

For All the Saints

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It was not long after my confirmation, at age twelve, that I noticed at the quarterly celebrations of the Lord's Supper a strange addition to the bulletin. Names appeared of those people who had died since we last celebrated communion. On one particular Sunday I recognized one of the names. It was that of a man I remembered as short, somewhat round, and bald. His wife had been one of my church school teachers and always had showed interest in my sister and me. I did not remember seeing Mr. A. around, but then, the only place I ever saw him was in the kitchen before or after church. I knew he would always be there, quietly tending to sundry chores. For years he had also been responsible for preparing the communion elements—a job he performed tirelessly, carefully, and lovingly. Those memories all came to me upon seeing his name in the bulletin.

That day, in addition to seeing a familiar name in the bulletin, I was struck by the prayers. I found one prayer very curious—the prayer for the communion of saints. As I listened to it and to the names included in the prayer, I became aware of a church that I did not know about, one that sounded glorious with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. I found that prayer comforting, assuring and awesome. Imagine being one little part of that huge congregation, one tiny moment in ages of history! But more, that one prayer affirmed for me a belief in the resurrection in ways I did not and still do not comprehend. To me, it was and is the prayer of the Church with a timeless quality.

That experience, and others like it, is what provokes me to write this article. In most liturgies in the Presbyterian churches in which I worship, I rarely hear the prayer for the communion of saints included. This is unfortunate, because the voicing of the prayer of the communion of saints is doctrinally and liturgically important, and I believe it functions pastorally and spiritually for believers in offering a perspective on the past, in acknowledging the present, and in giving hope for the future.

Some of the doctrinal background might help focus our attention since Presbyterians are, at best, only vaguely aware of the history and importance of the communion of saints. When one reads the historical writings on the communion of the saints, it is possible for some of the skepticism about the institutional church and its mission to be transformed into a greater, more encompassing vision of Christ's body—the Church. Calvin maintains that the communion of saints expresses what the church is. It is all the saints, with whatever gifts God bestows upon them, gathered together and sharing their gifts with one another. The communion stands by God's election and is joined by the steadfastness of Christ. Being convinced that we are members of such a body with its benefits grants us confidence to claim . . . “even if the world

were overthrown, the church could neither totter nor fall,” and “So powerful is participation in the church that it keeps us in the society of God.”¹

Now some of us may not feel capable of making such claims for the visible church. But the communion of the saints as Calvin describes it goes beyond what we observe temporally:

Yet, to embrace the unity of the church in this way, we need not (as we have said) see the church with the eyes or touch it with the hands. Rather, the fact that it belongs to the realm of faith should warn us to regard it no less since it passes our understanding than if it were clearly visible. And our faith is no worse because it recognizes a church beyond our ken. For here we are not bidden to distinguish between reprobate and elect—that is for God alone, not for us, to do—but to establish with certainty in our hearts that all those who, by the kindness of God the Father, through the working of the Holy Spirit, have entered into fellowship with Christ, are set apart as God’s property and personal possession; and that when we are of their number we share that great grace.²

From the creeds and confessions as well as from theologians in the Reformed tradition, one finds several convictions held in common with respect to the communion of saints:

1. From the beginning of the world to its end, God, through the Son and Holy Spirit, gathers believers into a congregation for eternal life.
2. The chosen are from among all of humanity.
3. God protects and preserves those in the fellowship of the communion in earthly and eternal life.
4. A believer can claim with confidence to be now and forever a member of the communion of saints.³

If the above convictions are important to the body of believers and can be affirmed liturgically, then a review of the use of the doctrine of the communion of saints in the prayers of worship deserves some acknowledgement.

In the liturgical tradition of the church, it is in the eucharistic prayer that one finds the prayer for the communion of saints. Evelyn Underhill points out six aspects of the eucharistic prayer: adoration and thanksgiving; the memorial or historical element; the oblation and consecration; the supplications; the mystery of the Divine Presence; and the ritual of the sacramental meal.⁴ The supplications are of primary importance to the current discussion.

The church’s supplications of which Underhill writes are generally divided into the categories of (1) supplication—an earnest and humble beseeching of God to equip the church and its members for their tasks in the world; (2) intercession—prayers for the needs of the members of the church and for all the needs of the world; and (3) communion of saints—prayers for the living and the dead emphasizing the corporateness of and divine activity in all the church. Of this last portion of the supplications, Underhill writes:

. . . a reminder of the fact that the Communion of Saints and Communion of Sinners is one Body, and that within that Body the true interests of one are also the interests of all. There is no separation here between

the Church visible and the Church invisible: it is as reasonable to seek a place in the supplications of the Saints as in those of an Intercessory Guild. So in the Roman Canon, the remembrance of the humble needs of the living in their weakness and imperfection—"Thy servants and hand-maids N. and N. and all here present. . .who pay their vows to Thee, Eternal True and Living God"—is directly followed by the long roll call of their great fellow servants "Thy blessed Apostles and Martyrs. . .and all Thy Saints" that the offering and the supplication may be that of "Thy whole family," here associated under various conditions of time and place in the one action of the eternal Eucharist.⁵

All six aspects of the Eucharistic prayer are significant when the Lord's Supper is celebrated. However, with less frequent celebrations of the Lord's Supper accompanying the Reformation, corresponding adjustments in the prayers appear.

Although Calvin maintained that weekly celebrations of the Lord's Supper were preferable, history demonstrates that he conformed his liturgy to that which Schwarz and Bucer developed for Strassburg—with a monthly schedule for communion. Thus, an examination of the liturgies shows that the order developed into ante-communion.

The order, structure, and content of the eucharistic service were largely retained, but such parts as belonged directly to consecration and communion were necessarily omitted. This practice was followed in Scotland after the Reformation, and also in England by Anglicans and Puritans alike.⁶

If one examines Reformed liturgies, one sees that the ante-communion service is patterned after the words, sequence, and action of the Eucharist. However, even with Calvin's writings in the *Institutes* which point to the significance of the communion of saints, the doctrine does not obviously appear in his own ante-communion prayers. In fact, it is present to some extent only in the sacramental service. James Hastings Nichols notes the inadequate articulation of the communion of saints in Reformation liturgies in contrast to the prayers of the ancient church which saw "the church militant and the church triumphant at one in adoration."⁷

In the two centuries following the Reformation, the liturgies of Reformed groups demonstrate a movement away from the ante-communion and a general disorder. With the discovery and study of the texts of the early Reformed services in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and a renewed interest in worship of the early church, changes in liturgies begin to appear. If one looks at the *Prayers for Divine Service* (Church of Scotland 1929) and the *Book of Common Order* (former United Free Church of Scotland 1928)⁸, one notes a return of the prayers, including the communion of saints, according to the ante-communion.

My concern with the prayer for the communion of saints may be seen as a part of a larger concern for a more thorough understanding and observance of the ante-communion prayers. But it is the case that one sees more regularly in contemporary liturgies the prayers of thanksgiving, supplication and

intercession. The usual omission is the prayer for the communion of saints. I contend that the prayer for the communion of saints functions pastorally and spiritually for worshippers in voicing a perspective on the past, in acknowledging the present, and in giving hope for the future.

First, pastorally and spiritually the prayer for the communion of saints affirms what has gone on before. In effect, it recites the tradition and expresses what God has already done. It remembers Christ's sacrifice and recognizes the company of heaven already established. If what the proponents of psychological and spiritual development say is true, then most persons in a congregation need to be reassured by familiar and ritual language and fixed truths. In other words, the prayer needs to say what the people want to say about the basis of their faith.

To be reminded of and recall the glorious work of God in previous times is the first step in awakening in persons the assurance and confidence to claim for themselves a place and a participation in the company of the faithful. *The Book of Common Worship* offers several phrases which might function pastorally and spiritually to initiate the pilgrimage of faith with the communion of saints:

We give Thee thanks for all Thy saints who have witnessed in their lives a good confession, for all the faithful departed, and for those dear to our hearts who have entered into rest (offer names).

O God, before whose face the generations rise and pass away, the Strength of those who labor, and the Repose of the blessed dead: We rejoice in the communion of saints.⁹

The above portions of prayers state a belief in God's activity in the past. Some of the prayers even give the opportunity for the liturgist to offer names of deceased members of the congregation. It is curious to me that many pastors will sit and listen to their flock recount stories about those saints who contributed to the life of the church and to the faith pilgrimage of other persons, but those same pastors are insensitive to or neglect the pastoral and powerful function of remembering those saints in the liturgy. To make reference to particular individuals who, by their faith, have witnessed to members of a particular congregation offers to those participating in the prayers the opportunity to recall the church's activity across several generations in meaningful and concrete ways.

The prayer for the communion of saints also functions pastorally and spiritually by orienting the participants to the present life of faith. I find in the congregation I serve that many persons are disillusioned about the state of the church. They need help in recognizing that the church on earth is a human institution, but a human institution intended to move toward a divine purpose and vision. Also, they need to have an image of the church that transcends pedestrian language and concerns that are often used to define it. The prayer for the communion of saints clarifies where we live now and points to the difference between the way things are, and the way they ought to or will be.

We are all a part of the church militant, and often that militancy takes on multiple meanings. But in the present we can look backward to see examples

of those who preceded us in the struggles, and we can gaze forward toward new expressions of faith. One of my favorite lines in one of the prayers from *The Book of Common Worship* is: "Grant us grace so to follow them [the faithful in every age] as they followed Christ; and bring us, with them, to those things that eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, which Thou hast prepared for those who love Thee."¹⁰ The life of faith has never been easy for any follower of Christ, but here is a prayer that acknowledges a longstanding fellowship with others. Pastorally such a petition allows the petitioners to identify with the others in the struggles as well as in the rewards. And spiritually the prayer gives a more encompassing meaning to life by setting faith in a larger context.

Finally, every prayer for the communion of saints points to the future, to a cloud of witnesses awaiting our reunion with them. Again from the *Book of Common Worship*, such lines as: "Lift us into Thy light and love; and give us at last our portion with those who have trusted in Thee and striven in all things to do Thy holy will," and "Grant. . . that we may be one with them in spirit, and, at the last together with them, be made partakers of Thine eternal kingdom;"¹¹ focus on the hope of the resurrection and confidence in inclusion in it. The truth of our presence now and forever in the company of the eternal is the strongest of all affirmations in the prayer.

Pastorally and spiritually the prayer leads participants to claim for themselves the protection and preservation of God in both earthly and eternal life. The sanctification of life is the pastoral and spiritual function of the prayer of the communion of saints—a sanctification of life that makes each one of us a member of a family—a family visible and invisible, now and in eternity.

Recently in the congregation I serve, after a death and funeral of a member, I wrote the prayers for Sunday. Among the prayers was the prayer for the communion of saints. Many of the parishioners, most of them senior citizens, had attended the funeral and were at church on that Sunday. Together we prayed,

God of all ages, thou hast made us heirs of the faithful of all generations who have given themselves to thy work, and we thank thee for our memories of them which enrich our lives with purpose and meaning. We thank thee for those who have loved church, family and the miracles of growth from the earth. We praise thee for the labors of those who have gone before us, who have filled life with the love of Christ. We are grateful for those dear to us who are not known by the world but are still living in our hearts. Especially, we remember Helen and give thanks that in worship our voices blend with hers and with the voices of the company of heaven to give thee glory and honor until we reach that promised place—perfect and eternal reunion with Christ. Amen.

After the service, one of the women approached me and said, "That last part of the prayer—you prayed it so strongly that I know you believe God is waiting for me and everyone else here to join Him in heaven. And I believe it too."

That is the kind of conviction I would like everyone to have. I am not saying that offering the prayer for the communion of saints is going to change lives when prayed only once or even many times. But the doctrine is an impor-

tant one for us all, and it deserves more attention as a part of our worship.

NOTES

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, vol. 2, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), i, 3.

² Ibid.

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, vol. 4, 1 (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1956), p.62.

⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *Worship*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1936), p. 139f.

⁵ Ibid., p.151f.

⁶ William D. Maxwell, *An Outline of Christian Worship*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), p.119.

⁷ James Hastings Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), p.48.

⁸ Maxwell, op. cit., p. 168f.

⁹ *The Book of Common Worship*, (Philadelphia: The Board of Christian Education of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1946), p.17, 30, 36.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.17

¹¹ Ibid., p.37, 31