

## **THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS**

The fact of faith, being a Christian, is a multi-faceted reality. It is therefore difficult to isolate a single aspect of our faith life without touching on some of the others. Lord's Day 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism gives a good example of this. In one Lord's Day it touches on the definition of the Church, communion of saints and forgiveness of sins.

In Reformed circles much discussion takes place about the Church - its marks, its definition, its nature and its unity. Sermons are seldom appreciated if there is no mention of the forgiveness of sins; but what about the communion of saints?

### **SAINTS**

Who and what are saints? The apostle Paul gives a clear answer to this question in his first letter to the Corinthians. He opens his letter with, "To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours." It is clear, then, that saints are those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus. Sanctified means

to be set apart, to be made holy, to be separated from the rest for a special purpose.

When the Church confesses the teachings of Scripture that infants must also be baptized, it says, in part, "Yes, infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation....Therefore, by baptism, as sign of the covenant they must be engrafted into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers..." (Lord's Day 27, Q/A 74).

Now those separated people are said to be separated from unbelievers, and they are to be "together with those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ..." These separated people, then, call on the name of someone who, Himself, was also separated. He was anointed. His is called Christ, that is, Anointed because He has been ordained by God the Father, and anointed with the Holy Spirit, to be our chief Prophet and Teacher, our only High Priest and our eternal King (cf Lord's Day 12, Q/A 31). These same people also have another name, the name Christian. The Bible teaches, and the

Heidelberg Catechism summarizes, that these Christians, these saints, are members of Christ by faith and thus share in His anointing, so that they may confess His Name as prophets, present themselves as living sacrifices of thankfulness to Him as priests, and fight against sin and the devil in this life with a free and good conscience and hereafter reign with Him eternally over all creatures as kings (Q/A 32).

It is no wonder that the matter of the communion of saints is found just there where the Catechism deals with the holy catholic Christian church and the forgiveness of sins. It appears that the saints are those separated from others and gathered together to worship their Saviour and to give thanks in and with their whole lives for salvation from sin.

### **COMMUNION**

The Catechism tells us that “everyone is duty-bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members.” Now that can mean a cheerful giving to the deaconry for the needs of the poor. It can also mean a watchful eye for those who are in difficult circumstances and supplying them with a well-timed pan of soup. It can even mean attendance at the various Bible study societies. It certainly means attendance at the worship services. It should include attendance at congregation meetings, etc. But is it possible that more is meant?

The apostle Paul writes about the use of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the same first letter to the Corinthians that we referred to earlier. He speaks about a variety of gifts and that each one receives his or her gifts for the common good (Chap.12:7). Further he stresses that it does not matter which gift(s) we have, they all find their origin in the Holy Spirit and therefore must receive equal honour. He also stresses that these must be used for the benefit of the other members.

With the human body there is not uniformity of talents or gifts, so that the whole body would consist of, for example, hands alone. In the same way in the Church there is a variety of gifts which are intended for the mutual benefit of the whole body, the whole congregation.

But what about these gifts then? Now it is not our intention to go into the list of gifts the apostle mentions and to determine which are still being provided to the modern church, but rather to see if the modern day church is using the gifts it has received.

#### *WORKING OUT AND EXPERIENCING THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS*

It will take far too much time and space to list all the gifts the Lord has given to His Church in the last days. The list could hardly be complete. Each of us could add much to the list of wisdom, knowledge, faith, confessions history, vigour, youth, age, kindness, understanding, education, insight, etc., etc. And it is surely true that many of these gifts are presently being used for the benefit of brothers and sisters. But is it true that we use all the gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members? Or are we sometimes afraid that our help will be rejected? Do we sometimes feel unsure how to use our gifts in particular circumstances?

At times it appears that the separations in society are stronger than the sanctification of the saints. The members of the Church that are set apart to help each other serve, honour and obey God are often divided along the lines of the society from which they have been separated. The younger members express frustration with the refusal to introduce new things. The older ones are distressed about the reluctance of the youth to follow the ancient paths. The educated ones hardly speak to those without degrees. Those who went to work at an early age because of need or inability to comprehend book learning shy away from those who only speak with multi-syllabled words. Surely everyone can add to this list as well. The gulfs and cracks that exist in the body of Jesus Christ vary from place to place and from time to time.

The easy answer to this is to recognize the remaining influence of sin on Christians in this present age. The right answer, on the other hand, is to pray and work for holiness also in these matters.

Once more the apostle Paul gives the answer. “Make love your aim”, he says, “and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.” This is the conclusion the apostle comes to after he has written, what we know as, the thirteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians. It is not necessary for us to quote this chapter in its entirety. But when someone wants to learn or be

reminded about the exercising and experiencing of the communion of saints he/she should read this chapter.

It is with these words firmly planted in our minds that we can interact with our fellow saints, we can have true communion with them. Then the youth will be able to accept the direction of the middle aged and elderly. Then the older saints will be able to deal patiently and lovingly with the vigorous youth. Then the educated will be patient and kind to those who have less book learning. Then those who deal simplistically with matters will make efforts to understand the learned.

Remembering that love is patient and kind, saints will dare to admonish one another in love when the need for that appears. Remembering that love never ends will allow those who have had strong words to reconcile in the communion of saints.

How can this happen some may wonder. Time and again we see how the communion of saints fails to function as it should. But then we must turn back to that wonderful lesson book, the Heidelberg Catechism. Right in that same Question and Answer where it deals with the Communion of Saints, it tells us "...that believers, all and everyone, as members of Christ have communion with Him and share in all His treasures and gifts." His treasures and gifts include holiness. We share in His holiness. Then we must live out of that holiness too. How can we do that? Just look at the next Question and Answer - "I believe that God, because of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember my sins, nor my sinful nature, against which I have to struggle all my life, but will graciously grant me the righteousness of Christ, that I may never come into condemnation."

How shall we go about this now? Let us use the example given by God. He has placed us in that set-apart gathering, the Church. That is what the first Question and Answer of Lord's Day 21 spoke about. And don't we all remember the marks of that Church? Yes, the pure preaching of the Word, the administration of the Sacraments and exercise of Discipline.

Now let us use the lesson of love taught us by the apostle Paul and in that light prophesy with the Word, sacrifice our natural desires and live priestly lives, as examples for other saints to witness, and let us discipline ourselves and the other saints as Scriptural kings in order that we may experience the true Communion of Saints.

PdB

## **ASSURANCE OF FAITH**

The subject Assurance of Faith is very real and current. Much is being said about the Experience of Faith. The contention has been made that 'experience' has often been avoided in the past. In keeping with the American example, we are encouraged to walk with Jesus and give ourselves over to Him, as they say. At the same time we notice that many young people are leaving the Church and immerse themselves into a charismatic or evangelical adventure.

We are of the opinion that one can not judge wisely, that is Scripturally, about these matters if you do not deal with the fundamental questions of 'what is faith and faith experience?' Or perhaps we should speak about the 'obedience of faith.'

## **OBSTACLES**

What causes a Christian to doubt? What are the obstacles that can quickly cause us to fall?

In the first place we like to mention the pernicious influence of modern theology. It asserts that the Bible is nothing more than a passing on of what people in earlier days have thought about God. The stories in the Old Testament, according to these theologians, are witness of how the Israelites tried to impress their enemies with tall tales about their God. Just like small children can sometimes tell tall tales about their fathers in order to impress their friends. With regard to the New Testament, the gospel stories have, of late, been treated as fiction. Beyond that they have exaggerated and improvised the happenings surrounding Jesus of Nazareth. They have done that to show that their Lord really is and was the Son of God. Prof. H. M. Kuitert's most recent book is a detailed example of some of these attitudes.

We reject all these unfaithful theories from the heart. But still such theories can sometimes unwittingly penetrate our thinking - 'is the Bible really true?' - 'Could all those strange miracles really have happened?' - 'Couldn't it all be a perfectly manufactured system worked out by theologians?' - 'Couldn't it be one large scary system designed to hold on to people as members of the Church?'

#### *STILL MORE OBSTACLES*

Our doubts can be fed even more when we observe Christians. How truly disappointing they can be. Time after time you can hear all kinds of terrible sins breaking out in the Church. These do not only befall church members, but also the leaders. Beyond that there is the division among Christians that is also used as an excuse to turn the back on everything.

C. S. Lewis, a popular author these days, presents fantasized letters from the devil in his recent book 'Letters from Hell.' In it the devil writes to one of the devils who has received a particular mandate. Just as some people think that each of God's children has their own particular protecting angel, who will guide them throughout their whole life, so Lewis fantasizes that everyone has their own devil, from among the legions, who leads them. Such a devil must see to it that his assigned Christian falls away from the faith.

In the letter this evil spirit receives special instruction about dealing with a variety of circumstances.

One bit of advice he receives is to ensure that his subject should have a good look around at some of the others in church who rub him the wrong way and about whom he knows so many sorry details. This will give you a good chance to get him in your grips. Or, ensure that your subject does not go to the same church week after week and consider himself bound to it. Try to get him to the point that he considers one church as good as the next and have him go first here and then there. Then you will also have a good chance

to break him loose from his faith.

Still another obstacle: - is there indeed a God after Auschwitz? How can a merciful God allow such terrible deeds of hate? Further - if there is a God how can He permit so much unrighteousness, so much suffering, so much hate and murder?

And still another obstacle - the confession that you consider yourself incapable of any good and prone to all evil, such a profession will lead to depression, and you should abandon it. Still, in general, what good is a confession anyway? It's only a product of old time theologians. The real point is how one experiences their faith! That is the language we increasingly hear within the church in the last number of years.

### *TEMPTATION*

As if all this is not enough there are still more attacks of the devil. They can take on a variety of forms. It can be a superficial life based on the idea that we belong to the covenant and therefore everything is alright. Then we so easily attend the Lord's Supper without proper preparation and self-examination. Then we so easily convince ourselves to depart from the narrow way shown to us by our Saviour.

Devilish temptation can also consist of the questioning that leads us to all manner of doubt - Do I really belong? Am I really a child of God? Am I allowed to say such and such? Am I imagining things? Don't kid yourself; the real test will only come later. K. Schilder once wrote a little rhyme about this in his Heidelberg Catechismus II p.573.

Three things burden my heart

First, that from this life I must depart.

Even more, burdens the second,

The time when my soul will be beckoned.

But the third burdens most of all,

I don't know to where I will receive the call.

Now we should certainly not think that such thinking only takes place in old fashioned reformed circles. An approach from the point of view of election can bring people to the ridiculous fatalistic ideas that if one is elect it doesn't matter how he lives, everything will work out; or, if one is not elect, belief and obedience will not help anyway.

The devil has many arrows on his bow!

### *RELATIVISM*

It can be said that we live in an age of relativism and a thinking and acting out of automatism. This is something that dates back to Paradise but is constantly repeated in ever increasing strength. Added to that is the fact that people are constantly being pushed and are rushing around, never being able to come to rest. They have no time to read, not to mention time to learn God's Word and to test the spirits.

Relativism is very old. Pilate was already busy with it. He asked, "What is truth?" And today people certainly don't appreciate it when you explain that your faith is the true faith and that you are certain and convinced that the Lord demands this or that from us. Most people believe that you are not even allowed to say such a thing. After all, we do have a mind of our own. We don't have to

let ourselves be told how things ought to be, especially not by the Church. We don't need to permission, we will find our own way.

Speaking about true worship is no longer appreciated. After all Christianity, Islam and Hinduism all point to the same God, don't they? Discussion about the true and false church is certainly not appreciated. That is rigid, reformed thinking from the years just after the Liberation - but now we know better.

In short - what is truth? When you meet a non-Christian who lives a proper life style and who appears to be kind to their neighbour, who could be an example for many Christians in their outward behaviour - of what value then, is the Christian faith? Consider a person who has been raised within the confines of the communion of saints in the Church and is suddenly faced with the world. What happens to such a person's faith in the authority of the Bible and the confession of it as he/she has learned from their youth? The devil tries to ease people away from their faith!

The falling away from the Lord, which He has pointed to in His Word, becomes increasingly visible. We are referring to what the Lord has given the apostle to write to Timothy, and so also to us. In particular that, more and more, people will become lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. They will become selfish and only pretend to show fruits of faith. (2 Tim 3:1-5). It was already happening in those days but only become increasingly intensive as time goes on. The evil will become even more evil!

Man is becoming a law unto himself and seeks only his own pleasure.

This danger is also very real in the Church. Then man increasingly becomes the center of attention. Then we only go to Church to obtain or receive something. Then we only want the sermon to give us comfort and hope in our sadness and difficulties. Then we are no better than worldly people who only think about what they can consume. That is religious consumerism.

In all manner of ways the devil tries to get us to join in. The fact that so many people are busy with the religious needs of man, can appear very pious, but if they forget that our primary religious calling is that we rightly know and love the Lord, live with Him and do His will - then they go on a wrong road. For, our primary calling is to listen to His commandments to do them. Our life receives focus and purpose when we continue to look to the ancient mandate in paradise as our calling.

Rev. P. van Gurp

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## **Faith and Joy**

Joy and happiness are the characteristics of true faith. There must be a festive climate in the gathering of believers. One should feel as participants in a pleasant atmosphere. Hand clapping and happy songs help to create such a sense.

More than a few people have accused Reformed people of not reaching that level of joy. That accusation comes in the form of questioning whether the faith experience within the Reformed churches is real.

### *An Accusation*

In discussions with younger, as well as older, members of the church, church life is a popular topic. There are those who have difficulty with the introduction of all kinds of new things. But there are also those who have problems with the immobility of church life. The one group wants to maintain what exists, that is security. The other group wants to move along with the time, then you will not lose the youth. With regard to the establishment of a good, reformed life style it is healthy to listen well to both sides in this debate.

However, when the discussion turns to accusations that faith as found in the Reformed churches is no longer real, or, at least, unrecognizable, then we have turned to a completely different subject. And that is often the case when we hear accusations about lack of love. Even within our own circles we can hear the complaint that things are done in a rigid manner. Every week each church service is the same as the previous week. In every sermon you are directed to the seriousness of sin and are pointed to a Christ as your Redeemer. It is all so well known. There is no surprising excitement. Everything is so fixed. The spontaneity is gone. It is a boring and inflexible entity. It's a dead end, many have already said.

### *Accurate Accusations?*

When you let this type of comments sink in, you wonder if they are truly accurate accusations. Isn't there a wrong preconceived notion behind the remark that joy is characteristic of true faith? Whenever we ask about true faith we always start with Lord's Day 7 of our Heidelberg Catechism. We go to Q/A 21. True faith is a sure knowledge whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed in His Word. At the same time it is also a firm confidence that the Holy Spirit works it in my heart through the Gospel and assures me that I participate in the treasures of God's grace. This answer concludes with the words, "only for the sake of Christ's merits." That is something which we shall hold on to. For in question and answer 20 we confess that outside of Christ there is no salvation. Apart from this Saviour we lie in the depth of death.

Now such faith, that knows God's Word as a trustworthy Word, will be filled with two things. First, it will be full of joy about forgiveness and life. Secondly, it will be filled with sorrow about the seriousness of personal sin and its consequences. More can be read about that in Lord's Day 33 where it speaks about true repentance.

True faith of the righteously penitent will continuously be busy with both this joy and this sorrow. And those who only want to speak about joy forget about the sorrow for sin. Those who claim that happiness may be the only theme of a Christian gathering have not understood that each one of us is confronted with our own sin everyday again. Someone who truly believes cannot be happy about that sin. On the other hand, such a person grabs hold of the truth of the gospel. That gives joy in the grace of Christ.

### *A Joy Filled With Thanksgiving*

Joy is not a commodity that can be bought. One cannot force the experience of joy on a gathering of the congregation, nor does our Lord require that. Our God teaches us that he rules heaven, earth, and our lives. The days of our lives are in his hands. Prosperity and adversity come over us as from his fatherly hand (Lord's Day 10). We can never speak about him with sufficient respect. We are never finished with our service to his name. That's why we should be careful not to think that we might be able to chum around with this holy God as jovial friends. Respect and service are the climate in which people should appear God. We ought to be full of thanksgiving for the grace he has shown us in his own son. Then a song will come to mind, "Praise be to God with sincere reverence". Then we will seek the honour of our God in a lifelong struggle against sin and an ongoing determination to serve him according to his will. Joy in the grace of God seeks a life with him in the prayer that asks to be renewed more and more according to his image (Lord's Day 44, Q/A 115). And, yes, then our life is filled with joy because of grace. Such joy does not only seek hand-clapping and festive songs as if all sorrow has definitely past away, but such joy can also find its way in a heart downcast because of its own sin. Psalm 51:17 says, "...a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise." The lesson of this Psalm is that a person (David) has learned to humble himself because of sorrow will be received by God. When such a person lays his broken spirit before God, he grants him a renewed spirit.

#### Joy in Christ

Someone who speaks about a joyful worship service, but then only speaks about the outer visible elements has forgotten the source true joy. That source is Jesus Christ our Prince of life. That's why the sermons must include our misery as well as his saving work. Those who consider that "a boring business" will never find the true pitch of joy. If the love for Christ the Redeemer is not present, and when his position as head of the church may not be mentioned, then all exterior appearances are as noisy gongs.

Therefore, "...rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed." (1 Peter 4:13)

H. W. van Egmond

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#### **REPORT ABOUT SYNOD LEUSDEN, THE NETHERLANDS**

Synod Leusden has unanimously agreed to support the evangelism project in Maastricht. This support will include financial backing in the order of 85,000 guilders towards a total budget for a missionary of 150,000 guilders. The balance of the budget will be raised by the Church at Brunssum, which would be the calling Church. They have been promised financial help from Classis Noord Brabant/Limburg and Regional Synod Zeeland, Noord Brabant and Limburg.

Committee spokesman, Rev.T.deBoer noted that, although the plan and vision offered no guarantees for growth, they were soundly based and formed. The wider cooperation that had been secured also fell in line with what Synod Leeuwarden had said about this matter.

The congregation of Maastricht presently consists of 75 members of which a good forty are students. There are also approximately fifteen contacts. These consist of some who are following Bible courses to others who attend the services every Lord's Day. At present there is a church service in Maastricht every Sunday morning while in the afternoon the members travel to Brunssem, some 35 kilometers away.

One of the matters that Synod Leusden has already dealt with is the report from Deputies for Financial Assistance for Evangelism. Synod Leeuwarden first appointed deputies for this matter. They included in the mandate that the Churches closest to the evangelism work should pay the most, Classis more than Regional Synod and General Synod least of all. Deputies now proposed to Synod Leusden that a formula of 25 - 6 - 4 - 1 be used. This will mean that the local church (es) will provide 25 guilders per member, Classis 6 guilders, Regional Synod 4 and General Synod 1. Of course the amounts may vary according to the size of the project, but the formula will remain the same.

Although Reg. Synods Zeeland, Limburg and Noord Brabant had not been able to provide their share for this project, deputies, as well as Committee 2 were of the opinion that this was explainable due to those regions involvement with evangelism work in Gent and Venl.

Although the majority of Committee 2 felt that a spending ceiling should be established for such projects, unanimity could not be attained. After some plenary discussion it was decided to leave this matter until Synod established all quotas.

The matter of the size of the Acts has also already been raised. The first clerk, Rev. J. Luiten suggested that the Acts not be allowed to exceed 750 pages. This is the precise number of pages of the Acts of Synod Ommen. Apparently Rev. J. Luiten was first clerk there as well. It appears that the size and content of the Acts has been controvertial over the last two Synods. Some have complained that the Acts of Ommen were too large and that the Acts Berkel-Rodenrijs were too small. In any case the suggestion of the first clerk was adopted. This will mean that not all reports of deputies will be included in full. Only relevant passages will be included.

Three letters dealing with a variety of subjects (subscription form, women's voting and one dealing with a number of items) were rejected because they had either not followed the church orderly way or did not bring forth new grounds.

### *Hymns*

One of the main subjects to be dealt with at Synod Leusden is the matter of additional hymns. Much has been written, in the Netherland and even elsewhere, about this subject. Synod received 350 letters about this subject. But just like every other matter, this too must be prepared by a committee. Rev. J.A. Schelling explained how the committee has dealt with the matter up till now. He indicated that Committee 3 had taken 40 letters and tried to determine the main headings that people were writing about. They came to 11 general topics. They included what Synod Berkel actually meant with their decision

hymns, how deputies dealt with their mandate, whether of not a church was allowed to introduce proposed, but unapproved hymns into the worship service in light of Art.67 of the Dutch Church Order, aren't 255 new hymns too many? With the main topics in mind, each of the seven members

of the committee was assigned 50 letters to apply them to the several established topics. In the end it was determined that 18 points needed to be addressed.

Although the committee has not concluded how it should deal with this topic, the members regularly discuss the various aspects of singing in the worship services. It is anticipated that a soon to be scheduled plenary discussion may give some more guidance to the formulation of a proposal by the committee.

Rev. G. Syms of the Reformed Church in the US (RCUS) has addressed Synod within the sister-church relationship that exists between the two federations. In connection with his disapproval of the revised marriage form Rev. Syms warned the Liberated Churches in the Netherlands not to sacrifice Ephesians 5 to the spirit of the times. He suggested that approving for use a draft of the new marriage form is not proper. He also spoke disapprovingly about the practice of women holding on to their maiden names after marriage.

Committee Three has already reported about the work of deputies who were mandated by Synod Berkel and Rodenrijs to review the articles of the Church Order dealing with the liturgy. Deputies were to review incoming opinions of the churches and serve this Synod with recommendations. Deputies suggested to Synod that no changes be made. Synod agreed. During the discussion and in some of the grounds the sentiment can be found that the Churches are not to consider the Church Order so strict that there is absolutely no room for a deviation on one point or an other. However, the idea was expressed that when Churches in federation agree about certain rules loyalty to that agreement is expected, If, then, certain circumstances in certain times call for some modification no one will become angry. At the same time, the loyalty to the spirit of the rules will prevent misuse of any freedoms churches may consider themselves to have.

In the matter of special or modified services for handicapped brothers and sisters, Synod accepted the modified versions of the forms (Baptism, Lord's Supper, and Public Profession of Faith). With regard to a future need for deputies for liturgical variances for the handicapped it was felt that some assistance may still be required for the churches. The types and forms of handicaps are so varied that more work might be necessary and variations to the forms may still have to be made in particular circumstances.

Four Reg. Synods have asked this General Synod to appoint deputies for evangelism. This will be done. These deputies will receive the mandate to stimulate the work of evangelism in the local congregations. They will also help in providing material and methodology.

The matter of the Theological University in Kampen was also dealt with by Synod. Several changes in the management of the University are proposed. Also a futuristic look gave rise to the term Kennis Centrum in Kampen. Translated this becomes Knowledge Center. Our source, br. P. G. B. de Vries, cautioned his readers not to become alarmed, as the focus of the work at the Theological University in Kampen will remain the preparation for men for the office of ministry.

Synod is about to take a week off.

This summary by PdB is taken from articles written by synodically appointed correspondent P. G. B. de Vries on Synod's Web page, [www.synode.org](http://www.synode.org).