

Enjoying the Communion of Saints

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Q. 63. What are the special privileges of the visible church?

A. The visible church hath the privilege of being under God's special care and government; of being protected and preserved in all ages, notwithstanding the opposition of all enemies; and of enjoying the communion of saints, the ordinary means of salvation, and offers of grace by Christ to all the members of it in the ministry of the gospel, testifying, that whosoever believes in him shall be saved, and excluding none that will come unto him. (Westminster Larger Catechism)

INTRODUCTION

It is a glorious and special privilege of the visible church to enjoy the communion of saints. This article aims to address that joyful communion. Of course, to frame it around joy is to make our communion more than a matter of bare theological assertion. It is to bring it into the realm of the affections¹ or Christian experience. Implied is that our union with Christ, expressed in our communion with one another, should move from 'doctrina' to 'pietas', from confessional theological statement to a practical lively orthodoxy. If, as our catechetical heritage teaches, man's chief end is the eternal enjoyment of our triune God, and the communion of saints is the outworking of the most central² and basic aspect of God's saving work—union and communion with Christ – then the communion of saints is something to be eminently enjoyed. More than merely a good thing, the communion of saints is a joyful thing.

We will consider the connection between our joy and its object, in this case, the communion of saints. Specifically, we will examine the spiritual fruit of joy, a framework for enjoying our communion, and how we practically respond.

ROOTS OF OUR UNION AND COMMUNION JOY

Law Command

There is little question that joy has a foundational place in Christian experience. Repeatedly, the Old Testament enjoins believers to joy. "[L]et Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad" (Psalm 53:6);

¹ For Jonathan Edwards, true affections were induced by the Spirit operating on the *mind* leading to the intensification of the *will*.

² "Nothing is more central and basic than union and communion with Christ.... Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.... It embraces the wide span of salvation from its ultimate source in the eternal election of God to its final fruition in the glorification of the elect." John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 161, 165.

“Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name!” (Ps 97:12); “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 118:24). Similarly, the New Testament puts forward Christian joy as characteristic of a genuine Christian faith and life. Jesus calls believers to “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven” (Mt. 5:12). The apostle Paul enjoins the Philippian believers to “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice” (Phil. 4:4).

Tracing these and additional biblical lines of joy will lead one to see that joy is very often a matter of law command. Over and over, the scripture presents joy as the subject of divine directive and imperative. The summons “O be joyful in the Lord!” (Psalm 100:1) is not an optional suggestion. It is a word commanded by our Divine Lawgiver that makes a direct claim on the will of the hearer. In framing it this way, it is implied that joy, as a Christian affection, bears on the believer’s volition.

Liturgical Context

Consider further that the command to rejoice is not an unmediated declaration from heaven directly to Christians. We do not hear an audible voice speaking from heaven exhorting us to be joyful. All the instances of commands to joy that we have are mediated via the biblical canon and occur within a liturgical context. The covenant community of saints at worship is the theater in which Christian joy is rehearsed and enacted. While it does not take a village, it does take a covenant community, for it is in the church where we learn and are liturgically trained, as it were, in righteous joy. God commands our rejoicing and, over time as we are part of the body at worship, we are habituated and formed in being a collectively joyful people. One underlying assumption here is that believers bring their joy(s)³ and all manner of gracious affections into the congregation. And as the church worships, those joys and affections are then directed toward their proper ends and object as we are caught up in praise of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within that congregation. Our hearts, desires, and joys, being what they are, can be bent Godward by means of corporate worship.⁴

Lively Communication

Neither divine law command nor the liturgical context explain the root of Christian joy. While command and context are not incidental to it, they are not what is most integral about it. For

³ “The most obvious fact about praise—whether of God or anything—strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honour. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise unless ...shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it. The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favourite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favourite game – praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars. I had not noticed how the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious, minds, praised most, while the cranks, misfits, and malcontents praised least...Except where intolerably adverse circumstances interfere, praise almost seems to be inner health made audible...I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: ‘Isn’t she lovely? Wasn’t it glorious? Don’t you think that magnificent?’ The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about. My whole, more general, difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what we indeed can’t help doing, about everything else we value.” C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: A Harvest Book/Harcourt Inc., 1958), 93-95.

⁴ Psalm 72:17 is a wonderful example of how our hearts may be recalibrated within and by participation in corporate worship. Our affections, like joy, are such that they are affected by liturgical contexts which assist in shaping us, body and soul, for God’s glory in the world.

that we must look to our union with Christ, for it is that central application of salvation which enacts a lively communication of the grace of joy, in addition to all other gracious affections. “Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory” (1 Pet 1:8). “By the operation of the Spirit on us whereby we are ‘quicken together with Christ’ (Eph. 2:5),” and “the actings of faith”⁵ through and by us whereby we come to grasp Christ, the believer is united to Christ and thus receives the grace and fruit of holy love and joy, “you love him...and rejoice with joy.” “By faith [we] have fellowship with him in his graces” (WCF 26.1). Every believer united to Christ, bound to Him by the Spirit, will evidence the Spirit’s fruit of joy. Our union with Christ is the root of the joy we are to exhibit in our manner of life.

RECOGNIZING AND REJOICING IN OUR UNION AND COMMUNION

What does it mean to glorify God and enjoy the communion of saints forever? We will pursue one broad, confessionally-based line of thought. I suggest that the confession, particularly chapter 26, in its characteristically rich and dense formulations, sets forth a framework for enjoying the communion of saints.

Rejoicing in our unity

The Confession states that saints are united to Jesus Christ by his Spirit and to one another in a common bond of love (WCF 26.1). Our connection with one another derives from our union with Christ, our common Head, and the Spirit’s powerful binding of us all together under our head. Our commonness, A.A. Hodge states, “involves us in ties of sympathy and identity of interest. One cannot prosper without all prospering with him—one cannot suffer without all suffering with him.”⁶ Put artfully, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny”⁷ is how Martin Luther King described our unity.

Moreover, the confession rightly states that this common union extends beyond descriptive spiritual reality and into the realm of practicality. The nature of our unity is such that our “gifts and graces,” “outward things,” and personal “abilities” do not simply belong to us separately or individually, but are to be shared corporately with the wider church community. No member of the body is to see himself in terms of himself alone, but as inextricably united to both Christ and every other member of the communion of saints. The African saying “I am because we are” expresses well the confessional idea of our connectedness to one another.

In fact, so strong is the notion of our common unity that the framers of the confession explicitly head off any thought of an equality of being between Christ and the believer—we are not so united as to be subsumed into the Godhead. Additionally, it explicitly affirms the believer’s right to private property and personal ownership within the church lest one think that unity means ipso facto communalism. Thus, our togetherness, or connectedness, is not monism of any sort. But this deep unity is an ongoing answer to the high priestly prayer of our Lord that touches on the unified inner life of the Godhead, “That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us” (John 17:). The visible communion of saints is the earthly embodiment of that prayer.

⁵ A. A. Hodge, *Commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 2013), 322-323.

⁶ *Ibid*, 325.

⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1991) 290.

A. A. Hodge expresses the foundational unity we share this way: “Communion is a mutual interchange of offices between parties, which flows from a common principle in which they are united.”⁸ More poignantly and experientially, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote his first dissertation on the communion of saints (*Communio Sanctorum*) says of our vital one-ness, “The more genuine and deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us.”⁹

What is universal, common, and shared among the communion of saints is grounds for “an effusion of holy joy” to borrow from Spurgeon. The communion of saints means the deep unity of saints because God, in Christ, and by the Spirit, has made us one.

Rejoicing in our Diversity

While we rejoice in what is common to us, we likewise enjoy our communion by virtue of what is different between us. There exists a glorious diversity among us. Again, as the confession lays out, we recognize a diversity of “each other’s gifts and graces” (WCF 26.1), knowing that no one, single person possesses within himself all that is needed to maintain “an holy fellowship” (WCF 26.2). Additionally, saints minister to one another “according to their several [diverse] abilities” (WCF 26.1), which suggests that healthy life together as a unity depends upon an implicit and lively diversity. While our fellowship is one of a common communion (unity), our “goods and possessions” are not thereby made communal but remain diversely owned by the various members as has been noted already. Regarding private ownership, the confession follows the logic of Peter’s ancient question to Ananias and Sapphira, “While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?” (Acts 5:4). Along with our unity, this too—the outer and inner diversity of believers—is something in which we are to find delight. Diversity is a constitutive part of the enjoyment of our communion.

Enjoying the communion of saints calls us to careful attention of both what is common and distinct to us, to those things we have similarly and uniquely, the oneness never canceling out or being subordinated to the many-ness. But both, in their many, many iterations, are equally foundational to us as a people. Our differences never dissolve into silos of individualism. Our shared common-ness never gives way to bland sameness on any level.

When we confess that we believe in the communion of saints, we are confessing that we are a body that in a multitude of concrete ways is “both separate and connected, distinct and related”¹⁰ in our corporate life. We manifest union in distinction.

Of course, this unity and diversity operates within the general sphere of creation, not just the particular realm of the visible church. Think of the words “dog” and “collie”. We know that a collie is a particular kind of dog. Collies have a general dog-ness just as Dobermans, German shepherds, poodles, etc. There is a diversity of dogs. Yet, collies and all various canines share a common dog-ness. There is unity and diversity of dogs.

For another example, think of the wonderful world of created sound. A single song can be played in many different ways and yet the unique tune/melody remain recognizable in spite of differences in rendering (i.e. theme and variations). That everyone has a favorite version of this

⁸ Hodge, *Commentary on the Westminster Confession*, 21.

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper, 1954), 26.

¹⁰ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 66.

or that piece of music testifies to this. We can perceive this about music because of our innate ability to discern unity and diversity writ large in creation.

In noting this, we are drawn to acknowledge the very nature of God Himself who is consummate unity and diversity, with His oneness and three-ness being equally ultimate and foundational to his nature as God. With him being the creator of all things, we should expect a universe fully stamped with the marks and imprint of the God who created it. Universality and particularity are everywhere. The heavens declare the glory of God's unity and diversity.¹¹ This is something for us to re-declare, in which we should rejoice in creation generally and the communion of saints particularly.

Unity vs. Diversity: A Contemporary tension

Now exploring unity and diversity as a framework for engaging and enjoying our communion with saints is not merely an interesting bit of speculative theology, a way to satisfy an itch for theological abstractions. It has concrete, real world consequence for how we are to be the church in the world.

I raise a contemporary church issue which brings into bold relief how we often fail to enjoy communion. In fact, we kill our corporate joy by failing to engage one another robustly through the lens of unity and diversity. The issue is race in the American church.

Few would deny that the twenty-first century American church experiences persistent and recalcitrant problems around race seen, not least, in its startling degree of segregation¹² by race. In the face of this, Christian sociologists who have studied churches and other religious organizations have noted a recurring pattern. In order to deal with the modern problem of race, majority-culture (i.e. white/European heritage in the US) churches tend to call for and extol transcendent values. They stress what is common to all members, the foundational unity which exists between all believers regardless of the various particularities of the parishioners. Stated differently, dominant-culture led churches often attempt to move beyond race as the principal manner of dealing with race.¹³ In this way, terms like 'post-racial' and 'colorblindness' and correlative sentiments like "I don't see race" are seen as positive and admirable for life within

¹¹ Cornelius Plantinga sees in the very process of creation a unity and diversity shaped pattern of "distinction-within-union." *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 29.

¹² (1) nearly nine in ten churches are 80 percent or more one race; (2) the average public school is six-times more diverse than the average church, the average neighborhood ten-times more; (3) the small number of ethnically diverse churches is largely unstable and located in transitioning communities where white congregants are moving out while ethnic minorities are moving in." Mark Robinson, review of *United: Captured by God's Vision for Diversity*, by Trillia Newbell (Chicago: Moody, 2014), *The Gospel Coalition*, April 28, 2014, accessed November 21, 2015, <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/united#>. For these statistics, see Michael O. Emerson and Rodney Woo, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) 37, 42.

¹³ "Findings suggest that most [majority culture led] multiracial congregations require an avoidance of discussions of racism, racial inequality, and politics and that members downplay their racial identity in favor of their religious identity in order to incorporate multiple racial groups into a single congregation. Similar forms of racial inequality that exist in society often arise in multiracial congregations as white leaders and members have an outsized influence on how the congregations are structured and organized. Thus, it appears that, on the whole, multiracial congregations are not increasing consciousness of racism and racial inequality. If anything, multiracial congregations are legitimating and reproducing racial inequality rather than challenging it." Korie L. Edwards, Brad Christerson, and Michael O. Emerson, "Race, Religious Organizations, and Integration," *Annual Review of Sociology* 39 (July 2013): 224.

the household of faith. In other words, highlighting our similarity is the key for resolving racial fractures.

Quite opposite of this, Christians in minority-led churches and organizations tend to highlight and emphasize the diverse cultural and experiential dynamics at work within the body as the way to address racial difficulties. Taking specific note of particularities of life by bringing to light unacknowledged and oftentimes hidden patterns of distinct ethnic group realities is seen as the way forward through racial strife. What from one view might be seen as “playing the race card,” far from being a manipulative ploy, is from the other view most likely an honest attempt to make plain the complexity and difficult dynamics required to navigate a racialized church and society. Of course, the place that race plays in any particular instance needs to be adjudicated but it should not be dismissed at the outset. Minority Christians will challenge¹⁴ the racial status quo in order to deal with it. From this vantage point, highlighting, not ignoring, differences and distinctions is key for resolving issues that arise.

One group of Christians emphasizes unity, the other diversity, yet both strive toward the same goal: a beloved communion of saints. As you might suspect and have likely experienced, this disparity becomes a recipe for the disunion of saints, and the racially divided nature of the church at present bears this out.¹⁵

Following on from the framework previously articulated, I suggest that in order to enjoy our communion in the way to which our Lord call us, we must embrace and come to enjoy equally both our sameness and difference. We must resist the tendency to play down, in the interest of a general spiritual unity, the myriad of particularities which mark out believers in the visible church. God loves the diversity of creation and creatures, including us. He made so much of it. Annie Dillard, observing the wonderful complexity of nature wrote, “The Creator loves pizzazz” in *The Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.¹⁶ She is right. He does. We do not do well to flatten and assimilate it into sameness. In doing so, we assume a kind of neo-Docetism that devalues the significance of material creation in favor of immaterial categories. Likewise with our common unity: our deepest mark of identity as Christians is our union with Christ and we are only united to each other insofar as we are first in union with Him. Our union is not grounded in psychological or social affinity, common interests, shared ethnic heritage or the like. Regarding the communion of saints, Bonhoeffer forcefully notes, “We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.”¹⁷ What is most spiritually true of us is also what is most common to us. Where we are fundamentally defined and named is in precisely that point where we share our deepest unity: our in Christ-ness.

Saints must not put these twin truths into tension with one another, nor subordinate one to the other, but live into both as a framework for our earthly enjoyment. To see and savor our union and distinction—ethnic, racially, and otherwise—is to think God’s thoughts after him, the one who created a world charged with the beauty of unity with diversity in all things.

¹⁴ “Monoracial congregations of color seem to have more potential for challenging racial inequality, evidenced in the well-documented role of African American congregations in political mobilization for greater equality (e.g., Morris 1984, Pattillo-McCoy 1998) and in the role of immigrant congregations to provide resources and social capital that facilitate upward mobility.” Edwards, et al., “Race, Religious Organizations, and Integration,” 224.

¹⁵ #Blacklivesmatter vs. #Alllivesmatter is an example of this racial tension in the wider culture at the moment.

¹⁶ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 139.

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life together*, 21.

RESPONDING TO OUR UNION AND COMMUNION

As the Church Gathered

When it comes to godly growth in our individual and corporate life “insight is not change.” It is never enough to know the good and not do it. Where God gives the gift of saving, uniting faith, he likewise ordains to good works. The call is to live out what we profess, to respond to what we recognize scripturally. The Confession gives the perfect context for living out a joyful communion of saints: the church in and out of worship. It is as we are bonded together in “an holy fellowship” (WCF 26.2) that we come to enjoy one another as we perform “spiritual services” done in accordance with our diverse or “several abilities.” This is done to the end that we might experience collective “mutual edification.” Paul’s image of the body joined together (unity) with every joint supplying its part (diversity) comes to mind (1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4).

We need not think about this too philosophically, but commit to participation in the church practically. For it is in the practical coming together as the church, enacting our covenant responsibilities to each other, that we come to enjoy the covenant community. “For the kingdom of God is...righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

As the Church Scattered

There are many ways we can move toward a joyful experience of the communion of saints, ways which arise from scriptural considerations. Here are four exhortations:

Presence

Commit to be present to one another, not solely on the Lord’s Day. Just show up. Echoes of “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves” should always ring in our ears. Faithful, persistent presence is fundamental to covenant keeping. As we promise to be present, we “create a small sanctuary of trust within the jungle of unpredictability.”¹⁸ That sanctuary gives us space to enjoy one another without fear. As westerners have largely lost, but of which our eastern brothers and sisters seem to be so aware, we will come to discover that “feelings” of joy follow faithfulness. Our love and enjoyment of the saints often follows our long-suffering engagement with the saints. Joy might not come in the morning but it will come. In being faithfully present, we will learn to love and enjoy the strangers with whom we find ourselves in covenant community.

Pursuit

More than being present, pursue other believers, especially those who are wildly different from you. If we are to widen our circle of communion to be ever extending “unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus” (WCF 26.2), we must take initiative and pursue others who are not presently in our sphere of fellowship. We must resist having close relationships with only those who are already a mere reflection of ourselves. There is a rare beauty in having joyful, deep, holy fellowship with people for whom the only explanation is that God has united you in Christ by the Spirit. Christ’s own incarnational mission—“For the joy that was set before Him” (Heb. 12:2)—is the greatest example of bridging a chasm of eternal difference ever known. We are sent to pursue an analogically similar kind of joy with others. As Christ said, “As the Father has sent me, so send I you” (John 20:21).

¹⁸ Lewis B. Smedes, “Controlling the Unpredictable – The Power of Promising,” *Christianity Today*, December 1, 2002, accessed November 21, 2015, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/decemberweb-only/12-16-56.0.html?sms_ss=facebook&at_xt=4ded2d7c2d2a2b14%2Co.

Practice

In some ways, enjoying one another is an acquired skill that grows as we faithfully practice serving as need and opportunity arise. It is a kind of “training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16) that Paul commends. Like the pianist whose craft is perfected through repetitive, patient attendance to practice, our capacity to enjoy the communion of saints improves as we are formed in habits of faithful service of one another. The church on earth anticipates and is a dress rehearsal for the eternal church of the new heavens and (re)new(ed) earth. Dress rehearsals are needed practice, a “labor [that] is not in vain” in light of upcoming events.

Ponder

We love because he first loved us. Similarly, we enjoy others because God in Christ has first enjoyed us. To know and feel the Father’s pleasure as his beloved will free and enable us to know and love our fellow saints. Those who know the Father’s joy over them, show divine joy to their brothers and sisters. If we forgive as Christ has forgiven us, we enjoy as Christ has enjoyed us. Regularly think on these things. Ponder the position you have and let it fuel your joy of others.

CONCLUSION

Enjoying the communion of saints is an inestimable gift and privilege. It is ours by way of present participation and prefiguration of our coming eternal state where we will belong to that “great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Rev. 7:9-10). May our communion now on earth be as joyful as it is (and will continue to be) in heaven.