.<sup>45</sup> In English, the structure is, “Wherever A is, there [also] is B,” repeated twice to make two colons. This structure, in a single colon only, can also be seen in Matthew 18:20, whose Greek is (strangely) best translated by the old KJV:

οὗ γάρ εἰσιν δύο ἢ τρεῖς συνηγμένοι εἰς τὸ ἐμὸν ὄνομα, ἐκεῖ εἰμι ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῶν.

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

Here we should notice the “where is/there is” syntactical structure in which an adverb of place, οὗ or ὅπου, introduces one comma, then is balanced by its correlate, ἐκεῖ, and a form of the verb εἰμί. These two adverbs often go together in Greek literature, and even elsewhere in Scripture. So for example, in James 3:16 we have, “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice”; or Matthew 6:21 (paralleled in Luke 12:34),

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<sup>44</sup> The Lightfoot/Holmes edition of *The Apostolic Fathers* reads ἕστω here, a more archaic form of the same verb. The meaning is the same. Both are third person singular, present active imperatives of εἰμί.

<sup>45</sup> De Halleux, 22.

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”; or Matthew 24:28 (paralleled in Luke 17:37), “Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.”<sup>46</sup>

But in the case of Matthew 18:20, we don’t just find syntactical resemblance to Ignatius; we even find semantic, or indeed, theological resemblance. Ignatius’s parallelism between the single bishop (who personifies Christ) and the full congregation, or the singular Christ and the whole catholic church, expresses the same concept as Matthew’s notion that two individuals meeting together have Christ in their midst. Their unity is a function of the Lord’s presence with them. A similar thought is expressed in Matthew 28:19–20, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . . And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” The idea is that wherever in the world a group of Christians may be, they are united by their shared experience of the risen Christ. Ignatius simply adds that the bishop can serve as a visible locus of such unity.<sup>47</sup>

Numerous commentators have pointed out Ignatius’s familiarity with the Gospel of Matthew, which probably emerged from the Antiochian environment.<sup>48</sup> What I would like to highlight is not just Ignatius’s obvious knowledge of Matthew, but the way he seems to be

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<sup>46</sup> See also Mark 6:10 and Rev. 12:6 for other pairings of ὄπου and ἐκεῖ.

<sup>47</sup> Schoedel remarks, “The theme of unity may well represent the central concern of the letters of Ignatius.” However, for Ignatius, the bishops, presbyters, and deacons are only pictures of this unity, not mystical instantiations of it. They serve only as “true comparisons and do not indicate that the local leaders are conceived of as representatives of their heavenly counterparts or are in any way divinized.” *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary*, 21; 242–43.

<sup>48</sup> Christine Trevett notes the relevant studies of Inge (1905), Massaux (1950), Koester (1957), and Smit Sibinga (1966), the last two of which are more skeptical about Ignatius having canonical Matthew (as we know it today) before him. Yet some sort of dependence on Matthean tradition, particularly the M source(s), is difficult to deny. See Trevett, “Approaching Matthew from the Second Century: The Under-used Ignatian Correspondence,” *JSNT* 20 (1984) 59–67. A few years later, W. Schoedel summed up the matter by saying, “Under the circumstances it would seem wise to admit the possibility that Ignatius knew both the Gospel and elements of the special tradition that lay behind it,” though he admits leaning toward the more skeptical view when it comes to canonical Matthew itself (“Ignatius and the Reception of Matthew in Antioch” in *Social History of the Matthean Community: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches*, ed. D.L. Balch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 175–77. David Sim believes Ignatius certainly did know canonical Matthew, but he only sees hostile opposition rather than appreciative influence between the two. “Matthew and Ignatius of Antioch” in *Matthew and His Christian Contemporaries*, LNTS 333, ed. D.C. Sim and B. Reepschinski (London: T&T Clark, 2008) 153.

drawing from a distinctly Matthean ecclesiology. Recently, A. Boyd Luter and Nicholas A. Dodson have highlighted what they believe to be an “overlooked chiasm” in Matthew 16:13–18:20, forming an *inclusio* that is bookmarked by Matthew’s unique use of ἐκκλησία at either end.<sup>49</sup> This unit of text, they claim, displays a distinctly Matthean “proto-ecclesiology” which exerted a profound influence on Luke’s doctrine of the church in Acts 1–14.<sup>50</sup> Of what does this ecclesiology consist? According to Luter and Dodson, Matthew believed that Jesus would build his church outward from Jerusalem, with a strong leadership role for Peter, and with growth occurring from the making of worldwide disciples. The term ἐκκλησία refers to the church gathered for worship, while the interchangeable term μαθηταὶ (disciples) refers to the church scattered for evangelistic ministry.<sup>51</sup> The authors conclude, “Matthew has considerably more to say about the ἐκκλησία Jesus promised to build than has heretofore been developed within the wider framework of an acknowledged biblical theology of the Church.”<sup>52</sup>

Whether or not there is a literary chiasm in this part of Matthew is beside the point. All I am wanting to say with regard to *Smyrnaeans* 8.2 is that Ignatius very well could have had a mental framework derived from Matthean circles in Antioch, in which the church was a worldwide entity made up of many disciples united in Christ, and which was led by singular, lynchpin figures who represented Christ in the community’s midst. Conceptually, this idea was present in Ignatius’s ecclesiological setting. It wasn’t something he produced out of thin air, but

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<sup>49</sup> Boyd Luter and Nicholas Dodson, “Hidden in Plain View: An Overlooked Chiasm in Matt 16:13–18:20,” *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 27 (2014) 3–17.

<sup>50</sup> A. Boyd Luter and Nicholas A. Dodson, “‘Matthean Theological Priority?’ Making Sense of Matthew’s Proto-Ecclesiology in Acts 1–14,” *SwJT* 61:1 (Fall 2018) 63–74.

<sup>51</sup> Luter and Dodson, “Matthean,” 71–72.

<sup>52</sup> Luter and Dodson, “Hidden,” 36.

was a natural byproduct of the church environment he already knew.<sup>53</sup> Yet the question remains: Why would Ignatius choose the word *καθολικός* to describe it?

## The Terminology of Catholicity in the New Testament

It is time to consider this word more closely. The original term *καθόλου* is a Greek adverb meaning “on the whole,” “generally,” “completely,” or “whatsoever.” This latter meaning is the way the word functions in its lone New Testament occurrence. In Acts 4:18, the apostles are warned by the Jewish authorities “not to speak or teach *at all* [or, *whatsoever*] in the name of Jesus.” The related Greek adjective *καθολικός* means “general” or “universal.” As a substantive, it could designate a person in charge of financial accounts, i.e., a treasurer.<sup>54</sup> By at least the first century AD, this Greek word had come over into Latin as the noun *catholicum*, and eventually it took the adjectival form *catholicus* and the adverbial form *catholice* as well.<sup>55</sup> Because of the widespread Christian adoption of this terminology, the word cluster went on in later Latin to have many church-related nuances such as wholeness, worldwide totality, unity under the pope, and doctrinal orthodoxy. One uniquely Christian usage is the noun *catholica* to designate the catholic church.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Schoedel remarks, “The church that is thus both set apart from the world and subtly linked with it is for Ignatius the whole church. Ignatius is the first to use the term ‘catholic’ to describe its universality (Sm 8.2) . . . He reflects the imagery of the cosmic ‘body’ to describe the church (Sm 1.2; cf. Eph 4.2; Tr 11.2). And he knows that the geographically separated churches are manifestations of one transcendent reality” (“Ignatius and the Reception,” 139).

<sup>54</sup> The *καθολικός* was equivalent to the political position created by Augustus known as the *procurator a rationibus*. See *LSJ*, 855.

<sup>55</sup> The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (285) lists only the noun *catholicum*, “a general principle,” with some first or early second century attestations, while C.T. Lewis & C. Short (*A Latin Dictionary*, 301) and A. Souter (*A Glossary of Later Latin to 600 A.D.*, 43) both give the adjectival and adverbial forms as well. Examples of the latter forms are generally from the late second century onward.

<sup>56</sup> In addition to Souter, 43, see A. Blaise, *Dictionnaire Latin-Français des Auteurs Chrétiens*, 139.

The etymology of καθόλου is instructive for us. It is made up of the preposition κατά changed to καθ’ in front of the noun ὅλος in the genitive. So we have καθ’+ ὅλου = καθόλου, or literally, “pertaining to the whole.” It is here, hidden in this etymology, that I believe we can find a New Testament basis for the concept of catholicity. By this I do not mean the theological idea of a universal or worldwide church, the cosmic “body” whose head is Christ like we see in Ephesians or Colossians.<sup>57</sup> That is its own worthy subject and is certainly relevant; but it isn’t what I propose to discuss here. Instead, I would like to focus specifically on instances where the Scriptures juxtapose ἐκκλησία and ὅλος, giving us the idea of the “whole church.” Although the TDNT entry for ὅλος confidently declares that this word is “theologically significant only in a few instances,”<sup>58</sup> none of which relate to the church, I beg to differ. I believe that this concept lends itself—when conjoined with the high Pauline ecclesiology I just mentioned, and/or the Matthean ecclesiology discussed earlier—to a view of the church that Ignatius of Antioch could have known.<sup>59</sup> So, too, could any of the church fathers after him who were intimately familiar with the nuances of the New Testament’s original language. They were hearing something important in the language of the “whole church.”

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<sup>57</sup> E.g., Eph. 1:22–23; 4:4–6; 4:15–16; 5:23; Col. 1:18, 24. See also Romans 12:4–5; 1 Cor. 12:12–27.

<sup>58</sup> Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. G.W. Bromiley, vol. V (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 174. The only usage of ὅλος that the article writer finds important is the wholeness of the human body in the Gospels.

<sup>59</sup> This is not to say that the Matthean and Pauline communities had exactly the same ecclesiology. And they certainly did not have the same soteriology. David C. Sim argues that “Matthew belonged to the Law-observant stream of the Christian tradition that had not broken with Judaism and which opposed the Law-free Pauline tradition, while Ignatius represented the Pauline version of the Christian message and saw no compatibility whatsoever between the Christian tradition and the practice of Judaism” (“Matthew and Ignatius,” 139). This seems to reflect an overly factionalized and rigid view of early Christianity, rather than taking into account its fluidity and diversity. We should expect there to be at least some degree of theological overlap between different interpretive communities. Yet to the extent that Sim’s remark rings true, we can still note that our present discussion is more about the nature of the Christian church *after* believers have come into Christ, not the specific means by which people may have entered this community. When it comes to describing the church as unified and worldwide through shared life in the Savior, certain themes in Paul cohere well with those found in Matthew, even if their respective soteriologies may have differed substantially.

There are four times when *ἐκκλησία* and *ὅλος* are conjoined in the New Testament to describe all the followers of the Lord in a single city. The Christians are taken as an entire group, acting in concert or possessing unity of spirit or attitude. Sometimes, specific pastoral leaders are mentioned along with the everyday people, all of whom are lumped together as the “whole.” Because in these earliest times we cannot speak of a single Christian congregation at one place within a city, but more of an intertwined Jesus movement with cell groups meeting in various neighborhoods, the emphasis isn’t on a strictly localized congregation but on the totality of Christians in a given urban environment. These four important biblical texts are represented in the following chart:

Reference	Text	Comments
Acts 5:11	“And great fear came upon <b>the whole church</b> and upon all who heard of these things.”	The context is the Jerusalem Christians who feared the Ananias and Sapphira incident.
Acts 15:22	“Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with <b>the whole church</b> , to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.”	The setting here is the so-called Jerusalem Council.
Romans 16:23	“Gaius, who is host to me and to <b>the whole church</b> , greets you.”	The entire Corinthian church is included in this statement. It is even possible that the term may include Gaius’s hospitality to worldwide Christian travelers from abroad. <sup>60</sup>
1 Cor. 14:23	“If, therefore, <b>the whole church</b> comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?”	Here again, the entire Corinthian community is taken as a whole, having assembled together in one place. <sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Edward Adams, *The Earliest Christian Meeting Places: Almost Exclusively Houses?*, LNTS 450, ed. J.M.G. Barclay (London: T&T Clark, 2013) 27–29. If Gaius’s hospitality was extended to Christians from distant parts of the empire who were passing through Corinth, this would be a very expansive nuance to the term, “the whole church”—a fact that James Dunn recognized, causing him to deny the “hospitality to travelers” view (see Adams’s discussion in the pages noted above).

<sup>61</sup> Would it have been possible for the entire Christian community in Corinth to meet in one physical setting? Adams argues convincingly that 1 Cor. 14:23 “implies that at other times, probably more frequently, the believers in Corinth gathered in smaller groups,” including “in shops, workshops, and perhaps other non-house settings” as well as personal residences. However, due to spatial considerations (i.e., the need to accommodate 100 to 150 persons or more) and certain sociological factors, the whole-church gathering mentioned in this verse, which included the shared Christian meal, likely would not have occurred in a private home. Instead, it could have taken place in a rented dining facility, a barn, or a large garden. See Adams, *Earliest*, 24–30; 203–06.

In addition to these urban references, there are two times when “the whole church” is characterized in the New Testament as being regional. First, in Acts 9:31 we read, “So the *church throughout all* Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.” This text is important for several reasons. Not only does it identify the church as an entity which can transcend urban and even provincial lines, stretching to a distance of approximately 200 miles from north to south, it also emphasizes such “catholic” themes as unity in the Spirit, the believers’ shared growth in the Lord, and their evangelistic expansion.

But beyond this, the terminology itself is interesting for our purposes. Luke’s expression is, of all things, [ἡ] ἐκκλησία καθ’ ὅλης. Do we not have here—rather than in Ignatius of Antioch—the first hidden mention of the “catholic church”? I recognize that the genitive feminine adjective ὅλης modifies “Judea and Galilee and Samaria,” not ἐκκλησία. This isn’t the adjective καθολικός here, and it is rightly translated, “the church throughout all of” the named regions. Even so, this point must at least be noticed: the Bible does use καθ’ + ὅλος to describe the regional unity of the ἐκκλησία. It is a subtle locution that could be remembered by someone like Ignatius of Antioch, or other ancient readers of the Greek New Testament.

Our second regional reference comes from the opening salutation of 2 Cor. 1:1–2: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints *who are in the whole of* Achaia [uh KAI uh] : Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Here again, we see the typical “catholic” themes of harmony and peace across a wide regional area. Admittedly, the word ὅλος is quite distant from ἐκκλησία; and as before, it does not modify it. Instead, the “church of God at

Corinth” joins in spiritual unity “with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia” (σὺν τοῖς ἁγίοις πᾶσιν τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ Ἀχαΐᾳ). Although this is not as clear of a reference to catholicity as the preceding example, nonetheless, it still offers a supra-urban description of the Christian church experiencing peaceful harmony across a “whole” region.

Wholeness, then, is a biblical mark of the church. As I have said already, we could tease out the more universal and cosmic ecclesiology in the Bible, but that is not my purpose here. Let us simply assume that the concept of church oneness exists in Scripture, and focus our attention instead on the terminology of wholeness.

## **Conclusion**

Allow me to conclude by now tracing the key terms forward instead of backward, moving from the New Testament to the eight century. We see that from the beginning, ἡ ἐκκλησία ὅλη is both an urban and regional union of believers in Christ. In fact, according to the Great Commission, the church is to be worldwide. Where even two or three believers are gathered in the sacred name, there is Christ in the midst of them. This Matthean ecclesiology, and maybe even the verse itself, would have been familiar to Ignatius of Antioch. Perhaps his remembrance of the biblical word ὅλος prompted him to employ the word καθολικός to describe the church’s universality, grounded in the Lord Jesus himself. In any case, Ignatius did choose to use that term, which was a common enough way to describe wholeness in his day.

With that precedent set, other second and third century writers picked up the same theme. By the fourth century, the concept was so widespread that various baptismal creeds began to add the word “catholic” to the already existing formula of “holy church.” This practice really took off

in the fifth century, especially in Spain and southern Gaul. And it was precisely this environment which formed and shaped St. Pirmin, so that by the eighth century when he recorded what he believed to be the creed laid down by the apostles, he could not help but include the concept of ecclesial catholicity because of the long pedigree behind it. From there, the Textus Receptus of the Apostles' Creed has reached our modern churches.

This unbroken line, from the Bible through Late Antiquity to the *sanctam ecclesiam catholicam* of the Textus Receptus, and from there to our modern pews, should give us pause when we are tempted to look askance at reciting the word "catholic" on Sunday. It isn't something that must be excised from our liturgical books or blotted from our church bulletins. Somber warnings about its lurking dangers do not need to be issued to the faithful. Instead, the word is biblical in its orientation and intent. Beyond this, it emphasizes a truth that is increasingly important for individualistic Christians like us to confess today: the worldwide unity of the whole people of God.

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