

## **Series: Apostles' Creed #11**

### **This Message I Believe in the Communion of the Saints**

#### **Scripture I Corinthians 1:1-9; 26-30**

We are in the third and last paragraph of the Creed. This is the paragraph which focuses on the Holy Spirit. The Apostles' Creed lists five blessings brought to us by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit unites us with Jesus Christ, giving us membership in the "holy catholic Church." Because we are members of the universal Church, we can have communion with both God and other believers. This is the blessing we will concentrate on today. In the next three weeks we will think about the other blessings of the Holy Spirit, the "forgiveness of sins," the future "resurrection of our bodies," and finally, "the life everlasting."

Scripture has a lot to say about "communion" and "saints." I would like to begin with the subject "saints."

Today there are many ideas about the identity of the saints depending on the traditions of people. Individuals who come from a Roman Catholic background are familiar the system of beatification and canonization. In order to be beatified, a person must be either a martyr of the Church, or a person who, through his or her intercession, has performed specific miracles, or a person who was known for heroic virtues. The Roman Catholic Church has more than 5000 individuals who are recognized for their miracles and virtues.

The New Testament defines a saint differently than does the Roman Catholic tradition. Whenever the Apostle Paul wrote letters to groups of believers, such as at Rome, Ephesus, and Philippi, he often addressed the believers as "saints." The New Testament gives us several definitions and descriptions of a "saint."

One of the passages is I Corinthians 1:1-9. Let's read these verses.

These words were written to the members of “the church of God in Corinth.” In a previous message in this series, we said that there were two historical meanings of this word which is translated into our English language as “church.” The word “church” in the New Testament refers to individuals who have been “called out” [*ekklesia*] of the world and who, therefore, “belong to the Lord” [*kuriake*]. When we put these two terms together we conclude that the Church is comprised of people who are sovereignly chosen by God Himself and on whom He places His mark of ownership.

We learn from verse 2 of our reading that there are three important characteristics of individuals who were members of the church fellowship in Corinth. They were “sanctified in Christ Jesus,” they were “called to be holy,” and they were included among those who “call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” We know from other portions of Scripture that these phrases describe individuals who responded to the call of God, placed their faith in the atonement made possible by Jesus Christ, were reborn by the Holy Spirit, and declared to be members of God’s spiritual family.

Paul specifically links the believers in Corinth with “all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The believers in Corinth were one local church of God in a specific geographical location. However, Paul makes clear that they were linked to the universal Church of Jesus Christ which is comprised of individuals who are called out from all the cultures of the earth.

Although there are three characteristics, we need to focus today on the phrase “called to be holy.” In some translations, the word “holy” is replaced with the word “saints.” This is because the Greek word “*hagioi*,” can be translated either “holy” or “the people who are holy;” hence “saints.” This Greek word “*hagioi*” is closely related to the word “sanctified,” which means to be set apart as belonging to Christ.

So here is our preliminary Biblical description of a “saint:” A saint is an ordinary individual who has been called by God to be a member of the universal Church of Jesus Christ. This person calls on the name of Jesus, is set apart for service to Him, and is identified with Jesus’ lifestyle of holiness.

“Saints.” Paul referred to all the believers in the fellowship at Corinth as “saints.” What would he say about us? Look around at the people present in this worship service. The people in this room are saints in God’s eyes assuming that they fulfill the Biblical requirements. Saints gathered together in one location are a local church.

A careful study of this letter to the Corinthian Church indicates something shocking and even scandalous about the situation there. Some of the saints in Corinth were far from saintly in their behavior. They were jealous and quarreled. They were sexually immoral, greedy, idolatrous, drunken, thieves, and other evil behaviors. Their worship practices were chaotic. In view of the Corinthian’s lifestyle, it seems strange that Paul, in verse 4, was “always thanking God” for them. However, Paul understood something that made him thankful. Some of that information is in verses 4-9.

In these verses, Paul gives us additional information about how believers acquire the identity of “saint.” Let me alert you to what you are going to see in these verses. You will notice that the Initiator of the benefits which are mentioned is God Himself. He has given grace “in Christ Jesus,” and in Christ Jesus He has “enriched” the saints “in every way.” As a result, the believers do not lack any spiritual gift. [According to later chapters in this letter, a spiritual gift is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.]

In addition, we read that God will preserve the faith of the saints so that they will be strong to the end. He will keep the saints blameless until Christ comes again. We can count on this because God will be faithful to complete His calling of His saints. Verse 9 emphasizes that God called the Corinthian saints into fellowship with Christ and that He will complete what He started in their lives.

There are five repetitions of the name of Jesus Christ in verses 4-9. This emphasizes the fact that all the purposes of God have been worked out in Him. Scripture makes it clear that all facets of an individual’s salvation, whether they deal with the past, present, or future, have been made possible through the plans of God and the actions of Jesus Christ. Saints are those individuals who receive the benefits of God’s sovereign initiative and activity. Paul was thankful to God for the grace which was made available to the saints through Jesus Christ. We can also say a hearty “thank you” and “praise God” for His work in our lives.

The saints in Corinth had come out of pagan backgrounds, and a lot of their past behavior carried over into their Christian lives. Paul was very concerned about this, and he provided very earnest instructions and encouragement to his readers in the hopes that they would act in more mature spiritual ways. The Scriptures make clear that God is very concerned about those who claim to be believers. Just because God has sovereignly selected and graciously revealed Himself to particular individuals doesn't mean that He is tolerant and accepting of the evil behavior of His saints.

When I was a pastor, I counseled some church members who behaved just like the Corinthians. Because of the evil activities of some believers, it was difficult for me to accept the fact that they were actually saints in God's eyes. Saints are not always who we think they are or want them to be. The reality is that conditions in local fellowships today have not changed very much since the times of the New Testament. There is, unfortunately, a lot of discouraging, worldly behavior in the Church today, but it is best that we adopt Paul's attitude, thanking God that God calls sinful people to Himself, and encouraging these sinful people to be more holy in their behavior.

The Apostle Paul wrote more about this in I Corinthians 1:26-30

In these verses Paul wanted his readers to think about the circumstances they were in when God called them to Himself. Not many of them were considered wise (*sophoi* "wise") by human standards; they were not intellectual and philosophical giants. Neither were they politically powerful (*dunatoi* "influential") with the ability to influence other people, nor were they born into the upper level of society (*eugeneis* "of noble birth," the aristocracy). The church in Corinth was comprised of ordinary people.

Paul also mentions those who were "low born" (*agene* slave class) and the despised (*ta exouthenemena*). These terms were particularly appropriate for the situation at Corinth because there were many slaves. Also among those who were called by God, Paul listed "the things that are not" (*ta me onta* "the nonexistent"), those who, in the world, were nonentities and outcasts.

Paul explains why God followed this pattern of choosing the weak and lowly. God did this so that He might show that human achievements and pride are not the criteria He uses when calling people to Himself. The relationship of saints to God does not depend on anything in themselves. In matters of salvation, people cannot get closer to God through a superior social, political, or intellectual status.

Notice that the phrase “God chose” appears three times in verses 27 and 28 and in verse 26 the term “called” was used. Paul is making clear that the initiative for salvation is with God. It is impossible for people to accomplish their own salvation, even though they may be very sincere in their efforts.

Verse 29 gives the reason. God does not want people to boast about their merits and abilities. God only chooses people according to His sovereignty and grace and not according to human accomplishments so that no person can boast in His presence that salvation has been gained by human effort. [*Cf Eph 2:8-9*]

I want you to pay special attention to verse 30. We are in Christ Jesus because this was God’s plan and because it is the result of God’s work. Salvation is all from God’s grace.

The words “in Christ Jesus” have a lot of important implications. Paul explains that Christ has “become for us wisdom from God.” This is not human wisdom, but wisdom that God gives to us through our relationship with Christ. Through Christ we can understand spiritual matters; we can understand God and His ways; we can begin to understand the things that have eternal significance.

There are other benefits of our union with Christ — benefits that we can understand because we have been made wise in Christ Jesus. He is “our righteousness, our holiness (sanctification), and our redemption.” These concepts explain the results of God’s wise plan in sending Jesus to die on the cross. Christ took our sin on Himself. He became our sanctification and has made possible our growth in grace in the Christian life. He is our redemption; in Him we have been delivered from sin, the devil, hell, and the grave [*cf 1Cor 15:55-57*]. God, in His wisdom, and through Christ, provided all these benefits to the Corinthian believers, and He provides them to us as well.

Now we are ready to think about the “communion” of the saints. The word in the Greek language of the New Testament is “*koinonia*.” This word is used numerous times in the New Testament to convey the idea of “sharing” or “having things in common.” In the English language Bibles, this word “*koinonia*” is translated in several ways: “communion,” “fellowship,” “partnership,” “participation.”

“*Koinonia*” begins with and depends on the grace of God which He provides to us through the Lord Jesus Christ. Fellowship and participation “in Christ” is the essential starting point. This is the vertical spiritual relationship we must have.

There is also a horizontal communion. All saints call on the name of the same Lord. God has worked the same redemption for every believer. All born again believers are members of the same spiritual family. They are also members of Christ’s Body.

Because believers are “in Christ,” they share the same faith and life with every other saint who is in Christ. This is possible because of the dynamic ministry of the Holy Spirit. Scripture declares that the Holy Spirit is given to every believer as confirmation that we are “in Christ” and belong to God. This means that the same Spirit who indwells me also indwells every other believer. This means that the same Spirit which guides my thinking and behavior, and empowers my life, is the same Spirit which works in the hearts and minds of other believers.

The “communion of the saints” does not imply that all the saints must be in agreement of every issue. There were differences of understanding among the members of the early Church. There will be differences of understanding among saints today. However, Scripture indicates that such differences are always secondary to the fact that each one of us has been chosen, called, and sanctified in Jesus Christ, and that we share our lives in Him.

In the previous message we thought about the “holy catholic Church.” This statement emphasized the unity that exists between all true believers. It is the thought that believers are one in Christ just as Christ is one with the Father and Holy Spirit. The statement, “the communion of the saints” is not restating this same fact about unity. The “communion of saints” is about the blessings, joys, and interests held in common by all believers because of their unity.

As saints, we are members of the same body. The same spiritual DNA is in all of us. It is impossible for us, as individuals, to live spiritually separated and isolated lives from each other. Rather, it is necessary for every believer to seek the spiritual and temporal welfare of others. This is the only way the Body of Christ can be healthy and vigorous.

The individuals who responded to the Apostles' message on the day of Pentecost set the pattern for us. Acts chapter 2 explains that the first generation of believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship (*koinonia*), to the breaking of bread and to prayer." We read that "all believers were together and had everything in common." The members of the first Church provided instruction, support, nurture, and encouragement to each other.

We must do the same. It is easy to say, "I believe in the communion of saints," but to do what the early believers did requires a significant level of commitment, mutual accountability, intimacy, and transparency to others.

I have quoted from Hebrews chapter 10 on several previous occasions and I want to do so again today by reminding you of five practical commands which apply to this subject of "communion:"

"Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith;"

"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess;"

"Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds;"

"Let us not give up meeting together;" and

"Let us encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Benediction:

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship (*koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit be with you all.