

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	39		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	I Corinthians 1:9; II Corinthians 13:14; I John 1:3		
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The Communion of Saints

21. Lord's Day

Question 55. What do you understand by "the communion of saints"?

Answer: 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; (a) 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. (b)

(a) 1 John 1:3 That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. 1 Cor. 1:9 God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Rom. 8:32 He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? 1 Cor. 12:12 For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. 1 Cor. 12:13 For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. 1 Cor. 6:17 But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit. (b) 1 Cor. 12:21 And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. 1 Cor. 13:1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. 1 Cor. 13:5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Philip. 2:4 Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Philip. 2:5 Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Philip. 2:6 Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: Philip. 2:7 But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: Philip. 2:8 And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

There is a line in the last stanza of the well-known hymn "The Church's One Foundation" which oddly enough (since in many respects it is a biblically based hymn) implies that we talk with the dead! It celebrates holding "mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won."¹ This strand of Gnostic nonsense is totally out of place in our worship. Yet, due to the growing influence of modern New Age mysticism, this kind of stuff is gaining rapid acceptance in our society at large and among those who frequently sit in the pews of our Evangelical churches.

Our word *communion* is derived from the Latin *communio* which in turn is the equivalent of the Greek KOINŌNIA, the word we use to express "fellowship." W. Robert Godfrey tells us that this word means "being together and participating together in various concerns and activities. It means

hearing and responding to the Word together. It means supporting one another in prayer. It means sharing financial resources to provide for the poor and to accomplish the work of the church. The central form of fellowship is found in the public worship of God. As we join our voices, hearts, ears and minds together, fellowship takes place in the highest degree.”² What does the creed mean by the expression “communion of the saints”? What is the nature of this communion? How is it expressed and maintained? We need to be clear on what the Bible teaches on this subject. Many Christians, I am afraid, think that *fellowship* is simply a kind of social interaction that takes place over a cup of coffee in front of the church, before or after a church service. True biblical fellowship is vital to the church’s (and the individual Christian’s) spiritual health. It is, therefore, important that we understand what the Bible teaches about Christian fellowship.

I. FELLOWSHIP: TWO-DIMENSIONAL

Communion assumes relationship. Marriage certainly captures this important feature of communion. There is an old Latin expression used in marriage that reads UBI TU CAIUS, EGO CAIA, “Where you are Master, I will be Mistress.”³

A. Vertical. This is what I John 1:3 is accenting. This verse in essence describes a true believer! Fellowship with God means that we have a living relationship with Him (cf. II Peter 1:3-4). It is the kind of fellowship which commits believers to a life of obedience and holiness (cf. II Corinthians 6:14).

B. Horizontal. This is the plane of fellowship believers have with each other. Note that this involves more than simply enjoying each other’s company. Among other things it involves our corporate worship together (cf. Hebrews 10:23-25). We cannot go off and practice our Christian faith by ourselves. This kind of religious individualism is entirely foreign to the New Testament. “The fulfilment of Christian joy,” wrote Bishop Westcott, “depends upon the realization of fellowship.”⁴

II. FELLOWSHIP: NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE

Christian fellowship has distinctive features. It aims to edify and to be edified. It is characterized by the desire to help and to receive help. Three specific things help to define the true meaning of fellowship.

A. Means of Grace. J.I. Packer has captured this important aspect of fellowship: “Through fellowship, one’s soul is refreshed and fed, and by the effort to communicate one’s knowledge of divine things one’s own grasp of them is strengthened. To have God’s children praying for you, caring for you as a fellow-believer, and sharing their experiences of trial and triumph with you brings vast enrichment; and your support of others in the way that others have supported you will mature you as well as benefiting them. Paul’s constant pleas that Christians would pray for him as he prays for them (Romans 15:30; II Corinthians 1:11; Ephesians 6:19; Colossians 4:3; I Thessalonians 5:25; II Thessalonians 3:1f.; Philemon 22; cf. Hebrews 13:18) and James’ injunction, ‘confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed’ (5:16), confirm this. Christian fellowship is a means of grace that we neglect to our poverty and our peril.”⁵

B. Test of Life. Fellowship as described in First John is doing righteousness, loving the brethren, walking in the light and keeping God's Word. This is what it means to "abide in God" (I John 2:7-17) and this is the essential meaning of fellowship. In other words, it is the manifestation of our sonship (I John 1:7).

C. Gift of God. "The primary object of the death of Christ," wrote Charles Hodge, "was the communication of the Holy Spirit. He redeemed us from the curse of the law, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit, Galatians 3,13.14. It is the gift of the Holy Ghost secured in the covenant of redemption by the death of Christ that applies to us the benefits of his mediation. As the gift of the Spirit is secured to all the people of God, they are KOINŌNOI, joint partakers, of the Holy Ghost, and thereby made one body. This is the ground of the communion of saints in which the church universal professes her faith."⁶

CONCLUSION: I can do no better in summarizing the importance of the communion of the saints than to quote Chapter 26 of the Westminster Confession of Faith: "ALL saints that are united to Jesus Christ their head by his Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with him in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory. And being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces: and are obliged to the performance of such duties, publick and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man. 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. 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 property which each man hath in his good and possessions."

ENDNOTES

¹ For an insightful analysis of this and other commonly held unbiblical notions, cf. Jay E. Adams *A Call to Discernment: Distinguishing Truth from Error in Today's Church* (Harvest House, 1987).

² W. Robert Godfrey, "TV Church" in *Modern Reformation* (Nov/Dec 1993), p. 20.

³ Those of you familiar with Roman history might remember that *Caius* and *Caia* were two names deemed fortunate by the Romans. At the celebration of marriage when the bride first entered the bridegroom's house, she would be asked by him who she was and this is the response she would give. Cf. H. Witsius, *Sacred Dissertation on the Apostles' Creed II* (rpt. P & R, 1993), p. 378. The word "Mistress" in common vernacular denotes a woman who is involved secretly with a married man, someone the French call a paramour (a lover). Originally, however, the word was used of the Lady of a household.

⁴ B.F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1966), p. 13. Michael Scott Horton writes along similar lines: "It is probably not an exaggeration to say that the independent, sectarian spirit in American evangelicalism has shown itself to be the most divisive and anti-catholic force in the history of Christianity. If we are to be biblical Christians, not only must we approach God correctly, we must approach him together." "Gnostic Worship" *Modern Reformation* (July/Aug 1995), p. 21.

⁵ J.I. Packer, *God's Words: Studies of Key Bible Themes* (IVP, 1981), p. 196.

⁶ C. Hodge, *I & II Corinthians* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1974), p. 689.