

We Believe Part 17

What is it you believe? I hope you are discovering the answer. **I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy, apostolic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.**

Last Sunday we talked about the church. We believe in the holy, catholic or universal, apostolic church. I know the weather kept most of you from attending, so I want to encourage you to go to the website and either listen to the podcast of last Sunday's sermon or download the manuscript and read the sermon. The reason I am saying that is because of the importance of the church. The church in our culture has lost its' significance, its' voice, its' moral authority. Sadly, many Christians have walked away from the church, insisting they love Jesus, but they no longer love or need the church. I know the church has its problems because it has us as members, but a Christian can't love Jesus without loving the church and being a part of it because the church is the body of Christ! Jesus loved the church and gave himself for it. How can we not love the church? If we are united with Christ we are united to his church, like it or not!

John Stott, in his book *The Living Church* wrote, **"We are not only committed to Christ, we are also committed to the body of Christ. At least I hope so. I trust that none of my readers is that grotesque anomaly, an un-churched Christian. The New Testament knows nothing of such a person. For the church lies at the very center of the eternal purpose of God. It is not a divine afterthought. It is not an accident of history. On the contrary, the church is God's new community. For his purpose, conceived in a past eternity, being worked out in history and to be perfected in a future eternity, is not just to save isolated individuals and so perpetuate our loneliness, but rather to build his church, that is to call out of the world a people for his own glory. Indeed, Christ died for us not only 'to redeem us from all wickedness' but also 'to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good' (Titus 2:14). So then, the reason why we are committed to the church is that God is so committed." ...John Stott**

We believe in the church and it is that belief that brings us to the next statement, that we

believe in the communion of the saints. To be a Christian is to be in relationship with God through Christ by the Holy Spirit. In addition, to be a Christian is to be a part of the body of Christ, to be in relationship with the people of God.

American culture values rugged individualism. We act as if we really don't need anyone else even in the church. A few years from now there will probably be no need for church buildings. We will just live stream a service from somewhere and everyone will watch it over their phone, isolated and alone, at their own convenience. The problem with that is, we believe in the communion of the saints! A connection with others is implied if you are a Christian. Eugene Peterson wrote, **"I didn't come to the conviction easily, but finally there was no getting around it; there can be no maturity in the spiritual life, no obedience in following Jesus, no wholeness in the Christian life apart from an immersion and embrace of community. I am not myself by myself. Community, not the highly vaunted individualism of our culture, is the setting in which Christ is at play."** ...Eugene Peterson We are called to be members of the body of Christ, the church.

So what does this mean, the communion of the saints? Let's look first at who or what is a saint? I know we usually think of some nearly perfect person that always thinks of others, kind and generous and selfless. "She's a saint." Or someone that was martyred for the faith and has been recognized by the ancient church or the Roman Catholic church as a saint. But is that what the bible says? Paul wrote, **"To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours..." 1 Corinthians 1:2.** See the word "holy" in this passage? Other translations use the word "saints" instead of "holy." It is related to the word "sanctified" that is also used in the verse and it means holy, set apart, consecrated. The verse could be translated, **"To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified (made holy, consecrated) in Christ Jesus and called to be saints (holy, set apart) together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours..."**

A saint then is anyone who calls on the name of the Lord and makes him the Savior and Lord of their lives. The believers in Corinth were far from perfect as we know, yet they had placed their faith in Christ and were following Him, united with him. That's why Paul can refer to them as saints. Notice he says they are sanctified (past tense) and called to be saints (present or future tense). They are holy and are called to be holy. Which is it? Are they holy or are they called to be holy? The answer is both.

We are holy because we are "in Christ" and he is holy. We have been made holy by His

grace, His forgiveness. But then we are called to “be holy” which speaks of our choices and how we live our lives. Our position in Christ is that we are holy, sanctified, complete in him. Our practice however is that we are a work in progress. We are being sanctified. We are called to a life of holiness as we surrender our lives and our choices every day to Christ. That call to be holy, to live a holy life is why the church is so important. We need the communion, the fellowship and encouragement of the saints of God to help us as we make choices that are holy, right, pleasing to God. If you have been saved by his grace and are living for Jesus, you are a saint. And as a saint, you are called to live like one – faithful, righteous, pleasing to Christ in your life and lifestyle. We are God’s saints.

“Well, you may be but you don’t know what all I’ve done. I’m no saint.” Well, look at what Paul says to this same bunch at Corinth. **“Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” 1 Corinthians 6:9-11** Obviously it’s not meant as an exhaustive list of sins or sinners, but it lets you know the saints of Corinth had a past, maybe not unlike your past. “That is what some of you were,” Paul said. The difference? You were washed, sanctified, set apart to Christ, made just and righteous by his grace, and called to be a saint along with all of those who have called on the name of the Lord for salvation.

In his book *I Believe* Alister McGrath wrote, **“To declare that we believe in ‘the communion of saints’ does not mean that we believe in a holy club; it means that we believe in a holy God who has called us as individuals into a community, within which his work of renewal and regeneration can take place.” ...Alister McGrath** We are the church because we have been called by God to be the church. We are the church because we need the church! It is in and through the life of the church – the worship, the teaching, the sacraments, the fellowship, the sharing of gifts and resources and talents, that God continues the work of transformation in us, healing, restoring, maturing us and making us the saints of God he has called us to be.

We are the church of God in Carbondale, sanctified (made holy and set apart) in Christ Jesus and called to be saints (living holy, blameless lives) together with all those everywhere (the holy, catholic, apostolic church) who call on the name of our Lord Jesus

Christ, their Lord and ours... That's who the saints are – called to live holy lives together with all those who call on the Lord! And that word “together” is why we emphasize that it is the “communion of the saints.”

When we think of communion in the context of church, the first thing we might think of is the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist. However, the word communion comes from a Greek word that means fellowship, partnership, relationship. When we talk about the communion of the saints, we are then talking about all those who have been washed, sanctified, called, set apart to Christ, sharing in fellowship, partnership, in communion with, in relationship with one another.

So what is it we are sharing in? According to the Scripture we share together in God's grace. **“...all of you share in God's grace with me.” Philippians 1:7** We are what we are and who we are by God's grace. All of us! We don't look down on those who have a different history than our own because we all share in God's grace. All of us are sinners saved by grace.

We share in fellowship with one another, with the Father and with the Son. **“We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” 1 John 1:3.** We share in fellowship with one another because we have all heard and believed the good news of the gospel! There are plenty of differences and divisions that separate the body of Christ on earth, but there are also the basics of our faith around which we can unite. We have received and believed the good news of Christ and through our faith in Him we now can have fellowship with the Father and with his Son and with the saints of God.

Likewise, we share in fellowship with the Holy Spirit. **“May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” 2 Corinthians 13:14.** Jesus said of the Holy Spirit “He lives with you and will be in you.” John 14:17. We have fellowship or communion with the Holy Spirit. He lives with us and within us. As we listen and obey, the Holy Spirit guides and directs us. And the same Holy Spirit that dwells in me dwells in every follower of Jesus. Again, I know we differ over some things, some interpretations of Scripture, but if Jesus lives in us by his Holy Spirit then we ought to be able to love one another and pray for one another and worship Jesus together. This is the communion, the fellowship extended to the saints of God.

The communion of saints means a sharing of our life and our gifts with one another. The bible says, **“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” 1 Corinthians 12:27.** As part of the body of Christ, each one of us contributes to the growth, health and well being of Christ's body. Each of us is to serve and love and share our gifts with

one another “for the common good.” Paul tells us in Ephesians 4 that the body of Christ is built up and grows “as each part does its work.” **“From [Christ who is the Head] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” Ephesians 4:16.** It is the communion of saints, the relationships we have with one another and the fellowship we share that works like supporting ligaments, holding us together. That’s what allows us to grow as each part does its work. We are connected in relationship, held together by the supporting ligaments of love and fellowship. When we stop sharing our lives with each other, stop loving and serving each other, cutting ourselves off from others, we stop being a healthy part of the body. A hand alone, no longer connected to the body, isn’t of any use to itself or the body. We need each other. We need the church, the body of Christ, the communion and fellowship of the saints of God.

The communion of saints doesn’t just mean the sharing of our spiritual gifts with each other. The New Testament pattern was for the body of Christ to help one another in acts of charity and benevolence. Look at Acts 4. **“All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.” Acts 4:32-35**

From the beginning of the church the practical needs of believers were met as they were able. Acts 2 says “they gave to anyone as he had need.” Acts 6 they were daily distributing food to the widows and those in need. Paul was taking up offerings on his missionary journey to help the needy in Jerusalem. James speaks of pure and faultless religion as looking after the orphans and widows in their distress.

To believe in the communion of the saints is to believe that we have an obligation and a responsibility to serve one another, to heal the broken, to lift up the hands that are hanging down, to bear the burden of those who have fallen under the load, to share with others as the Lord has blessed us, to look after those who have no one to care for them. We can’t say we believe in the fellowship of the saints if we neglect the saints. We can’t say we are part of the body of Christ and we love the body of Christ if we are in fact neglecting his body, the church. James said what good is our faith if we just say to someone, “Go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed but does nothing about his physical needs?” James 2:16

Affirming our belief in the communion of saints will cost us something. It means we

believe in a holy God who by his grace calls us to live our lives in fellowship and relationship with a community of believers who themselves are undergoing this same transforming work of grace. It means sharing our lives with other imperfect people who are also submitted to Christ and learning what it means to be in fellowship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It means bearing with one another and forgiving one another. It means bearing one another's burdens even when we don't feel like it.

We are the church of God in Carbondale, sanctified (made holy and set apart) in Christ Jesus and called to be saints together – working to surrender our lives to His holy calling every day, along with all those everywhere (the holy, catholic, apostolic church) who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours... That's what it means for us to believe in the communion of the saints. It's about who we are together and who we are becoming, by God's grace, together.

Let's pray. "Oh Gracious God, help us as your people, saints of God called by your name and transformed by your grace, help us to be the holy people you call us to be. Grant us the grace and strength we need to love you and to love one another. Make us one in love and in purpose and in calling as we give ourselves to you in complete surrender."

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." 2 Corinthians 13:14