

The Communion of Saints

The teachings of Jesus often challenge us—they set before us an ideal that is extremely difficult to live up to. Love your enemies, he said. Don't desire revenge. Don't judge. Keep your thoughts clean at all times. Give everything you have. Preach the gospel in all the world.

But Jesus challenges us in one of his prayers, too. Shortly before he was crucified, he prayed for his disciples. Then he prayed for us: "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father ... that they may be one as we are one" (John 17:20-22).

A difficult scripture

Jesus did not give this as a command, but his desire for us is still clear—he wants all believers to be united. And frankly, Christianity has earned a dismal score on this matter. I am embarrassed by all the fragmentation found in the Christian world. Since Luther, there have been hundreds of church splits, more than a thousand different denominations, and thousands more independent churches, some of whom can't get along with anyone.

There are untold numbers of leaders who think that they alone have the truth, the secret now revealed to some specially chosen servant of God. Too often, they write other Christians off as deceived, as false brethren, as apostates. The annals of church history have too many anathemas, far too many condemnations.

When people fight over trivial details, they give Jesus a bad reputation. How can he be the Prince of peace when his followers can't even get along with each other?

Notice the reason that Jesus gives for wanting us to get along: "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" (verse 21). Our example reflects on Jesus' reputation, and that is all the more reason that it saddens me to see how poorly we Christians have done over the years.

Jesus wants all his followers to "be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them" (verse 23). Jesus wants our unity to be rooted in God's love, not in perfect

agreement. There will always be disagreements, but our identity as Jesus' disciples lies in our love for one another.

Sharing communion

How far are we from "complete unity"? A long way, I fear. There are deep-rooted divisions in the Christian churches, mutual accusations that have endured for centuries and are only gradually being addressed.

There are still many churches that will not share communion with people in other denominations. How ironic! The Apostle's Creed, which most Christians accept as valid, says: "I believe in ... the communion of saints." This is talking about much more than sharing bread and wine, but it surely includes that much—and yet many Christians refuse to do it. The prayer of Jesus is still waiting to be fulfilled.

In 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, Paul writes: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread" (King James Version). This translation uses "communion" in its older meaning—to share in something, to participate in something. We illustrate our unity by sharing in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper.

How sad that some Christians have taken this ceremony of sharing and turned it into a ritual of exclusion. I have done it myself, and I am sorry. The Lord's Supper should be an illustration of grace, not of suspicion and reluctance. The communion of saints means that we recognize one another as Christians, and treat each other as Christians.

In our own history, one of the most troubling doctrinal changes for some people was when we began to teach that there were Christians in other churches. At first, we weren't even saying that Christians formed the majority of those churches—merely that there might be a few scattered here and there. Despite this initially timid approach, some people found such an idea troubling. They acted as if salvation depended on being in a specific organization, when it actually depends on Christ. In their minds, the communion of saints extended no

further than the organizational boundaries of our own denomination. Thankfully, God’s mercy extends far beyond our boundaries, and in his grace, he included us even though our attitudes were not very gracious.

Denominations

I think that Jesus is calling Christians to unity—but this does not necessarily mean the end of all denominations. I believe that God uses different denominations, just as he uses people of differing spiritual gifts. But these denominations should not take their differences so seriously that they question the conversion of everyone who doesn’t subscribe to every doctrine taught in that church. The better approach is to rejoice in the many things we believe in common, to work together on what we can agree on.

It reminds me of a story about two great preachers of the 19th century, Dwight Moody and Charles Spurgeon. Moody had long admired Spurgeon’s sermons, and when Moody traveled to London, he went to meet the famous preacher. He was met at the door by Spurgeon himself, smoking a cigar. Moody was shocked. “How can you, a man of God, smoke that cigar?” Spurgeon was not offended, but he replied, “The same way that you, a man of God, can be that fat.”

Similar stories could be told of differing practices in alcohol, going to movies, participating in holiday traditions, or wearing certain articles of clothing. But the point throughout is that the people of God, even though they are equally sincere disciples of Jesus, can nevertheless come to different conclusions on various matters of doctrine and behavior. We may never find unity on such details. Rather, our unity must be in Jesus Christ, not in conforming to certain behaviors or belonging to a certain organization.

Notice what Jesus said about the kind of unity that we should have: “Just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us.... I in them and you in

me” (John 17:21, 23). Our unity comes from our union with the Father and the Son, through the Holy Spirit. When two people are both in Christ—counting their identity in him—they are united to him by faith and, whether they realize it or not, they are thereby united to one another by his grace.

We in the Worldwide Church of God are united to all Christian denominations. We are not seeking organizational unity with them, but we nevertheless have communion with them. Not only can we share the Lord’s Supper with them, we also accept them as they believe in and follow our Lord, Jesus Christ.

We have communion in the larger sense, of sharing in the life and mission of Jesus. We are equals before him: all of us are sinners saved by his grace, in communion with one another. He has made us siblings in the family of God. As the Apostle’s Creed says: We believe in the communion of saints. We *are* a communion of saints—but this communion, this sense of unity and sharing, extends far beyond our own denomination. We are brothers and sisters of all who accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We join them as they do the work of God, and we invite them to join us as we do his work as well.

By this everyone will know that we are following Jesus: Not just that we work with one another, not just that we tolerate one another, but that we also love one another, that we love all who follow our Savior, that we are as gracious to them as he has been to us. Sometimes they need a lot of grace; sometimes *we* need a lot of grace. But throughout it all, our communion should be based on grace.

Michael Morrison

**We are a
communion
of saints.**

WCG Today, January 2006, pages 3-4.
Copyright © Worldwide Church of God.
Unless noted, scriptures are quoted from

the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.