

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Living in Fellowship with the People of God



Edited by

PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN

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PR

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Preface

Americans have started bowling alone. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, bowling was among the nation's most popular team sports, with almost 10 percent of Americans participating in a bowling league. This may not seem significant, especially to nonbowlers; however, Harvard professor Robert Putnam thinks it symbolizes an important shift in American culture. In a book entitled *Bowling Alone*, Putnam shows that by almost every measure, participation in civic life is at a record low. Socially and politically, Americans are less connected than ever.¹

Even church attendance is down, having declined by as much as 10 percent in recent decades. And those who do attend seem to have less and less time to commit to their congregation's worship and ministry. Church has become a place we go rather than a community to which we belong. Yet the truth is that there is no such thing as private Christianity—Christianity without the active communion of the saints. As Charles Colson has argued,

Christians who understand their personal identity as followers of Christ will not make a widespread difference in the decline and decay around us—unless we have a high view of our corporate identity as the body of Christ. . . . Christianity is not a solitary belief system. Any genuine resurgence of Christianity, as history demonstrates, depends on a reawakening and re-

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newal of that which is the essence of the faith—that is, the people of God, the new society, the body of Christ, which is made manifest in the world—the Church.²

A privatized faith weakens the church within and without, loosening the bonds of true Christian community and hindering the church's witness to the world.

It was a concern for the corporate life of Christ's body that led a small group of pastors and teachers to plan an adult Bible school class called "The Communion of Saints." The class, which ran for thirteen weeks at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, was designed to strengthen Christian fellowship in the local church. To establish a proper biblical and theological foundation, the course was organized around chapter 26 in the Westminster Confession of Faith. It was also designed to be practical, with most class sessions including time for asking questions, making comments, offering suggestions, and praying for God to strengthen the communion of the saints at Tenth Presbyterian Church.

These class sessions also formed the basis for the present book, which from the beginning has been a group effort—a practical exercise in the communion of saints. Eight people did most of the writing: Dr. Hughes Oliphant Old from Princeton's Center for Theological Inquiry wrote "Baptized into Communion" (chap. 3) and "Assembly Required" (chap. 6). The Reverend D. Marion Clark, who now serves as senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Gainesville, Florida, wrote "Members Only" (chap. 4). Dr. William Edgar, who is professor of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, contributed "United in Love" (chap. 5). The chapters on "The Communion Table" (7) and "Gifts and Graces" (8) were written by the Honorable Thomas Martin, a judge in Chester County, Pennsylvania. Dr. George McFarland, chairman of the history department and vice-principal of the high school at Delaware County Christian Schools, contributed "Relief in Outward Things" (chap. 9) and "Mu-

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tual Edification” (chap. 10). And the Reverend Howard Blair, a semi-retired missionary to Japan, wrote on “Worldwide Communion” (chap. 12). I wrote the remaining four chapters, and Lydia Brownback, media manager for the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, prepared the leader’s guide.

Once a complete draft of the manuscript and study materials was available, it was previewed by Bible studies meeting in the homes of John and Chris Felser and David and Susan Madder. Members of these small groups critiqued each chapter, carefully noting ideas that needed amplification or clarification. Finally, as I prepared the manuscript for publication, each contributor had a final opportunity to review and revise it.

As we worked together on this project, we learned from one another, benefiting from the unique gifts and special insights of each participant. In the process, we came to have a deeper appreciation for the communion that we share in Christ. We understand what Dietrich Bonhoeffer meant when he wrote, “Let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God’s grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.”³ It is our prayer that everyone who reads this book will learn to offer the same prayer and will “have power, *together with all the saints*, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (Eph. 3:18).

Proceeds from the sale of this book go to China Ministries International for the translation and distribution of Reformed literature in the Chinese world. This too is an expression of our communion as saints—a small gift offered in the certain hope that one day we will all gather to worship God in his glory.

PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN
PHILADELPHIA

What Is the Communion of Saints?

I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. (Eph. 3:17b–18)

I believe in the communion of saints. (The Apostles' Creed)

In 1630 the devout Puritan governor of the Massachusetts Bay Company led a small group of colonists to the shores of North America. His name was John Winthrop (1588–1649), and as his ship, the *Arbella*, sailed the Atlantic, the governor stood on the deck and charged his followers to establish a new kind of Christian community:

We must be knit together in this work as one man, we must entertain each other in brotherly affection . . . , we must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality, we must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our

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eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body, so shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, the Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us.¹

What Winthrop proposed was a living fellowship of love centered in Jesus Christ. The community he envisioned would be animated by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, who would enable the people who lived in it to share a common life of unity, charity, and generosity. To put this idea in its simplest terms, Winthrop believed in the communion of saints.

“I Believe in the Communion of Saints”

John Winthrop was not alone. Most Christians believe in the communion of saints . . . or at least they say that they do. Anyone who has ever recited the Apostles’ Creed has said it before: “I believe in the communion of saints.” Depending on the order of worship in their churches, some Christians make this confession hundreds or even thousands of times. But many are unsure what it means. What is the communion of saints?

The phrase “I believe in the communion of saints” was a late addition to the Apostles’ Creed. The creed seems to have been formulated sometime during the second century of the Christian era. But Irenaeus in the second century, Tertullian in the third century, and Rufinus in the fourth century did not confess a belief in the communion of the saints, at least in so many words. Even as late as A.D. 400, Augustine’s commentary on the Apostles’ Creed made no mention of the communion of the saints.²

As far as we know, the first reference to the “communion of saints” (or *communio sanctorum*) appears in a sermon by Nicetas of Reme-

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siana, who died early in the fifth century. However, by A.D. 550 the phrase had become an established part of the Apostles' Creed. Christians were not content to believe in "the holy catholic church." They also wanted to confess "the communion of saints."

The communion of the saints is not simply the blessed community that the saints enjoy in heaven. Nor does it involve personal communication between the living and the dead, which is how some of the earliest commentators seem to have understood it. This is also how the Roman Catholic Church and many Eastern Orthodox leaders understand the communion of saints to the present day. This misunderstanding started with the recognition that some Christians live exemplary lives. After death these Christians, especially those who had been martyred for their faith, were revered for their godliness. In time holy men and women came to be venerated, and their personal belongings were treated as holy relics. Furthermore, since they were already in heaven, it seemed reasonable to think that they had special access to God. Thus some people started praying to the glorified saints instead of praying to God. Eventually this so-called communion of saints became a substitute for communion with God.³ Of course it is good to learn from the heroes and heroines of the faith. But it is wrong to worship them, venerate them, pray to them, or in any way consider them mediators between humanity and God.

Another misunderstanding is to assume that the communion of the saints is exactly the same thing as the church. For example, Martin Luther (1483–1546) taught that the "the holy Christian church" and "the communion of the saints" were identical. For Luther, the communion of the saints was "nothing but a comment or interpretation by which someone wished to explain what the Christian church is."⁴ One problem with Luther's view is that it makes the Apostles' Creed redundant. If the church and the communion of the saints are identical, then the Apostles' Creed merely repeats itself when the

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words “I believe in the holy, catholic church” are followed by the words “I believe in the communion of saints.” Thus we are led to conclude that although the holy, catholic church is one place where the saints enjoy their happy communion, the two are not identical. So what is the difference?

One difference is that the communion of saints includes believers who are in heaven, whereas the church is limited to those who remain on earth. True, some theologians distinguish between the church militant, which wages spiritual warfare on earth, and the church triumphant, which has entered into glory. But while the New Testament generally reserves the term *church* (*ekklesia*) for the earthly gathering of God’s elect (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:2), the communion of saints extends beyond the church to embrace the company of heaven. Without falling into the error of worshiping the saints in glory, we nevertheless are joined to them through faith in Jesus Christ. This connection is expressed in a beautiful stanza from William Walsham How’s hymn “For All the Saints”:

Oh, bless’d communion, fellowship divine!
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine,
Yet all are one in thee, for all are thine.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

The dead are dead in Christ and the living are alive in Christ, so all the saints are connected to Christ. This book will focus primarily on our communion with the saints on earth. This is because at present there are some aspects of fellowship that we cannot share with the saints in glory. But when Christ returns, he will gather us all together to enjoy complete communion.

Another difference between the communion of saints and the holy, catholic church is that this communion will outlast the church. The visible church is a temporary institution. Although the people of

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God will live for all eternity, many aspects of the visible church will disappear when Christ returns to establish his kingdom. Presumably there will be no evangelists, no sacraments, and no church discipline in heaven. In the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith, “the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life” will last only until “the end of the world” (25.3). But the communion of saints will last forever, as God’s people enjoy everlasting fellowship with the triune God and with one another. In the meantime, the church helps to promote and preserve the communion of saints. James Bannerman wrote:

According to the arrangement of God, the Christian is more of a Christian in society than alone, and more in the enjoyment of privileges of a spiritual kind when he shares them with others, than when he possesses them apart. . . . The Christian Church was established in the world, to realize the superior advantages of a social over an individual Christianity, and to set up and maintain the communion of the saints.⁵

The communion of saints is one aspect of what is sometimes called the *invisible church*. The invisible church is “the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head” (Confession of Faith, 25.1). In other words, the invisible church consists of all true believers, and not just those who say that they are Christians. The members of this invisible church have fellowship or communion with one another. As the apostle Paul reminded the Christians in Rome, “in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Rom. 12:5). The communion of saints is the common spiritual life that is shared by every member of the invisible church.

Who the Saints Are

In order to understand the communion of saints it is necessary to know what is meant by the word *saint*. The first thing to point out is that a saint does not belong to a special category of believers. Sainthood is not a lifetime achievement award for martyrs, evangelists, and prayer warriors. Saints are not members of a spiritual Hall of Fame. Rather, a saint is nothing more and nothing less than an ordinary Christian. This is why it was customary in New Testament times and long afterwards for Christians to call one another “saints,” no matter how unspiritual they may have seemed. The apostle Paul followed this practice by greeting Christians as “saints” in many of his letters. “To the saints in Ephesus,” he would write (Eph. 1:1), or “Greet all the saints in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:21).

There is something curious about the biblical use of the word *saint* that helps to show that saints are regular Christians. Although the various words for “saint” occur hundreds of times in the Bible, they almost never occur in the singular. The Bible speaks of “the saints” but not “a saint.” The singular thing about saints, therefore, is that they are always found in the plural. Saints are never found here and there, somewhere off by themselves. They are found wherever there are Christians, because every believer is a saint. Thus anyone who knows Christ is included in the communion of saints.

Literally, the “saints” are the “holy ones.” They are holy for three reasons. First, they are declared holy in their *justification*. They are not holy by virtue of their virtues. In fact, there is a sense in which the communion of saints is a communion of sinners. But these sinners have been made holy on the basis of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Christ has become their “righteousness, holiness and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). They do not stand before God on the basis of their own holiness. Rather, they “have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb. 10:10). Saints are sinners justified by grace.

Second, the saints are made holy in their *sanctification*. On the basis of their justification, believers are considered saints from the moment that they put their trust in Christ. At the same time, they experience a spiritual transformation that gives them a new capacity for holiness, and they continue to become more holy all the time. They are “sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy” (1 Cor. 1:2; cf. 1 Thess. 3:7). First the saints are declared holy; then they are made holy as the Holy Spirit enables them to forsake sin and to follow Christ in new obedience. Sanctification is something like spiritual boot camp. It takes more than enlisting in the army to prepare someone for battle. Boot camp transforms a civilian into a soldier. Similarly it takes more than conversion to train someone to live a holy life. Sanctification transforms a sinner into a saint.

Third, the saints are identified as holy by their *separation*. To be holy is to be separated from what is profane. Old Testament believers were set apart from the world by being circumcised, keeping the Sabbath, refraining from unclean foods, and maintaining proper worship in the temple. Their need to be separate from the world was expressed by the prophet Isaiah: “Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no unclean thing! Come out from it and be pure” (Isa. 52:11). The New Testament saints are holy in the same way. Although they are in the world, “they are not of the world” (John 17:14), for Christ calls them to separate themselves from worldly words, attitudes, and actions. The Christian community is a holy community.

The late German Reformer Zacharias Ursinus (1534–83) summarized the biblical teaching about sainthood: “Believers are called *saints* in three respects: by the imputation of Christ’s righteousness; by the beginning of conformity to the law which is commenced in them; and by their separation from the rest of the human race, being called of God to the end that they may truly know and worship him.”⁶ To put this in simple theological terms, the saints are holy because of their justification, sanctification, and separation.

What Communion Is

Now that we know who the saints are, the next question to ask is What is meant by communion? To have communion is to share something in common. The German Reformed theologian Johan Heidegger thus defined the communion of saints as “the union, society and assembly of all believers who have something in common with each other.”⁷ So the question becomes What do the saints share in common?

The answer is that the saints share almost everything in common—at least everything that matters. Because they are joined by the common fact of their salvation in Jesus Christ, they have an equal share in all his benefits. In their common life as a new community in Christ, they share the spiritual gifts that equip them for their common work in the gospel. The basis for their communion is expressed perhaps most powerfully in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:3–6). In these verses Paul describes the Christian community as a common body, connected by a common Spirit, entered by a common calling, destined for a common glory, serving a common Lord, on the basis of a common faith, sealed by a common sacrament (baptism), to the glory of a common God, who is the Father of all.

Perhaps this is the best place to define the communion of saints. The doctrine is so rich and deep that it defies a simple explanation, but one of the best and fullest definitions comes from chapter 26 of the Westminster Confession of Faith:

I. All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by His Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with Him in His grace, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory: and, being united to

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one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.

II. Saints by profession are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offereth opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus.

III. This communion which the saints have with Christ, doth not make them in any wise partakers of the substance of His Godhead; or to be equal with Christ in any respect: either of which to affirm is impious and blasphemous. Nor doth their communion one with another, as saints, take away, or infringe the title or propriety which each man hath in his goods and possessions.

Shorter definitions are possible. Luther described the communion of the saints as “a community of pure saints . . . called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding.”⁸ Ursinus understood the doctrine of the communion of saints to mean “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.”⁹ Here is another definition: *The communion of saints is the living fellowship of all true believers who are united in love by their union with*

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Christ and have spiritual communion with one another as they share in corporate worship, spiritual gifts, Christian graces, material goods, and mutual edification. The rest of this book is about how to practice and promote this godly communion.

Divided We Fall

It is not easy to practice the communion of saints. The isolation of the saints is as old as the fall. The sin of Adam and Eve made a breach in their communion with one another as well as with God. In his legal defense Adam managed to attack the woman as well as the Creator: “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it” (Gen. 3:12). Sin brought anger, shame, alienation, and recrimination into human relationships. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45) pointed out in his definitive work on the communion of the saints, “medieval symbolism for the Fall puts a tree in the center, with the serpent coiled round it, and on either side the man and the woman, separated by the tree from which they disobeyedly ate.”¹⁰

The sins of others often disturb the communion of the saints. James Montgomery Boice (1938–2000) used to tell the story about the Scotsman who doodled during a sermon. The man wrote a short poem that was discovered in one of the pews after the service. He seems to have been looking around at his fellow worshipers, for he wrote,

To dwell above with saints in love,
Aye, that will be glory!
To dwell below with saints I know,
Now that’s a different story.¹¹

Most Christians have read a few chapters of that “different story” and in doing so have discovered that most saints are not very saintly after

all. Most—possibly all—sins disrupt the communion of the saints. This is true of obvious sins like lying, stealing, murder, and adultery. But it is also true of private sins like greed, selfishness, gossip, and slander. As cartoonist Walt Kelly's Pogo said, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

Another obstacle to the communion of the saints is the pride of individualism. This is especially a problem in the American church. When the French statesman Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–59) visited the United States in the 1830s he observed that Americans "owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man, they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands. . . . [This attitude] throws [the American] back forever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart."¹²

The pride of individualism has infected the American church. Thomas Jefferson liked to observe, "I am a sect myself." Thomas Paine said, "My mind is my church." Now many Americans are raising Paine in the contemporary church. They doubt the necessity of active involvement in a living church. They rely on Christian radio, worship at home with a televangelist, or treat churches like leased automobiles, trading the old one in for a new one every five years.

The saints are also divided by class, ethnicity, and gender. These differences are part of God's providence in creation, and as we shall see in chapter 11, the way that the saints complement one another adds to the beauty of their communion. But when social, racial, and sexual distinctions are corrupted by sin, they become obstacles to Christian fellowship. The communion of saints is disturbed whenever race becomes a pretext for racism, class becomes a pretext for classism, or sex becomes a pretext for sexism. Identifying these sins as sins is not a matter of being politically correct but biblically correct (see Gal. 3:28).

Another obstacle to the communion of the saints is schism. In the

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words of the old hymn, the church is “by schisms rent asunder.” Some denominational distinctives are necessary to preserve the purity of the church, but such divisions are often the sad result of moral or doctrinal error. The existence of different denominations represents a failure of saintly communion.

Finally, the saints are separated by time and space. Although Christian books enable the faith of the past to live in the present, individual Christians cannot engage in heart-to-heart spiritual communion across the centuries. Even geography hinders the communion of saints: Because we are scattered across the globe we cannot meet for common worship.

The sad result of these many obstacles is the isolation of the saints. We are divided rather than united. We are like the characters in Maurice Maeterlinck’s (1862–1949) haunting play, *The Sightless*, which depicts twelve blind people lost in a forest. The message of Maeterlinck’s play is expressed in these words from the oldest blind man: “We have never seen each other; we question each other, and we answer each other, we live together and we are always together, but we know not what we are. For years and years we have lived together and we have never *beheld* each other. One would say we are always alone.” The same might well be said of the church, that although we are always meeting together, we are often alone.

Somehow we know that what God said to Adam is true for us all: “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18a). Deep down we desire the kind of intimate fellowship described in the New Testament. We long to make a spiritual connection with all the saints, living to love others rather than ourselves. So we continue to say that we believe in the communion of the saints.

The question is Do we practice this communion? To employ the language of the Westminster Confession, Are we “united to one another in love”? Do we “share in one another’s gifts and graces”? Do we “maintain holy fellowship in the worship of God”? Do we “relieve

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each other in outward things”? Do we “perform such spiritual services as tend to our mutual edification”? And do we “extend this communion to all those in every place who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus”? The sad truth is that most Christians in most churches do not do most of these things as often or as well as they ought to be done. The purpose of this book is to help us rediscover the lost communion of the saints.