

Communion of Saints

By David Feddes

Today our focus is on the communion of saints, and we are going to be looking especially at some passages from the letter of the apostle Paul to the Philippians. I want to start with how Paul says hello. Sometimes when we read the letters of the New Testament, especially those of us who are preachers or people who are studying the Bible, we hurry through the hellos and then get to the important stuff, where he is talking about the truths they ought to believe or the practices they ought to do or change. But I think it is a big mistake to hurry through the hellos. We are going to look at a lot of the hellos, and let us start with his hello to the Philippians.

“To all the **saints** in Christ Jesus... I thank my God ... because of your **partnership** in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all **partakers** with me of grace... For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:1-7)”
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You see the outpouring of love, the feeling, and the affection that the great apostle has for the people who are going to be reading this letter. The two words we are going to be focusing on in this message are *communion* and *saints*. You are a saint. That is one message Paul is sending. He says there is this partnership. The word there is *koinōnia*, “because of your partnership in the gospel.” That is, your fellowship, your communion in the gospel. Here's my overall outline:

- Who are we? Saints
- How do we relate? Communion

Who are we? Saints!

Here is Paul's hello to the Christian **Romans**: "To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints... I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world... I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. (Romans 1:7-12) Paul is saying, "God loves you. Your faith is famous. You and I can build each other's faith and each other's gifts." He is affirming them and saying wonderful things about them and how much he loves them.

Here's how he says hello to the **Corinthians**: “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints... I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge... so that you are not lacking in any gift... Christ will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:2-8).

If you go on to read the Corinthian letters, you find that a lot of these people are bickering with each other, fighting with each other, and dividing into factions. Some of them are engaged in some of the grossest sexual immorality. Others are treating the Lord's Supper in a very bad way.

Some are denying that the resurrection lies in the future. There are all kinds of wickednesses and sins that some of these Corinthians have gotten themselves into. But what is the first thing Paul says to them? You're saints! God has given you all kinds of grace. You are rich in gifts, and you are going to look great on judgment day. It sounds like what he said to the Philippians, that God began a good work in you and he is going to bring it to completion. It is amazing, when you consider the hard things he was about to say to the Corinthians, that this is how he says hello to them and who he really considers them to be in spite of all the stuff he is about to talk about.

Hello to the **Ephesians**: "To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus... Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places... I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you" (Ephesians 1:1 ,3, 15-16).

Some people, when they think of the apostle Paul, think only of his doctrine. Paul has a very strong doctrine of sin, of how terribly humanity has fallen, how all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and of our total corruption in sin. Some take that to be Paul's final word on Christians, that we are totally depraved and God is going to pluck us from sin and bring us into glory. But that is not the whole truth. It is not the central truth about the believer. Paul insists that believers are first of all saints. Paul is clear that there is something about us that is much worse than we want to admit. Even after we become Christians, there is something called the flesh, an evil power within us that is worse than anything we want to admit. But even so, he insists there is something in us that is better and more glorious than many of us realize. So he calls us saints: "You have every spiritual blessing, and what I hear about you fills me with thanksgiving all the time."

Hello to the **Colossians**. "To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven" (Colossians 1:2-5). You are faithful, brothers and sisters, family in Christ. I am thankful for your faith, your hope, and your love.

Hello to the **Thessalonians**: "We give thanks to God always for all of you... remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you... And you became imitators of us and of the Lord... you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia... your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything" (1 Thessalonians 1:2-8). Paul sees faith, hope, and love in them and rejoices in them. Paul knows God chose them, not because he had some secret peek at God's list of who got picked, but because they received God's Word and lived it.

When he writes his second letter to them, he is still saying a lot of the same thing. "Your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring" (2 Thessalonians 1:3-4). You people are amazing, says Paul. I brag about your faith and your love and your bravery. I brag about you all the time. Later on in the letter, he says some hard-hitting things. He tells people not to be idle

and declares, "If a man will not work, he shall not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10). He corrects mistakes they are making about beliefs concerning Jesus' second coming. Paul is not living in some fantasy land when he says nice things in his opening greeting. He is about to say much tougher things, but first he says the basic truth about them.

When Paul writes not only to churches but to individuals, listen to how he talks. To **Timothy** he says, "To Timothy, my true child in the faith" (1 Timothy 1:2). He also says, "To Timothy, my beloved child... I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy... I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. (2 Timothy 1:2-7)" (2 Timothy 1:6-7). I love you, Timothy. Seeing you makes me happy. Always remember, you have what it takes. "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young" (1 Timothy 4:12). Remember God's gift that is in you. This faith was not only your grandmother's faith and not only your mother's faith, it now lives in you also" (2 Timothy 1:5).

To **Titus** he says, "To Titus, my true child in a common faith" (Titus 1:4).

To **Philemon** he says, "To Philemon our beloved fellow worker... I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints... For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you" (Philemon 1:1-7).

True reminders

Why does Paul say this over and over to different people? One reason is because it is true. You do not find things in the Bible that are not true. Paul is speaking truth when he says: You are saints. You are loved by God. You are chosen by God. You are worth bragging about. I see evidence of great things, and God is going to keep it going until, on the day of judgment, you are standing tall in his presence, and he is welcoming you and rejoicing in you. Paul says these things because they are true.

Another reason he says them is because we need to hear them. It is easy to forget that we are saints. What is a saint? Someone who is set apart. Someone who is made special. Someone who is declared holy and made holy by God. We hear these things in the Scriptures because God wants us to know who we are and how he wants us to see our fellow believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. It needs to be said again and again and again. A saint is someone set apart.

A saint is not someone who, after careful examination by a church hierarchy, is decided to have performed at least two miracles, lived an extraordinary life, and is now someone you can pray to. You do not pick out a few unusual people and make them saints and pray to them. You are a saint if you belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. That was something the Reformation recovered when it emphasized the priesthood of all believers, the holiness, the set-apartness, and the ministry of all believers to all believers.

There is one letter, Galatians, where Paul did not start with a very positive hello. He did say "grace and peace to you" in a very brief greeting, but he did not have much nice to say about

them at the beginning. Instead, he thundered, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel, which is really no gospel at all” (Galatians 1:6–7). He goes on to say that if anybody preaches a different gospel, “let him be eternally condemned” (Galatians 1:8–9). That is how he starts. Sometimes strong problems require strong measures. Paul is not quite ready to call them saints right away because they are in danger of ditching the whole gospel, and if you abandon the gospel, you are no longer a saint.

However, by the time he gets to the middle of the letter to the Galatians, he starts reminding them who they are. "In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith... And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (Galatians 1:2, 3:26, 4:6-7) This was the letter he started in the harshest way, but halfway through he is saying, you are sons of God and heirs of everything God has.

When we think about the communion of saints, we need to accept what is said again and again in the hello parts of these letters. They remind us who we really are in Christ Jesus and by the mercy of God.

Paul did not invent this. It was Jesus himself who said, “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). It was Jesus who said, “The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good” (Luke 6:45). Jesus knew that when he transforms someone and gives that person a new heart, whatever else is true of them, they are saints, and they do have a new and good and holy heart he has put within them, even though there are still remaining elements of the flesh they must fight against.

To quote Paul again, “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16). That is why you are a saint. You have the life of God himself, the life of Christ through his Holy Spirit, inside you. To quote another apostle, Peter, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (1 Peter 2:9).

That was a lot of verses and a lot of words to make a couple of basic points. See yourself this way. See other believers this way. It is our task to see others as saints of God and to realize that we ourselves are saints of God.

Some of you have read *The Silver Chair* by C. S. Lewis. I want to remind you of that story where Rilian has been under an enchantment for ten years. He is supposed to be the future king, but he is under the enchantment of an evil being. Only about one hour a week does he really remember who he is, and during that hour he is bound to a silver chair, and then he is back under the spell again. Eventually, some people from Narnia get there and rescue him from that chair. When he sees them, he begins to realize again who he is and where he belongs: “You may well believe that I remember Narnia, for I am really a prince of Narnia. While I was enchanted, I could not remember my true self.”

One purpose of us getting together every Sunday, as well as our interactions with fellow believers throughout the week, is to remind each other who we are. We are saints. That is my first main point: Who are we? Saints.

How do we relate? Communion

How do we relate in the communion [Greek: *koinōnia*] of saints? Let us look at what Paul says in Philippians 1-2.

Stand firm in one spirit

"Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that **you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel** without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved--and that by God. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have" (Philippians 1:27-30).

Paul says to stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel. I always picture the reenactment of the old Roman formation where soldiers learned to march in harmony, with shields on all sides and above them, protecting them from the arrows of archers and from other attacks. In order to be a unit like that, one thing you cannot have is somebody inside the formation pulling out a dagger and stabbing fellow soldiers in the back, or knocking others out of formation and attacking them.

Sometimes we hear tragic stories from the battlefield of soldiers being killed by friendly fire. They are accidentally, and sometimes intentionally, shot by members of their own military force. What a tragedy that is! That is what happens when the communion of saints becomes warfare against each other rather than warfare against the enemies that attack the saints.

Later in this letter, the apostle says, "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord" (Philippians 4:2). After all the wonderful things he said earlier in the letter, he says, in effect, "Ladies, please get along. You have been great fellow workers, and it is time to team up again." We need those reminders in the communion of saints, because friendly fire is devastating. When we are together, we are able to stand against the attacks of the enemy, remembering who the real enemy is. The enemy is not our fellow believers, the saints.

Paul says in another place, "If a man is disobedient to our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother" (2 Thessalonians 3:14-15). There is a big difference between telling someone, "You no good rotten enemy," and saying, "Brother, there is something we need to deal with here." Paul wants us to stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.

We need to contend for that faith in different ways. I will mention two kinds of attacks. One is the attack of false teaching. When we are together and holding fast to the faith, if one among us is under attack, or starting to entertain ideas far from the gospel, or scratching their head and wondering whether what they have always believed is really true, the reinforcement of fellow believers and directing them again to the truth of God can be very valuable. We are contending for the faith of the gospel, for the truth. Paul speaks of “the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). Part of the way the church is a pillar and foundation of the truth is not that it replaces the Bible or is equal to the Bible, but that it is the community of the Bible, built on the Bible, reminding one another what God says and what the Bible teaches.

We contend for the truth of the gospel because if it is just you and your Bible on your own, you can end up with some very distorted ideas. Not every individual reader of the Bible gets the message right on their own. It is when we are together reading the Bible that we often correct each other’s misunderstandings. An individual is easier to pick off alone than when standing together. Every so often there has been a heroic reformer who had to stand almost alone when the truth of God had fallen into disrepair even within the church itself, but for the most part God intends the church to reinforce one another in the truth.

That is one way to contend for the faith of the gospel, helping each other to know and hold on to the truth when it comes under attack. That attack is coming in our age like never before. It comes from academics who undermine and attack the Word of God, and from moral perspectives where ideas almost never tried in the history of the Western world are introduced as normal, moral, and beyond question. In such times, the church had better stand together.

Another way the saints need to stand together is when attacks come in the form of grief, suffering, and trials. Paul wrote about that. There are people who attack you and persecutions that come, but there are also circumstances that weigh very heavily on you and overwhelm you. Grievances, the death of loved ones, painful sicknesses, trials that exhaust you, drain you, and make you feel like collapsing. That is when we need to bear each other’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ, supporting, carrying, and defending each other when Satan tries to exploit those painful and difficult circumstances to bring us down. The communion of saints is felt very strongly when we are in trouble and when our hearts are breaking.

We need to stand firm in one spirit, contending for the truth when heretics and lies challenge it, but also to contend for the truth when it is hard to believe that God is in charge, when it is hard to believe that things are going to turn out well, when it is hard to believe that Jesus Christ reigns. Then we need to remind each other of these things.

Put others first

Vital for the communion of saints is putting others first. Paul writes, “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you

should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:1-11).

This is one of the great passages in all the New Testament about what it is to live as Christians and about who Jesus is and what he has done. I want to highlight how Paul is applying this passage. The latter part, about Jesus being equal with God, then humbling himself, and then being exalted again, is extremely valuable for revealing the ministry and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. But the apostle Paul is using this hymn to say, in effect, "Now I want you to be like that. I want you to have the mind of Christ Jesus in you."

One thing this means for the way we relate in communion with each other is that we relate out of a sense of wealth. We are aware of the wealth that we have. This is important because sometimes Paul’s command to act out of humility and to consider others better than yourself can be misunderstood. You might say, “In order to help others, I guess job one is to feel like I am quite vile and worthless, that I ought to be ashamed of myself, and then I should see others as superior and try to help others.” If that is your approach, you are going to be nearly useless to others. If you start with nothing, you have nothing to offer. You can end up simply wallowing in your own shame and worthlessness.

What happens in this passage with Jesus? Did Jesus come and minister to us because he was worthless and was just trying to help some other people out? The passage says he knew he was in very nature God, but he did not hang on to all of his riches as God. As Jesus knew his riches as God, Paul appeals to the fact that we know we have encouragement in Christ. We have comfort in his love. We have fellowship with the Spirit. We have tenderness and compassion. When Paul says “*if* you have these things,” the original Greek might be better translated “*since* you have these things.” In Colossians 3, for instance, it says, “If you have been raised with Christ,” but he is clearly speaking to people he assumes have already been raised with Christ. He is really saying, *since* this is the case, then do this. So he is saying, *since* you have encouragement in Christ, comfort in his love, fellowship with the Spirit, and tenderness and compassion, now minister to one another.

Just as Jesus had tremendous wealth and out of that wealth poured himself out for others, we have tremendous wealth that we can pour out for others. As Jesus joined humanity and served and sacrificed for us, we join other believers and put them first.

Again, when Paul says, “Consider others better than yourselves,” you are going to waste your time if you go around saying, “I have to look at every person I have ever met and persuade myself that they are a superior life form to me.” Is that what he is talking about? Consider others better than yourselves. That might not be too hard if I look at someone who has lived longer, is wiser, and perhaps better than I am. But if I look at somebody else, I might have a harder time.

They might be less mature or less learned. I may know about some really bad things they did last week. Am I supposed to say, “That person is vastly superior to me”? If that is how we do this, we are going to waste our time making comparisons, which is not wise at all. You really ought to get out of the comparison game completely.

When you consider others better than yourself, it means you are putting them ahead of yourself. You are putting their interests ahead of your own. Occasionally there may be an element of truth in considering others better than yourself simply because you ought to know your own sins better than you know anyone else’s. There is that element of truth. But overall, the point is that out of the wealth of what God has given you in Christ, you are ready to pour it out for others because you are putting them first.

You do not have to be locked into two things: selfish ambition and vain conceit. Selfish ambition and vain conceit are often signs of people who do not know who they really are. They are always grabbing. They are always trying to climb the ladder and stomp on any hands on the rungs beneath them. They act out of selfish ambition because they have to get ahead of others. With vain conceit, they are posers. They are always trying to show the good side, make an impression, and hide whatever is not so impressive.

This is true of all of us to some degree. When I emphasize that we are saints, do not forget that old flesh is still there, always wanting to put ourselves first and always wanting to look good in the presence of others.

Stop trying to impress others, and seek to bless others. That is how we are to relate to each other. As we do that, no task is too low. Jesus was humble. Does that mean Jesus thought he was worth less than anybody else? He knew better. He was humble because no task was too low for him to do, even the washing of feet. No suffering was too terrible for him to bear, and no sinner was too rotten for him to associate with. That is what it means to be humble. Nobody is too bad for you to associate with. No task is too lowly for you to do. No trouble is too nasty for you to endure. You are not too good to go through those kinds of things or to spend time with those kinds of people. That is real humility. It is not going around comparing yourself and saying, “I just found 5,843 people who are better than I am.” That is not how it works. It is forgetting about that whole comparison entirely and saying, “I am rich in Christ. There is a lot to do, and I want to serve humbly as my master did.”

When we look at how this is rooted, we find it in the words of Jesus Christ himself. When Paul says to have the mind of Christ, he is saying you can have that mind of Christ because the Holy Spirit is already in you, and God the Father, who exalted Jesus, is the same Father who has adopted you as sons and is going to exalt you. All of this echoes the voice of the master in John 17. Jesus prays and says, “They are not of the world, even as I am not of it” (John 17:16). That is what a saint is. Your origin, your life, your identity does not come from this world. It comes from another world and from God himself. “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth... I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be

one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:17-23)

That is communion. That is union. It reflects the union of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus' point is that the unity and love among believers is the way the church proclaims the blessed Trinity. If you proclaim the doctrine of the Trinity in a church full of bickering, fighting, and division, your words may be sound and orthodox, but who in the world is going to believe you about what the life of the blessed Trinity is really like? Who will believe what you say about the love of Father for Son, the love of the Spirit, and that this love is poured out into our hearts, that God is in us and we are in God, and that we are bound together as one? That trinitarian communion is the source of our life and our unity, and it is also the supreme way that we proclaim it. Jesus says the world is going to know him by the complete unity his followers have. So let us prize this communion of saints, because it is one of the chief ways of proclaiming the gospel and displaying the being of God himself.

Koinōnia is sometimes translated communion, sometimes fellowship, sometimes partaking, sometimes participation. If you were to go through a concordance and see how *koinōnia* is translated in the New Testament, you would find all those shades of meaning.

The Bible gives many images, each worthy of a whole message and a lot of meditation. A body has many parts, yet they all work together as one body. A household has a father, a mother, children, and in biblical times servants or extended members, all working together. A temple has many stones and building blocks, yet it comes together as one splendid building. An assembly, *ekklēsia*, the church, is a people called together to become one. An army has many soldiers, but one objective and one commander.

This communion is rooted in the communion of the Trinity, the love bond of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Connecting with Christ in each other

It is experienced in our personal connections with one another as well as with our God. Part of this relating is noticing and nurturing the Spirit's presence in other people, his actions and activity in others, and his gifts in each other. In our life together as a congregation, this is where the communion of saints is extremely important, helping people notice that God is in them when they may have a hard time noticing it themselves, seeing what God is doing in their lives, and using our spiritual gifts, talents, and personalities to bless one another.

Larry Crabb, a Christian psychologist, says that a careful exploration of the redeemed heart is like mining for gold in a dirty cave. You may have been thinking, "Paul said all that nice stuff about people, and all this talk about saints sounds good, but we know each other." Many of us have been around a while. You know me, and "saint" is not the only word you would use to describe me. On some days, at some moments, it might come to mind, but probably not that often. I know some of you, and "saint" does not always pop into my mind the moment I see your face.

When people go looking for gold, do they expect to find it in ready-made bricks lying on the floor, one hundred percent pure? You do not find gold that way. Gold often becomes pure only after a lot of processing. It starts mixed in with a whole pile of dirt. If someone said, "I am not going to look for gold unless I find it free from any speck of dirt," there would be no gold discovered or mined in the entire world. Every gold mine is mostly dirt, if you really get down to it. But a little bit of gold in a lot of dirt makes for a supremely valuable gold mine.

When we relate to each other, sometimes the amount of dirt may seem to outweigh the value of the gold. But when you really total it up, the gold of God's presence, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the good things God has begun in redeemed people and in their hearts far surpass the clutter and the dirt that still need to be removed.

One of the great favors we can do for each other is to notice and point out the gold, as well as, at times, to help sort through the dirt and say, "I do not think that is so golden, friend. That is something that needs to be refined." God will use other means to refine us as well, sometimes through trials, sometimes through difficulties, sometimes even through blessings in our lives. One of the ways the gold is sorted from the dirt is through our interactions with each other. When we explore each other's hearts and get to know one another, even when you come across some dirt and say, "Ew, yuck," do not be too quick to write off a fellow believer. Say instead, "I know there is some gold in there somewhere."

Sometimes we talk about someone having a golden heart as a kind of proverb, but it really is true that every believer has a golden heart. It is just not pure gold yet. We need to be confident of that.

One way to do this is to take our cue from Barnabas. When new Gentiles in Antioch first became Christians, they were former idolaters who had lived wicked lifestyles and had just come to Christ. They did not yet know much of the Bible. They still had an awful lot of dirt. The apostles in Jerusalem knew exactly whom to send into that situation to help out. "They sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith" (Acts 11:22-24). Barnabas, whose name means Son of Encouragement, had this goodness, this faith, and this fullness of the Holy Spirit flowing out of him. Wherever he went, he could see the evidence of the grace of God. When he saw that, he was glad. Even if he saw other things that were bad, he still rejoiced when he saw evidence of God's grace. That is what an encourager does. That is what *koinōnia* does. An encourager believes in you and comes alongside you to mobilize the Christ-life, the life of the Holy Spirit that God put in you when you were born again.

When we connect with each other in Christ, something wonderful happens. Christ puts a unique glory in each of us, and we display that glory in the way we relate to others, and we delight in it when we see that glory in the people around us. I had a conversation with my wife, and she mentioned that she didn't think she was accomplishing anything very special. But from my perspective, there are quite a few people in this church who would not be here if it were not for her. Yet she sometimes thinks there is nothing very special about her. You have to be careful about that, because you can underestimate who you are and the huge impact you have.

Sometimes that impact comes through particular spiritual gifts, where others can recognize and say, “They really stand out in that.” But often it is simply being who you are and who God made you to be. What a marvel it is that God is creating someone with this glory, this gold, this wonder in them.

We are to display that glory in the way we relate to others, not by showing off, but by knowing that when we connect with people, we have glory to share. The Holy Spirit is in me. Jesus promised, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (John 7:37–38). When you have the Holy Spirit in you, you have rivers that will overflow and bless others. At the same time, you are looking for those rivers of blessing in them, and you delight in them. You connect in order to share what Jesus is doing in you.

It is nice when we give each other compliments, and there can even be an element of the Spirit in that. “You look really nice today.” “I like your dress.” “The food you made was delicious.” Such compliments are good forms of encouragement. But there is also a deeper communion of saints where we look for what God is really up to in a person and what is truly special about them, and then we say that to them.

Instead of only saying to your child, “Thanks for taking out the garbage,” which is good and right, it is especially important to look for where God’s hand is at work in them and to be alert to that. I cannot prescribe exactly what that looks like for everyone. I am simply saying to be on the lookout for it among the people you know best, starting with your own spouse, your own children, your closest friends. Be alert to it, and then be ready to speak of it when God gives you the opportunity. In that way, we share what Christ is doing within each of us. We battle against the hindrances we talked about earlier, and we strengthen each other. As the Holy Spirit of Christ in you connects with the Holy Spirit of Christ in me, we grow in Christ’s power, in his love, and in his insight.

The philosopher Schopenhauer said that humans are a lot like porcupines. They have a hard time staying warm apart from each other, but when they get too close, they poke each other. They have to find a polite distance where they are not too close but not too far. But Schopenhauer was an atheist, and in Christ it’s possible even for porcupines to snuggle up pretty close and warm each other. They just need to relax the spines a little and draw near. You do not get that warmth when you maintain a polite distance, when “Hi, how are you doing?” is as deep as the conversation goes. Warmth comes when we really know each other, when we know each other’s glories and each other’s struggles, and when we show encouragement, comfort, tenderness, and compassion.

Jesus himself states the test of whether we are his. In formal doctrine, the marks of the true church are often said to be the faithful preaching of the word, the right administration of the sacraments, and the proper exercise of Christian discipline. There is truth in that. But Jesus also gave this test. ““Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). Scripture says, “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death” (1 John 3:14). The marks of orthodoxy and the proper

conduct of the church as an institution are important, but the test Jesus gives is this: do you love each other the way Jesus loves you?

Let us end by asking and answering these questions from the Heidelberg Catechism.

Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 21

Q & A 54

Q. What do you believe concerning “the holy catholic church”?

A. I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. And of this community I am and always will be a living member.

Q & A 55

Q. What do you understand by “the communion of saints”?

A. First, that believers one and all, as members of this community, share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts. Second, that each member should consider it a duty to use these gifts readily and joyfully for the service and enrichment of the other members.

Communion of Saints
By David Feddes
Slide Contents

Communion of saints

To all the **saints** in Christ Jesus... I thank my God ... because of your **partnership** in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all **partakers** with me of grace... For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:1-7)

Communion of saints

- Who are we? Saints
- How do we relate? Communion

Who are we? Saints!

To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints... I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world... I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. (Romans 1:7-12)

- God loves you! Your faith is famous! You and I can build each other's faith and gifts!

Who are we? Saints!

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints... I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge... so that you are not lacking in any gift... Christ will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 1:2-8)

- You are grace-filled and rich in gifts! You're going to look great on judgment day!

Who are we? Saints!

To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus... Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places... I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you. (Ephesians 1:1,3, 15-16)

- You have every spiritual blessing in Christ! Your faith and love fill me with thanks!

Who are we? Saints!

To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. (Colossians 1:2-5)

- You are faithful! You are family in Christ! I'm thankful for your faith, hope, and love!

Who are we? Saints!

We give thanks to God always for all of you... remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you... And you became imitators of us and of the Lord... you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia... your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. (1 Thessalonians 1:2-8)

Who are we? Saints!

Your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring. (2 Thessalonians 1:3-4)
- You people are amazing! I brag about your faith, love, and bravery all the time!

Who are we? Saints!

To Timothy, my true child in the faith (1 Timothy 1:1)
To Timothy, my beloved child... I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy... I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. (2 Timothy 1:2-7)
- I love you, son. Seeing you makes me happy. Remember, you've got what it takes!

Who are we? Saints!

To Titus, my true child in a common faith (Titus 1:4).
To Philemon our beloved fellow worker... I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints... For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. (Philemon 1:1-7)

Who are we? Not slaves, but sons and saints!

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel... In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith... And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (Galatians 1:2, 3:26, 4:6-7)

Who are we?

You are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14)
The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good. (Luke 6:45)
Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? (1 Corinthians 3:16)
You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession. (1 Peter 2:9)

Remind each saint of their true self: "You may well believe that I remember Narnia, for I am Rilian, Prince of Narnia. While I was enchanted I could not remember my true self."

Communion of saints

- Who are we? Saints
- How do we relate? Communion

^{1:27} Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that **you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel** ²⁸ without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved--and that by God. ²⁹ For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, ³⁰ since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have. (Philippians 1:27-30)

^{2:1} If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ⁴ Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

⁵ Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:1-11)

Christ's mind in you

- **Aware of wealth:** As Jesus knew his riches as God, so we know encouragement in Christ, comfort in his love, fellowship with the Spirit, tenderness and compassion.
- **Eager to share and sacrifice:** As Jesus joined humanity, slaved and suffered for us, so we join other believers and put them first.
- **Confident of glory:** As God exalted Jesus, he promises to exalt those who serve humbly.

Trinitarian communion

They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth... I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:16-23)

How do we relate? Communion

- *Koinonia* = communion, fellowship, partaking, participating
- Some other biblical pictures of relating: body, household, temple, assembly, army
- Rooted in communion of Trinity
- Experienced in personal connection
- Noticing and nurturing the Spirit's presence, actions, and gifts in each other

A careful exploration of the redeemed heart is like mining for gold in a dirty cave. (Larry Crabb, *Connecting*)

An encourager's vision

They sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith. (Acts 11:22-24)

- *An encourager believes in you and comes alongside you to mobilize your Christ-life.*

Connecting with Christ in each other

- In heart-to-heart connections, you display the unique glory of Christ in you, and you delight in the unique glories of Christ in others.
- Christians connect in order to share what Christ is doing within us, to battle together against hindrances to Christ within, and to strengthen each other.
- As Christ in you connects with Christ in me, I grow in Christ's power, insight, and love.

Prickly personalities get close and warm each other: encouragement, comfort, tenderness, compassion

Test of belonging to Jesus

“Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

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