

Introduction:

We professed our faith this morning by reciting the Apostles' Creed. And when we did so, we confessed our faith in "...the communion of saints..."

The communion of saints is a clause that is sometimes understood in ways that we do not condone or confess. For example, the Roman Catholic Church explains the communion of saints in light of their own distinctive teaching. And so they say that the communion of saints involves the saints in heaven praying for us here on earth; or us on earth praying for the dead who are in purgatory; or that we can pray to the saints in heaven and ask them to intercede for us.

Now all that is wrong and unbiblical. We do not pray for the dead. And the dead do not pray for us. And there is no such thing as purgatory. There is a sense in which we do have communion with saints who have died and gone to be with the Lord; but that communion does not involve praying for one another. In other words, the communion we have with them is different and is worked out differently from the communion we have with one another here on earth.

So when we confess faith in the communion of the saints, we are not confessing unbiblical views or the Roman Catholic understanding of this clause.

What then are we saying when we confess "the communion of the saints?" What do we believe the Bible teaches concerning the communion of the saints? That is what we want to look at tonight. And I want to begin with the foundation.

The foundation of the communion of the saints is our communion with Christ.

Paul often refers to Christians as saints. The word saint literally means "holy one." And to be holy means set apart or consecrated to God. The Temple was holy because it was set apart for worshipping God and as God's dwelling place. Christians are set apart from the common, the world, and belong to God. They are holy. They are saints.

And what is more we are holy in that we are sanctified or changed. We who were dead in sins are made alive. We who were unclean are now clean. We who had a heart of stone, now have a heart of flesh. We have re-created. We are internally or personally holy. Not perfectly, obviously. But one day we will.

Now we are saints and holy ones because we are united to Christ. He is the holy one and we are made holy in him. We are joined to Christ. We are the branches and he is the vine.

Another and more common expression that Paul uses to describe the Christian is "in Christ." A Christian is someone who is in Christ. A saint is in Christ. We are joined or united to Christ such that we share or participate in and with him.

Paul says that we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:10); possessors of eternal life in Christ (Rom. 6:23); justified in Christ (8:1); glorified in Christ (Rom. 8:30; 2 Cor. 3:18); sanctified in Christ (1 Cor. 1:2); called in Christ (v. 9); made alive in Christ (15:22; Eph. 2:5); created anew in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17); adopted as children of God in Christ (Gal. 3:26); and elected in Christ (Eph. 1:4).

1 Cor. 1: 30: “And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.”

Since we are in Christ; we rise and fall with Christ. We died with Christ and we were raised with Christ.

In 1 Cor. 10 Paul says that when we partake of the Lord’s Supper we participate in the body and blood of Christ. The word participate means to commune or fellowship or share in. We share in the body and blood of Christ. We experience and participate in the work of Christ. We are in Christ and share in his death and resurrection. His blood cleanses us from all sin.

This is why WCF 26 “Of the Communion of Saints” begins by saying that “All saints that are united to Christ their Head by his Spirit and by faith have fellowship with him in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory.”

We are in Christ and so we stand and fall with him. What happens to him, happens to us and vice versa.

Now is it precisely because we as saints are in Christ and united to him and have communion with him that we have communion with one another: the communion of the saints.

I am not the only one united to Christ. We all are. Christ has one body and one bride. And we all together are members of that one body and one bride. By virtue of our communion with Christ, we have communion with one another.

The foundation of the communion of the saints is communion with Christ.

But what saints? Saints on earth or saints in heaven or both?

Communion with saints in heaven.

Christians who have died and gone to be with the Lord are still part of the one body of Christ. They too are in Christ. We are one with them in that sense. And one day we will join them when it comes our turn to die and we all will be raised together on the Last Day and enter glory together. We share the same Christ, the same salvation, the same hope and the same future. We are all part of the family of God.

Also, it is true to say that we worship where they are.

Heb. 12:22-23 says that we in the NT, when we worship we come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.

The phrase “the spirits of the righteous made perfect” refers to all the saints who have died and entered into the presence of the Lord in heaven.

And one of the points that the author of Hebrews makes throughout his book is how the NT is so much better than the OT. And in part it is better because we in the NT worship at the real tabernacle or temple in heaven. In the OT they worshiped at the copy of the real one in heaven. The earthly temple in earthly Jerusalem was patterned after the one in heaven; and so it was only a copy of the original.

Now that Christ has come, we by the Spirit worship at the true dwelling place of God in heaven, which is where departed saints are.

And so in that sense we can say that we have communion with them. We enter into God's presence where they are. The difference is that we do so here on earth by the Spirit; but they are disembodied spirits made perfect who are in the immediate presence of God.

So then in these senses it is true to say that we have communion with the saints who have died and are in heaven. We are one with them and we are all one in Christ. And that of course creates an everlasting bond and relationship.

And so the 17th Dutch theologian Wilhelmus a Brakel rightly says, "Believers on earth acknowledge the glorified saints as their brothers and sisters. They love them, highly esteem them, follow their conversation [walk or lifestyle] upon earth, join them, jointly bowing before the throne with them, giving honor and glory to the Lord, and longing to be with them in the state of perfection."

But again, none of this means that they are praying for us; or we are to worship them in any way; or that we are to pray for them.

We can be inspired by the race they ran on earth by God's grace; we can look forward to seeing them again in glory; but we do not minister to them or intercede for them as we do or at least as we ought to do so for the saints who are with us on the earth.

The communion of saints works itself differently, obviously, for saints living together here. So let us turn our attention to that aspect of the communion of the saints.

Communion with saints on earth.

One aspect of the communion of the saints is, as WCF 26.1 puts it, we have communion in each other's gifts and graces.

In 1 Cor. Paul rebukes the church for their party spirit. In chapter 1 he mentions how some were of Paul, others of Apollos, still others of Peter; and of course the most pious of all, those who were of Christ. Part of their problem was that they failed to realize that we all belong to one another; and that we are all servants of God and of one another. He says, "So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's."

In 1 Cor. 12 Paul discusses the different gifts of the Spirit that the Spirit distributes among believers. And in vs. 7 he says that "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." The Spirit gives us gifts to help one another. We are members of one body. But we are not all the same part or member of the one body. We are different and have various gifts, which we are to exercise for the welfare of the whole body: for the common good.

We are to share in each other's gifts. The same is true of our graces. Our growth in grace is not only for our own well-being, it is so we can be a blessing to others. Indeed we have an obligation, a duty to exercise our gifts and graces for the good of the saints of God.

There are over 50 “one another” passages in the NT; which call us to use our gifts and graces for others; for the common good; for the saints.

Be at peace with one another; love one another; honor one another; instruct one another; serve another; be patient, bearing with one another in love; forgive one another; admonish one another; carry each other’s burdens; encourage one another; pray for one another; spur one another on towards love and good deeds; exhort one another; and so on.

In Rom. 12 Paul says that having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them...if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

This aspect of the communion of saints ought to help prevent jealousy, envy and selfish ambition in the church of Christ. We all belong together and we are all to serve one another. It doesn’t matter who God uses to bless someone else. It doesn’t have to be you. Rejoice with those who rejoice. If God uses someone else to teach or to encourage or build up praise God.

Likewise, we shouldn’t have sectarian parties or politics in the church. It should never be us and them; but both of us. We shouldn’t be I am of Tim Keller; I am of R.C. Sproul; and so on. All are Christ’s and so all are ours. I believe in the communion of the saints.

Sean’s trip to Wyoming: a young lady was physically unable to finish the trip. Two choices: evac her out or the rest of the group carry her gear. The group chose the latter and she was able to complete the long trip. They literally carried one another’s burdens.

Another aspect of the communion of saints is that we are to look out for one another’s physical needs.

WCF 26.2: “Saints, by profession, are bound to maintain a holy fellowship and communion...in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities.”

God is not just concerned about our souls; he is concerned about our bodies as well. After all, he created them and he has redeemed them in Christ so that we will one day rise from the dead. God is concerned for our physical welfare; and so we should exercise that same concern for one another.

John makes that point quite forcefully in his first epistle. He says that we are love one another not only in word but in deed. And if anyone has the world’s goods and see his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?

In Acts 2 we learn that the early Christians devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers. They even shared their belongings and sold their possessions so that they could help those in need (Acts 2:42-45).

The church is a community and a communion. They commune together. They share together.

But of course there is an important distinction between communion and communism. God does not command us to live in communes and share everything so that no one owns anything.

This is evident by the fact that one of the Ten Commandments says, “Do not steal.” You can’t steal in a collectivist world because there is no private property. Also God tells us to work so that we might have

something to share with others. Again you can't give to others if you don't have anything that is your own.

Peter told Ananias that he didn't have to sell his property and he didn't have to give the money from the sale to the church. He was within his God-given right to keep the money.

Communion of the saints is not communism.

WCF 26.3 says that the communion we have with one another as saints does not "take away or infringe the title or property which each man hath in his goods and possessions."

Still another aspect of our communion is in worship.

WCF 26.2: "Saints, by profession, are bound to maintain a holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God..."

We worship the same God together; we partake of the same sacrament together. Indeed, the Lord's Supper signifies and seals, not only our communion with Christ, but also our communion with one another.

We are not to neglect meeting together (Heb. 10:25).

In Heb. 12, the author says that in NT worship we come to "the church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven." This means that we join with other believers around the world as we worship in the same place (the true temple in heaven) and the same God.

Conclusion:

"I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints..."