

Outline

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Communion of Saints

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## THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

### Introduction

The expression "the communion of saints" in the Apostles' Creed follows the confession "I believe one holy catholic Christian church." The words "communion of saints" are a further explanation of the church. These words teach us what the church is, as well as what she ought to be, namely the communion of saints. The saints are the children of God set apart by the Lord so that they may serve Him. These saints have communion, and that is what the church is all about. In this section we will look at how the congregation functions as the communion of saints.

The expression "the communion of saints" is taken in this chapter in a broad sense. At times you notice that it is used in a limited way, e.g. helping each other in situations of need. Certainly this is an important part of the communion of saints, but it includes much more, such as, encouraging each other, admonishing each other, worshipping together, studying God's word together, etc.

### 1. Scripture

The LORD God made man to have communion with Him and with fellow human beings.

Gen 2:18

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

Scripture also teaches that after man destroyed this communion by his fall into sin, the LORD God restored it again by His work of redemption. When the LORD redeemed Israel, He redeemed them as a nation. Israel walked through the wilderness as a people. Even the order in which they had to march and how they had to be camped showed this (See e.g. Numbers 10). The Lord is redeeming a nation.

Exod 19:6

you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

This has also consequences for receiving the new land. Together the people of Israel inherited the land.

Joshua 22 : 26-27

That is why we said, 'Let us get ready and build an altar -but not for burnt offering or sacrifices.' On the contrary, it is to be a witness between us and you, and the generations that follow, that we will worship the LORD at his sanctuary with our burnt offerings, sacrifices and fellowship offerings. Then in the future your descendants will not be able to say to ours, 'You have no share in the LORD.'

Judges 1:3

Then the men of Judah said to the Simeonites their brothers, "Come up with us into the territory allotted to us, to fight against the Canaanites. We in turn will go with you into yours." So the Simeonites went with them.

Within this nation each individual has a place. The Israelites are called to care for their brothers and sisters. The LORD gives laws to preserve the communion.

Ex 21:2

"If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything.

Ex 22:25-27

"If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest. If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.

Deut 14:28-29

At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

Deut 15:11

There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.

Ps 16:3

As for the saints who are in the land, they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight.

Ps 42:4

These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng.

Ps 55:14

with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the house of God.

Ps 122:8

For the sake of my brothers and friends, I will say, "Peace be within you."

The communion showed in mutual discipline. The Israelites were called to protect the communion in making sure that the one who sins is punished, lest God's wrath comes on the whole congregation. See e.g. Deut. 13.

The Old Testament also speaks about the breakdown and rejection of this communion.

Gen 4:9

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Josh 7:1

But the Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things; Achan son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of them. So the LORD's anger burned against Israel.

Ps 10:2

In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises.

Ps 55:12-13

If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were raising himself against me, I could hide from him. But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend,

Micah 2:1-2

Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud a man of his home, a fellowman of his inheritance.

Psalm 133 sings of the beauty of the communion of saints.

Ps 133:1-3

How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!

It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes.

It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.

Christ came to restore the communion with God and with each other. Through faith in Him the communion can be enjoyed.

Matt 5:7

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Luke 8:21

He replied, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice."

John 13:13-14

"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.

The church after Pentecost put this in practice. Their communion was a fruit of obedience to the teaching of the apostles.

Acts 2:42

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Acts 2:44-45

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

The apostles continue the teaching of the O.T. The church is compared to a house. Now a house is more than the total sum of stones used. It is a structure in which each stone has its own place. So the church is a communion in which the members support, help, encourage, protect and warn each other. In this way it becomes a house. The congregation is a holy nation and a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9). The members

must care for each other. At the same time we must keep in mind that unity is not the same as uniformity. The congregation is a unity, but not a uniform group of people. The Holy Spirit gives to each member his own talents. The talents are to be used for the well-being of the whole congregation. The Bible uses the example of a body. It consists of many members, each with a different function. All these different members function together in the body. They need each other and support each other. We receive salvation within the communion of saints. (Hebrews 11:40: "that apart from us they should not be made perfect.") The Bible does not know of a dilemma between corporate and individual as if we had to choose the one or the other. They go together and complement each other. As a member of His body I have communion with Him and with the other members.

Rom 12:4-5

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

Rom 12:13

Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

1 Cor 12:26-27

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

2 Cor 8:14-15

At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

Phil 2:4-7

Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

1 Pet 5:5

All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

James 1:27

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

James 2:13

because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

Also in the New Testament we read of the duty to show care for each other in admonishing when necessary. Because sin breaks down communion and drives people apart, mutual discipline is a gift from the Lord to protect the communion of saints. The rule which the Lord Jesus gave in Matthew 18 has as aim that we do not lose each other. The communion of saints is so precious that it needs to be protected against the destructive power of sin. The easiest thing to do is desert leave the one who is sinning, and let him be in his sin. However, the Lord wants us to care for each other. The communion we have shows in admonishing one another in a brotherly manner. The expression "bear one another's burdens" in Gal.6:1-2 shows this as well. (See also part 2 - 2 Church Discipline)

Gal 6:1-2

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.

Our future is the perfect communion on the new earth.

Rev 7:9-10

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

Rev 21 :3-4

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

## 2. Confessions, Church Order, Forms

### 2.1. Apostles' Creed

The Apostles' Creed connects the communion of saints to the church and mentions it in the section about God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification. This communion is a gift of God and comes about through the preaching of the gospel and by the powerful working of the Holy Spirit. The new life we may live as redeemed people we live in communion with God and our brothers and sisters. We receive this new life within the communion of the saints. We may even say that this communion is a tool to sanctify the life of the believers.

I believe one holy catholic Christian Church, the communion of saints

### 2.2. Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession brings out that we are duty bound to be joined to the church, and this also means to serve the edification of the brothers and sisters. Participating in the communion is an obligation.

Article 28

We believe, since this holy assembly and congregation is the assembly of the redeemed and there is no salvation outside of it, that no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, no matter what his state or quality may be. But all and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with it, maintaining the unity of the Church. They must submit themselves to its instruction and discipline, bend their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and serve the edification of the brothers and sisters, according to the talents which God has given them as members of the same body.

To observe this more effectively, it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate from those who do not belong to the Church and to join this assembly wherever God has established it. They should do so even though the rulers and edicts of princes were against it, and death or physical punishment might follow.

All therefore who draw away from the Church or fail to join it act contrary to the ordinance of God.

### 2.3. Heidelberg Catechism

The Catechism brings out very beautifully that the relationship with the other members is founded in and motivated by the relationship with Christ. We should never separate the unity we have in Christ from the unity we have with each other. It also brings out our calling in regard to discipline to protect the communion.

Q/A 55

What do you understand by *the communion of the saints*?

First, that believers, all and everyone, as members of Christ have communion with Him and share in all His treasures and gifts.

Second, that everyone is duty-bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members.

Q/A 82

Are those also to be admitted to the Lord's supper who by their confession and life show that they are unbelieving and ungodly?

No, for then the covenant of God would be profaned and His wrath kindled against the whole congregation.

Therefore, according to the command of Christ and His apostles, the Christian church is duty-bound to exclude such persons by the keys of the kingdom of heaven, until they amend their lives.

Q/A 85.

How is the kingdom of heaven closed and opened by church discipline?

According to the command of Christ, people who call themselves Christians but show themselves to be unchristian in doctrine or life are first repeatedly admonished in a brotherly manner. If they do not give up their errors or wickedness, they are reported to the church, that is, to the elders. If they do not heed also their admonitions, they are forbidden the use of the sacraments, and they are excluded by the elders from the Christian congregation, and by God Himself from the kingdom of Christ. They are again received as members of Christ and of the church when they promise and show real amendment.

Q/A 111.

What does God require of you in this (eighth) commandment?

I must promote my neighbour's good wherever I can and may, deal with him as I would like others to deal with me, and work faithfully so that I may be able to give to those in need.

### 2.4. Church Order

The communion of saints is connected to the work of the deacons and is protected by mutual discipline.

**Art. 23 Deacons**

The specific duties of the office of deacon are to see to the good progress of the service of charity in the congregation; to acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties and exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy ... and promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord."

**Art. 66 Church Discipline**

... which (=church discipline administered in a spiritual manner) can be done only when the rule given by our Lord in Matthew 18:15-17 is followed in obedience.

**2.5. Forms****Form for Public Profession of faith**

Fourth, do you firmly resolve to commit your whole life to the Lord's service as a living member of His church?

**Form for Lord's Supper**

By the same Spirit we are also united in true brotherly love as members of one body. For the apostle Paul says, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. As one bread is baked out of many grains and one wine is pressed out of many grapes, so we all incorporated in Christ by faith, are together one body. For the sake of Christ, who now so exceedingly loved us first, we shall now love one another, and shall show this to one another not just in words but also in deeds."

**Forms for Excommunication and Readmission****Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons****The Ministry of Mercy**

...the Lord impressed upon His people Israel the obligation to show mercy to the needy ....

They shall promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord. In this way God's children will increase in love to one another and to all men.

**Form for Marriage****The Duties of Marriage**

Work faithfully in your daily calling, that you may support your family and also help those in need.

**3. Goal**

For the sake of Christ, who so exceedingly loved us first, we shall now love one another, and shall show this to one another not just in words but also in deeds. The task of the overseers is to make the congregation aware of the treasures we have in Christ and to encourage them to use these readily and cheerfully for the wellbeing and benefit of the other members.

**4. Communion of Saints and Lord's Supper**

The Apostles' Creed uses the expression "the communion of saints" as a further explanation of the church. The church is and ought to be the communion of saints. It is both a gift and a calling. This is what we learn from the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The Lord Supper shows the unity we have with Christ, for we eat His true body and drink His true blood. The Lord's Supper also shows that we have communion with each other, for we drink together. We eat from one bread and we share a cup. Rejoicing in God's redemption is not something you do by yourself but together with others. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is therefore a wonderful reminder of our bond with Christ and with each other. It also strengthens this bond.

## 5. Evaluation

1. The discussion can deal with the Scriptural and confessional basis for this work, as well as the goal of it. Do we all agree on this? Are there points that have been overlooked?
2. In evaluating the functioning of the communion of saints two things can be asked:
  - Do the members of the congregation see the basis of this communion in Christ's work of redemption?
  - Do the members of the church use their gifts for the well-being of the other members? Of course, the question is also how we as office-bearers help the congregation in this?
3. This can be worked out into the following questions:
  - Are the members aware of the gift of the communion of saints?
  - Is this gift explained in the preaching and teaching?
  - Is the celebration of the Lord's Supper seen as a means to strengthen and direct the communion?
  - How do members help each other?
  - Do all members participate in the communion?
  - Are those in special circumstances remembered, helped and visited?
  - Do new comers feel at home in our midst?
  - Is there a tendency of peer pressure in the congregation?
  - Do the lonely, elderly, or handicapped receive attention?
  - Do the members see their calling to admonish if necessary?
  - How does the rule of Matthew 18 function?
4. We can also look at certain specific areas. Members can be overlooked or fall between the cracks. Do members make an effort to get to know the other members? There is always the danger that we make our own groups and forget about others. Are we aware of this? Do we warn against this? Do we teach this to our children? If a congregation consists family clans, then we should watch that the involvement in the immediate family hinders the involvement in the congregation.
5. Most congregations have a committee in the congregation that arranges help for those in need. Often the sisters are involved in this work. But it need not be restricted to them. Such a committee would do well to have a good relationship with the Deacons. The purpose of these care committees is to organize help when needed. The committee members should not do all the work themselves, but ask and encourages other to help out. This help by a committee should never go at the expense of the individual initiative in the congregation.
6. Are there points in this chapter that need our further attention? Why? How shall we do this?
7. Are there any concerns that need to be addressed as a result of this evaluation?  
What are these concerns?  
Why are they a concern?  
What plan of action could be taken to address this?

