

The Apostle's Creed

I Believe in the Communion of the Saints

1 Corinthians 12:7; 3:21-23

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

Turn with me in your Bibles to [1 Corinthians 12: 7](#). We are working our way through the Apostles' Creed and we come today to the affirmation that we believe in the communion of the saints.

Just as we saw last week that there are different views of what it means to say, "I believe in the holy catholic Church" there are also different views of what it means to say, "I believe in the communion of the saints." Some churches teach that this clause validates the doctrine of the intercession of the glorified saints. That is, that glorified saints in heaven pray on our behalf; they intercede on our behalf. Or, it is argued that this clause validates the doctrine that we can ask those saints to intercede for us with Christ and God, or we can pray for the dead or those who are in purgatory.

Now, needless to say, that's not what we mean when we say, "I believe in the communion of saints." "This phrase," J.I. Packer says, "confirms the real union in Christ of the Church militant here on earth with the Church triumphant in glory," as is indicated in [Hebrews 12:20-24](#). And it may be that this clause was originally meant to signify communion in holy things—the word, sacraments, worship, prayer, and to make the true but distinct point that in the Church, there is a real sharing in the life of God. Now, if you were listening very closely to that description, that summary of J.I. Packer, and you know they always say, "Packer by name, Packer by practice." He packs it in in his statement.

In that description he mentioned three aspects to communion, and we're going to focus on each of those aspects today, at least in passing--communion with God, communion that we on earth below have with the saints above, and communion with one another in Jesus Christ. The Church is the society and communion of those united to Christ, and thus recipient of all the benefits that are theirs through Him. Communion is shared life with those who possess the same new life in Christ. The great biblical analogy of this communion which we have with one another is marriage. Just as it illustrates the union which we have with our risen Savior and bridegroom, it also illustrates the communion that we have with one another. Herman Witsius, the famous Dutch theologian says,

“What is the Church but a society? What is a society but a union of persons possessing some privilege in common? Who are they besides that compose the Church except the saints? And what is the catholic Church in the end but the association of Gentiles with Jews in Christ in the paths of holiness?” And so, we’re going to think together about what it means to say that we believe in the communion of the saints. Let’s begin with Paul’s words in [1 Corinthians 12:7](#), and then we’ll look back to chapter 3.

“But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

Thus far, the word of God. Turn back with me to chapter 3, beginning in verse 21.

“So then, let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.” Amen.

Thus ends this reading of God’s holy and inspired word. May He add His blessing to it. Let’s pray.

Our Lord and our God, as we consider what it means to be in the communion of the saints and what it means to enjoy the privileges of the communion of the saints and what it means to exercise the obligations and responsibilities of members of the communion of the saints, we ask that You would open our eyes to behold wonderful things from Your word. This we ask in Jesus’ name, Amen.

In these passages we will examine three aspects of what it means to be a part of the communion of saints. We might call them three communions that we enjoy as part of the communion of the saints. First, there is the believer’s communion with God, the vertical dimension of the communion of the saints, the saint’s communion with God. Then, there is the believer’s communion with the Church triumphant with our brothers and sisters who have gone on to glory. And finally, there is the believer’s union with the Church militant, the Church visible, the Church here on earth, and especially expressed in the local congregation in which we fellowship and share life with one another. I want to consider each of those three aspects of the communion of the saints this morning.

I. The believer’s communion with God. Let’s begin with the believer’s vital communion with the triune God. Let me ask you to turn to Philippians, chapter 3, to begin with, and as you are turning to Philippians, I want you to remember what John tells us in [1 John 1:3](#), and that is, “That we have seen and heard the Lord Jesus Christ and proclaimed Him to you so that you may also have fellowship with us and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ.” This is the believer’s communion with God through Jesus Christ. Believers are in communion with Jesus Christ by virtue of our union with Him and we are in communion with the living God because we are united to Christ. And so, believers through union with Christ, through faith on Him, are united to Him by the Holy Spirit and therefore, know a vital communion with the triune God. Believers have communion with God; He is our inheritance and we are His inheritance. What belongs to God belongs to us by His mercy in Jesus Christ. We commune with the Father by the Son and through the Spirit and that is the reality, by the way, that we celebrate at the Lord’s Table. The Father Himself invites us to put

our knees under His table and to fellowship with the triune God through the risen Savior, Jesus Christ. So, in the Lord's Supper itself, we are celebrating this glorious privilege that believers—sinners saved by grace have—to fellowship with the living God.

But Paul emphasizes a distinctive aspect of this communion with God in [Philippians 3](#), beginning in verse 8. A constant refrain in the New Testament is that all the saints, united to Jesus Christ by His Spirit by faith, have fellowship with Him in His graces and sufferings and death and resurrection in glory. And look at what Paul says here in [Philippians 3:8](#).

“More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is in faith in Christ, a righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.”

The apostle Paul here says something staggering. That he wants to know Christ, in not only the power of His resurrection, but also in the fellowship of His sufferings. The apostle Paul is drawing attention to a principle which Jesus Himself stated over and over, as He explained to His disciples in the upper room from [John 13](#) forward, that they were united to Him. He explained to them that what happens to the Master will happen to the disciples. The glory of the Master will be the glory of the disciples one day. There will be enough glory by and by, but that also means that the suffering of the Master will be the sufferings of the disciples, because the disciples will join in and follow in the way of suffering of the Master. And the Apostle Paul says here that he prays for this.

Now, this is stunning. In the passage we read in [Acts 9](#) earlier this morning, we are told that Jesus Himself came to Ananias in verses 15 and 16, and said, “Ananias, this is my chosen servant Paul, and I'm going to show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake.” Now, I am sure that when Ananias related that word to the Christians who had previously been persecuted by Paul, that there was not a little bit of dark humor and appreciation of this reality on their part. I can see them thinking, “Well, he's going to get his come-uppance.” And here's the apostle Paul, years later telling you that he not only doesn't resent these sufferings that Jesus has called him to, but he prays that God will grant him the privilege of joining in the fellowship of Jesus' sufferings through them.

You may say, “Well, yes, but that is Paul, the super-Christian.” Well, turn back to [Philippians 1:29](#), where Paul says, “For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now *to be* in me.” My friends, we are united to God in Christ by the Spirit by faith; and when we are united to God in Christ by the Spirit by faith, we are united to Him not only in the exaltation but in the humiliation of Jesus Christ. And therefore, we know the sweetness of communion in this life, not simply in the times of

joy in some ecstatic mystical experience of the nearness of God, but we know the communion of God in the midst of the deepest desolations which we experience in this life--the hardest bereavements, the most grievous trials, the moments at which we are laid bare and do not feel that we could go on. At that moment, we are experiencing of the *essence* of what it means to be united to God. It's not getting through those things so that you can go on and experience communion with God; it's right in the midst of your weakness that you experience the unparalleled power of communion with God. And the Apostle Paul *prayed* that he might have that. He didn't just pray that God would help him through those times; he prayed that God would give him the privilege of entering in to that kind of communion with the risen Savior. Now this is not the main emphasis of the Creed's clause "I believe in the communion of the saints." It's not so much focusing on that vertical dimension of communion which we as the saints have with God and with the Lord Jesus Christ, as it is focusing especially on the horizontal dimension of that communion. I want to think about that with you in two aspects.

II. The believer's unity with the Church Triumphant. First, I want to think with you about the believer's union and communion with the glorified Church in heaven. Believers are in communion with all other saints, even those above, by virtue of our union with Christ. Believers, through union with Christ, know a communion with the glorified Church in heaven.

Now, we've already said that we don't have that communion by praying to the dead, nor do we have that communion by the saints pouring out the benefits of the treasury of merits upon us as they pray for us, so how do we experience this communion? Notice what the author of Hebrews says in [Hebrews 12:22](#). "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of *the* righteous made perfect." Hebrews is telling us here that believers, here in the gathered congregation of the people of God, have communion with the saints in glory. We're part of the same body. We're united to Christ and they are united to Christ; and though we are separated by a vast distance, and though we do not know the specifics of what they are doing now, yet, we are united in the same activity. When we gather to worship God, we know we are doing what the saints above are doing because they're praising God. And furthermore, we know what they long for. We know what their heart's desire is, and it is our heart's desire, if we are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the Book of Revelation, 6:9-11, those who have been martyred are described by John. He sees them under the altar as the lamb breaks the fifth seal. He sees under the altar the souls of those who have been slain because of the word of God and because of the testimony they had maintained and they are crying out with a loud voice, "How long, O Lord, how long Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth? And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until *the number of* their fellow servants and brethren who were killed even as they had been, would be completed also."

And so, it is their desire that the consummation would come, and that the judgment would come, and that Christ would be glorified, and that they would be vindicated and that the plan of God would be consummated, whereby He brings all things together in Christ in the heavens and on the earth into one. We know that is their desire and we are united with them in that desire. When you come to the Church visible, to the Church militant, to the Church local, to worship the living God, you have come to an outpost of heaven; to a little taste of that new age breaking in on this one. You have come to the suburbs of glory and you commune in your worship in word and prayer and sacrament with the saints above in glory. That's what we sing about when we say in hymn, *The Church's One Foundation*: "Yet she on earth hath union with God the Three in One, and mystic sweet communion with those whose rest in won. With all her sons and daughters, who by the Master's hand, led through the deathly waters reposed in Eden's land." You remember the prayer from those nine lessons and carols that we sing every year at Christmas? It comes from the text which was composed in the early nineteen hundreds and has been used every Christmas eve at King's College Chapel in Cambridge, and in that bidding prayer we remember, "All those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light; that multitude which no man can number, whose hope was in the word made flesh, and with whom, in the Lord Jesus, we are one forevermore." You see, the very realization that we are in union with those brothers and sisters sometimes helps us go on. That's really what Vaughn Williams' hymn, using William Walsham How's hymn text, I should say quickly, is all about. You know, there are some verses to "For All the Saints" that aren't in our hymnal. I know you're surprised at that. I know you're surprised that we don't sing them. Let me share with you two of the stanzas that are not in our hymnal. "Oh blessed communion; fellowship divine we feebly struggle, they in glory shine. Yet, all are one in Thee, for all are Thine. Alleluia, Alleluia. Oh, may Thy soldiers faithful, true and bold fight with the saints who nobly fought of old, and win with them the victor's crown of gold. Alleluia, Alleluia. And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long steels on the ear, the distant triumphant song and hearts are brave again and arms are strong. Alleluia, Alleluia." Just the realization that in glory that triumphant song is being sung now keeps us going. And then, to know that one day with them, we will stand and see this: "There breaks a yet more glorious day, the saints triumphant rise in bright array; the King of Glory passes on His way. Alleluia, Alleluia. From earth's wide bounds from oceans farthest coast, through gates of pearl stream in countless hosts singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Alleluia, Alleluia." To be standing there, brothers and sisters, with you on the last day; to see it, in our bodies, to sing it, "The King of Glory passing on His way." You can make it through *anything*, if you're waiting for that. And if you're hearing that triumph song, even now being sung. John Duncan, famous Old Testament professor from New College, Edinburgh, Scotland, in the 19th century, said to one of his students when the student asked, "What do you want to see when you get to heaven?" He said, "I would like to see the Lamb. I would like to see the Father of the Lamb. I would like to see the Spirit of the Lamb. But next to that, I would like to see the Lamb's wife. I would like to see Her; I would like to be Her." You see, that scene is already being played out, and when we gather here, we are mingling our voices and our hearts with that praise that is going on there. We commune with the saints above. But, of course, the great emphasis of the New

Testament is on our communing with one another in the here and now. And that's the third thing I want you to see.

III. The believer's unity with other believers on earth. Believers are in communion with all other saints, and thus, have a responsibility for them by virtue of our union with Christ. Turn back now to 1 Corinthians, chapter 12, and we will end where we began our reading. Believers through union with Christ are in communion with all the Church, visible, militant, and especially in its local gathering, and we have certain obligations and we've been given certain gifts and they're all to serve for the body. And so, Paul in [1 Corinthians 12:7](#), can say, "to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. He says, "Yes, Corinthians, you've been given extraordinary gifts, but those gifts don't belong to you; they belong to the body. God gave you that gift for the common good. In the same way that he can say in that mystical passage that the husband's body belongs to the wife, and the wife's body belongs to the husband, so also, all of My gifts belong to you, and all of your gifts belong to Me and all of our gifts collectively belong to one another; they are for the common good.

And in [1 Corinthians 3:21](#), the Apostle Paul says there's no need to be saying, "I'm of Paul, and I'm of Peter, and I'm of Apollos," because Paul and Peter and Apollos belong to all of you. We belong to you. God has gifted us, not so that we can raise our own estimation in your eyes, but He's gifted us in order to minister to you. That's why, my friends, I want you to know that Brad Mercer, and Derek Thomas, and Ligon Duncan-- this whole pastoral staff--when you come to us rejoicing about the way another minister on this staff has ministered to you, we are going to rejoice in that; we're going to revel in that. We love it when you come up and say, "Oh, but Derek has ministered to me by the preaching of the Word of God," or, "You don't know how Brad has helped me in this difficult family situation." It causes us rejoicing when you revel in the gifts of other ministers because we all belong to you; our gifts are yours, and we're expendable. We're here to bless you as we may. Paul speaks to this same truth in 1 Corinthians 12, doesn't he? He says, "All the members of the body, though they are many, are one body. So also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all are baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, we were all made to drink of one Spirit." And so, we've been made into a family, a family so close that Paul can call it a body. Is that the way we are at First Presbyterian Church? Do we manifest that reality? We are so close that we can be called a body? We glory when our friends in Christ in this fellowship are being exalted. We glory as if it were our own exaltation, and we grieve when they are enduring trial as if it were our own grief? We care for them; we love them? We're so united to them that we sympathize with them in the hard things? We give to them in time of need? We pray for them; we reciprocate offices of kindness? We enjoy common blessings when we are sundered from them? We grieve and we long to be brought back again?

My friends, if we are the communion of saints, and we are, then we live for one another and we belong to one another and we glory in one another and we're responsible to one another and we're to care for one another. You see, we share mutual obligations to one another; and we have fellowship in one another's gifts and graces, and we share a

mutual concern for our temporal well being and we have a common mission and we have a common destiny. And so, if we understand that, if we understand all of those privileges entails in communion, then we'll also understand the responsibilities that go on with it. We'll be diligent in coming together to worship and to hear the word of God. We don't realize how we hurt the whole body when we don't come together; the *body* suffers when you're not here--the *body* suffers. We'll be earnest about preserving peace amongst ourselves. Do you realize that when one member of this body is at odds with another, a *grievous wound* is born by this body?

My friends, if we took care to assure the peaceable relation between ourselves, I don't doubt that revival would break out. We love one another in word and deed and so we help one another in time of need. We're doing a little better at that. How far do we have to go? We're called to shine in a dark world as we love one another. We're called to holiness together. I'm not a "lone ranger." My sin impacts this body as Achan's sin impacted Israel, so our sin impacts this body. We can't, just off on our own, just do our own private thing and it have no effect on the body. We're part of a body; we're members. It's one member of this body sinning when sin is done. Even the University of Alabama understands that principle. The action of a head coach reflects upon a university. How *much more* does that action of one member of a body; knitted together by the Spirit, in Christ, united and communing, how much more does the action of that one member impact the *whole* body? We must remember that in our pursuit of holiness, brothers and sisters. We are not islands; we are all part of a continent--of the main, of a communion of the people of God.

And so, my friends, I ask you this, "Do you *love* the communion of the saints, and do you *live* the communion of the saints, and do you *show* the communion of the saints?" Do you remember what John says in 1 John 3:14? "We know that we have passed out of death into life because..."--fill in the blank. Because we've prayed a prayer? No. Because we've signed a card? No. Because we've made a decision? No. Because we love the brethren. You see, loving the brethren isn't the *way* you're saved, but it is what you are saved to. We're saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone; but all those who are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, are united to Jesus, and thus, united to one another. And so, it is impossible to love Him and not love the brethren. Will we love the brethren here at First Presbyterian Church? May God make it so and begin with each of us. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, grant us an appreciation of the privilege of communing with You, of the encouragement of communing with saints above, and then, by Your grace, cause us to respond in faithfulness in loving one another and communing with one another and sharing life with one another. This we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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