

I Believe The Communion Of Saints

Heidelberg Catechism

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We read from the Scriptures this morning as we find it in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Philippians. We read a part of chapter 1 and of chapter 2. We're going to start to read at verse 19 of chapter 1. He had just spoken of the fact that some preached Christ, verse 15, out of envy and strife, some out of good will, but then he says, notwithstanding, verse 18,

18 ... every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice. 19 For I know that this shall turn to my salvation through your prayer, and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, 20 According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death. 21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. 23 For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: 24 Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you. 25 And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith; 26 That your rejoicing may be more abundant in Jesus Christ for me by my coming to you again. 27 Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; 28 And in nothing terrified by your adversaries: which is to them an evident token of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that of God. 29 For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake; 30 Having the same conflict which ye saw in me, and now hear to be in me.

1 If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, 2 Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. 3 Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. 4 Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. 5 Let

this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: 7 But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: 8 And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. 9 Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: 10 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; 11 And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

We stop in our reading at that point.

Our Savior on the night that he instructed them about his departure and the coming of the Holy Spirit, concluded his speech with a prayer, and near the end of that prayer in John 17, Jesus said this, "Neither pray I for these [the disciples who were with him] alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me." Did you see Jesus twice said, "Unbelievers will know that I am divine, that thou hast sent me, not by looking and hearing me but by seeing the fruit of my work in that those whom I save are one and conduct themselves as one."

When Paul begins his applications of all the doctrinal truths that he presented in the first 11 chapters, he starts chapter 12 by beseeching them, just like he does in Ephesians 4:1, that "you present your bodies as living sacrifices." What does he mean by a living sacrifice? Verse 2, "that you don't be conformed to the world," don't act like them, "but are transformed by the renewing of your mind." Now what's that transforming? What does it mean not to be conformed to the world? Verse 3, "I say through the grace given unto me to every man that is among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think but to think soberly according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith." In 1 Corinthians 1:10, "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." He concludes his second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13, verse 11, "Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you." In Ephesians 4, here is your calling that fits with what it is to be called unto salvation, you endeavoring to guard, keep, that is, to guard, the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace until we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect, that is, a complete man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. And finally in 1 Peter 3:8. The apostle is inspired to write, "Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous."

Lord's Day 21 Question and Answer 55,

Q. 55. What is to be understood by "the communion of saints"?

A. First, that all and every one who believes, being members of Christ, are, in common, partakers of Him and of all His riches and gifts; secondly, that every one must know it to be his duty, readily and cheerfully to employ his gifts, for the advantage and salvation of other members.

We saw last week that one of the attributes of the church organism, the body of Christ, is that it is one. "I believe an holy catholic and apostolic church." This unity is a Spirit-given reality and so now if we understand what the church is, then we understand that the Holy Spirit who gave us the church also gives us the communion of saints.

The communion of saints has a history, that history is, first, what God did when he created in Adam the father of the whole human race. So in Acts 17, the Apostle Paul speaking on the Acropolis, talking to people who don't know the Old Testament Scriptures at all, and he says of them this, "God hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed and the bounds of their habitation." That first part of verse 26, God hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on the face of the earth, that unity that God created in Adam, the devil thinking to get the whole human race on his side, destroyed that unity. He thought that if he got Adam, he got the whole human race on his side. And he did but being as selfish and self-seeking as he is, he fell because he wanted to be equal with God, not just a creature. He destroyed that unity so that now, just like the devil, all of those who fell in Adam are self-seekers, self-focused, self-interested.

When God took that unity that the devil created or occasioned rather by the fall, then what God did was divide. God created them united, the devil took them all, now they're all united in him, in his self-serviceness, but now God took them and divided them. He put enmity, hatred, between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. That seed of the serpent you can hardly call a unity because, again, they can only conduct themselves in a hateful and hating one another attitude, but those that God called the seed of the woman are those that now are the new unit or unity in the promised seed of the woman.

Sin became the occasion for division among the human race that fell in Adam because, 1., sin destroyed the unity with God. God created that unity with Adam and there was a unity there that God had with Adam and Adam with God, but sin destroyed that so that now Romans 8:7, the carnal mind, the fleshly mind, is at enmity, hatred, against God, and because the unity with God is destroyed, therefore the unity with one another is also destroyed. So I was referencing a verse out of Titus, Titus 3:3, man is naturally self-centered, independent, hateful and hating one another and envious. But again, God used that hatred between the two, the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, to created that new unity.

God recreated that unity in a positive, as a positive spiritual unity and the way in which the Heidelberg Catechism, the father's caught this. Before they talked about what do we believe about the communion of saints, about what we have with one another, they said you've got to first see this, this new unity is because we're all partakers of Christ. In fact, he calls us members of Christ. Now that's familiar with us because last week we said the church consists of the body of Jesus Christ. So God took those who had been fallen in Adam, he identified them as separate from the seed of the serpent but as the seed of the woman and he made them to be partakers of Christ, of communion with him, and he's the head and all the members that he saves are in Christ. And so the language of that first part, I repeated it, we are members of Christ and therefore altogether we are partakers of him and all his riches and gifts. Of his riches and gifts. So to jump way ahead, look at each other, you've got to see somebody who's joined to Christ and every single one, we pray, are joined to Christ, and when they're joined to Christ, they partake of all of his gifts and benefits. Each one. You're united to Jesus Christ.

That unity involves only those that are chosen in Christ but involves all of those that are chosen in Christ. Here's the steps. First, election. God put the names of all of his own in the book of life, in the Lamb's book of life. They're never erased out of it. It's as if God dipped the quill of his pen in the blood of Jesus and he wrote our names. Not the names our parents gave us but the names that he has for each one of us.

After election comes the cross, the redemption. The Lord Jesus accepted unto himself those that the Father had given him. I know I've said this before but it just is such a beautiful description. When Jesus is praying to his Father in all of John 17 and he talks about election, he never uses that word, that theological term, instead he speaks of election in a most beautiful way. He says, "Those are the ones that my Father gave to me. My Father gave them to me. And just as I and the Father are one, so when the Father gave them to me, I take them out of the Jews and I take them out of the Gentiles. I've got this fold and I'm going to get that fold and I'm going to bring them together and they're going to be one because they're all mine. And I died, I took their sins of every single one of them and for them I died. I suffered and died, I bore the hell of all of their sins and sinfulness and I lived so righteously that I could take my righteousness and have it imputed to each one of them." In Christ, in his life, he separated us and he makes peace so that the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 2 knows the difference and the tension between the Jewish Christians and the Gentiles that are becoming Christians and he says, "God broke down the wall that divided those Jews and those Gentiles. Now in Christ the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians are one in the body of Christ."

Third, election, redemption, the gift of the Spirit. The gift of the Spirit of Jesus Christ is the powerful tool and instrument that unites so that it as the body is one and hath many members and all the members of that body being many are one body, so also was Christ for his. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be a slave or whether we be a free man, and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. The Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ communicates Christ, his life, his gifts, to each one of the elect.

And so what do we call this? The communion of saints. Saints. Now remember the Canons' description of a saint, Fifth Head, First Article? All of those who are brought into communion with Jesus Christ, regenerated by his Spirit, delivered from the dominion and slavery of sin, they're delivered so that they are freed from having to sin all the time, they're able to do good because they're delivered from the dominion and slavery of sin, but not altogether, not completely yet. That's a saint. A saint still sins but he's in union with Christ, he's regenerated by his Holy Spirit and he's delivered from that control that Satan exercises over one otherwise. They all have in common, now here's where we have to be careful, not something natural, that's families, that's families and there may be a tight tie in a family but that's not the communion of saints. You can have something physical or one nation. We visited somebody in family visitation this week and there on the coffee table was a book about the United States, it's entitled, "One Nation." That's not the communion of saints and the communion of saints is not BFF, best friends. There can be very tight groups of friends, that's not the communion of saints yet. The communion of saints is to have in common the spiritual life of God's Son. So now the seven "ones" of Ephesians 4:4, 5 and 6. One faith. One hope. One Spirit. One love. One knowledge of God. One righteousness. One God and Father of all, one Lord. That's what all of the communion, all of the saints have together.

But now let's reflect a minute. Communion of saints. But what is communion with Christ? It's not a very easy concept to describe simply. The communion that we have with Christ, you have to start with that. It means that I know the love and fullness of Jesus Christ. I know his love and I know his fullness and in him, in him I have fulfillment, comfort, and peace. I may not always think of it that way, I might not always experience it as I ought, there's different measures at different times, there's seasons of richer grace the Canons speak of, but to have communion with Christ is to know his love and fullness, and in him to have, I have everything. I have fulfillment. I have comfort in every trial. And I have peace, that beautiful harmonious tranquility inside one's soul. The body may be ravaged but I've got peace.

In the unity there's diversity. The body of Jesus Christ is not the head with as many hands as the sand on the seashore and the stars in heaven. No, there is fingers, there is hands, there is arms, there is elbows, there is shoulders, there is a liver, there is kidneys, there's a stomach, there's bowels, there's nerves, all kinds of nerves and all kinds of tendons and ligaments, and bones, and blood, all different members, all different kinds, none alike. Grace does not make for uniformity. Uniformity is what you see when you see a marching band and they all wear the same uniform. It's when you see some little kids playing ball and they've got their caps and they've got their same uniforms and sometimes the parents can hardly tell, if they didn't see the number on the back of the child whose child it is because the soccer team and the basketball team, they all seem to look alike from a distance, especially if they're wearing caps. Not uniformity. It is not that everybody has to look like me, do what I do. Can you imagine if everything, there wasn't a liver? There weren't kidneys? If there wasn't the skeletal system? We're all diverse.

The diversity in the body of Jesus Christ consists of, first of all, the diversity of gifts. The diversity of gifts. Take time this afternoon, tonight, read Romans 12, there there's a list of

the diversity of gifts that are in the body. There is the gift of ruling. There's the gift of exhortation. There's the gift of giving. There's a gift of hospitality. The gift of praying, intercession. There's the gift of mercy. There's a gift of service. There's a gift of teaching. Diversity of gifts and there's the diversity in the measure of the gifts. Diversity in the measure. To some one, to some two, to some three, to some five. There is a diversity of the measure of the gifts. And sometimes each day is different, or in the age of a person it's different, but the purpose of the diversity in the unity of the body of Jesus Christ is to show the greatness of God's wisdom and the greatness of his grace, and to show us the breadth of God's love. His love can save every kind and make them fit together as one. Grace uses, grace even exalts diversity, manifesting the breadth of God's love and the entire multitude altogether of the body of Christ is constituted by the mighty mighty grace of God and manifests the riches of his grace.

If that's how we are to understand the unity of the communion of saints, how are we to live it? How are we to practice it? Here again the order in which our fathers explained the communion of saints is crucial. You don't have the Mississippi River, you don't have any river unless you first have a spring from which the water flows. So any stream often begins with, well, not always but it often can begin with a spring. Now think of it that way. The invisible, you can't see the bond that we have with Jesus Christ but that's first. That's first. That's why I repeated and tried to put it in simple words what it is to have that communion with Christ, to know his love, to know that his fullness and in him to know fulfillment and comfort and peace. It starts there. We're members of Christ. We're partakers of him and all his riches and gifts. Someone said the more I am in fellowship with God in Christ, the more I am willing to serve him by serving my fellow members. The more I am in fellowship with God in Christ, the more I am willing to serve him by serving my fellow members.

To be a partaker of Christ and his riches and benefits is to know I am forgiven. I'm forgiven. I know his love and fullness. I'm forgiven and I am righteous so that, then, we can practice that forgiveness and that righteousness in the way in which we look at each other, and that's the striking part of that second commandment that's like to the first. He didn't just say love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, mind, soul and strength, and then the second commandment, love your neighbor, he said love your neighbor as you love yourself, as you know how to see yourself the way God sees you in Christ, with Christ, knowing his love and fullness. When you know that for yourself, then you give it to the other members of the body.

So how many times did I do that a little bit differently than I've done usually? I went to all different passages of Scripture and a lot of them said be of the same mind, be of the same mind. We're going to look at that concept of the mind again tonight. You can and must control your thinking. The mind goes a million ways, someone said yesterday to me, and it goes all different without our control. God says be of same mind, get control of your mind, get control of your thinking. Don't think on these things but think on these things. Take, seize them and put a rein on them so that you can control them as they race and you can guide them into the right kind of thinking. Be of the same mind and will that is in Christ, transformed by Christ. I must not think of myself, that's the interesting way

it's phrased in Romans 12:3, more highly than I ought. I must think of myself but not more highly than I ought to think. Think soberly, and as soon as I think soberly, we're going to remember, 1., I deserve nothing but hell. I keep sinning. I can never look at myself as better than others. If I understand truly that I'm the chief of sinners, then I can't look at others as worse than me, exalting myself. No, think not of yourself more highly than you ought to think.

Then look and marvel at what it is, why did God elect? As Calvinists, unconditional election, we don't look at, God did not look ahead and see, "Well, that one's pretty good or that one's going to believe." No. God sovereignly chose unconditionally. Why did he pick me? I don't know. The closest he comes to answering that is in Deuteronomy 7 and it's because he wanted to. Period. But that electing, that saving is an additional reason for humility. Transformed by the mind of Christ, we walk humbly. He humbled himself. Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus.

So then how do we do that? We serve each other. In 1 Corinthians 12, I read part of it, 12 and 13, "by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles," then he goes on and he says this is what it means to be in the body, our comely parts are not to look at the other parts and say, "I'm prettier, I'm better," but he says let there be no schism, no division in the body but that the members should have the same care one for another. The answer to any schism, any division, is to have the same care one for another, and then he hits this part that we're kind of familiar with, whether one member suffer, one member suffers, all the members suffer with it, or one member is honored, and this is harder. It's not as hard for us to suffer with those who suffer but if somebody is honored, it's pretty easy to get jealous. But if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. "I'm so glad you could be honored."

If we want to serve one another, then we have to start with this thought: know Satan. Know that Satan delights in dividing. His self-seeking nature he imparted to all of his seed, the seed of the serpent, and they all seek their own. That's why when God created the division in the human race, only one could be a unity, the other you can't call a unit or a unity, they're just a mass of self-seekers. But that nature is my old man, our old man. Be aware of Satan's work. Hate him.

But then realize that we're saved in order to serve. Two S's, very simple: I have been saved in order to serve. Instead of exalting myself above others, the key is in lowliness and meekness. That's Ephesians 4:2, that's also Colossians 3. Remember we put on these things, put off these? Eight things to put on, two of them are lowliness of mind and meekness. No member is to be considered superfluous. No member is unnecessary.

The Belgic Confession speaks of the need to join the true church. It gives all kinds of reasons. All the members are duty bound to join and unite themselves with that true church. 1. Maintaining the unity of the church. 2. Submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof. 3. Bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ and as mutual members of the same body. Serving to the edification, the fourth reason, the last one, serving to the edification of the brethren according to the talents that God has given

them. I am saved in order to serve. I am saved and bound to join, to maintain the unity, maintain the unity, that's Ephesians 4:3, endeavoring to guard the unity of the Spirit, the unity imparted by the Spirit. The Spirit creates the unity. Our natures want to divide it. I have to endeavor, make every effort to guard what the Spirit created in the bond of peace.

Hebrews 10:25, delight in our assembling together. Delight in our assembling together. Not I don't feel like going to church. I don't feel like being with those sinners. No, delight in the assembling of ourselves together. You want to know the importance of the relationships that we have with each other? He has a very interesting way Jesus described the judgment day. He gathered them all and he separated the goats from the sheep and what did he say to them? Why did the goats get cast into everlasting damnation and why did the sheep were welcomed into the kingdom of their Father? He could've said because you believed right and you believed wrong. That would have fit. But Jesus said there's something more important, more important, this is crucial, you goats, you didn't give even a drink of cold water to one of the least of these, my brethren. You didn't serve the other members or the members that you thought were lower. And you sheep, your identity is this, now, yes, there's doctrinal rightness but in God's eye or in Jesus' perspective that which is even more important is how you conducted yourself to the least of these, my brethren. The communion of saints is of which he was speaking.

We work together. Sometimes when I hear of some injury or somebody in the hospital, then I learn more about the miraculous way in which the body all works together and I see the body of Jesus Christ pictured. There's no soloist. There are some voices that are absolutely beautiful but in the body of Christ there are no soloists. Not in God's choir. No matter how many talents they may have above the others, there is no separatists, there's no schismatics. So he says in Titus 3:10, if somebody is schismatic, that you admonish them once, maybe twice, then depart from them. There's nothing more important in the way in which we live our faith than the unity of the body.

So he gives all the different ways in which the different gifts are in existence in 1 Corinthians 12. All kinds of gifts, diversities of gifts. Apostles, or all prophets, teachers, workers of miracles, have all the gifts of healing, speaking in tongues, do all interpret, covet earnestly the best gifts. But I want to show you the better way, now it's the more excellent way, though I speak with the tongues of men and angels and I have not charity, I don't love, I am just two pots banging together, sounding brass and tinkling cymbal. Though I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and though I have all faith so that I could remove mountains and I don't have love, I am nothing.

So the manner in which we guard the unity of the Spirit is with all lowliness and meekness, and then never forgetting that we live in the body with people who sin. They're saints but they're still sinning and when they sin they're going to hurt me. Forbearing with longsuffering and forbearing one another, the last two words, in love. Longsuffering and forbearing one another in love, what is that love? That I value and learn to value you as God values me in Christ.

So knowing what I've been given, I look and see what you've been given with me and I see Jesus, but sometimes there's conflict and controversy so he writes about that in Philippians 4 and he says in every conflict you have to remember that their names are written in the Lamb's book of life too, and you have to remember not to stop rejoicing in the Lord always, and you have to make sure you let the peace of God rule in your hearts, and then instead of detailing all the things that they do wrong, think on these things, whatsoever things in them are true, whatsoever things in them are honest, whatsoever things in them are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are... Are you getting sick of hearing how many? No, we may not. Whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, if there be any praise, think on these things in them. "Yes, Lord, I've got to work on that." And then respond to him who occasions the conflicts and not to the people.

Then we taste that which every time I visited Chris and Ed, she speaks of it and he too, what it is to get a card, and know that just like them, they stood in that aisle or they picked out that card that just had the right words but it's what you add in it, that they read that first. A verse, a thought, and they say, "I'm not walking alone. I'm surrounded. I've got fellow saints who walk with me." Then we taste and see the goodness of the communion of saints, then we see God's love because through each other we show God's love and with each other and through each other we receive the evidence of God's love, and thus we're strengthened both in exercising the gifts that he gives to us for others, and in receiving them from others. When we rest on each other, then we're sustained and encouraged and then we together participate in the praise and glory of God and his grace.

What a God to save anyone. What a God to blend us together as he does in the one body of his Son. Amen.

Bless thy word, we beseech thee, Father. Bring these truths to us so that we become more active in understanding and practicing by faith these beautiful activities that thou dost perform in and through us. For Jesus' sake. Amen.