

The Communion of Saints

A sermon on Acts 11:19ff

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In our last sermon on Acts we considered the question of the church's **boundaries**. As the book of Acts transitions into Part **3** of the mission here in chapters **9 through 11**, telling the story of how the gospel first went to the **Gentile** world, the early church wrestled with **how to define membership** in the people of God. Under the **Mosaic** covenant, it had largely been defined in terms of **circumcision** and the **ceremonial law**. **Now**, as Acts 10 and 11 showed us, it is to be defined along the lines of **faith** in Christ, the presence of **the Holy Spirit**, and Christian **baptism**.

Our text **this** evening (*the second half of chapter 11*) shows us one of the major **implications** of this paradigm shift: the **fellowship** of Christian **Jews** and Christian **Gentiles**. If it's true that faith, the Holy Spirit, and baptism unite Gentiles to **Christ**, then it follows that faith, the Holy Spirit and baptism also unite Gentiles to **Jewish believers**. In other words, when we are united to **Christ**, we are also united to his **body**.

The New Testament has a term for this idea that we share in Christ **together** and therefore have a common **identity** as well as mutual **obligations** and **privileges**: **koinonia**. The word can be translated as **sharing, fellowship, partnership, or communion**, and, in the history of theology, the **concept** has often gone by the terminology "The **Communion of Saints**" (*think, for example, of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the communion of saints" or chapter 26 of the Westminster Confession of Faith*).

Although the **word** *koinonia* is not present in this passage, the **concept** certainly is. Look for it with me as we read the text together.

This is the word of the Lord...

Please keep your Bibles open and may the Lord enable us to understand, believe, and obey His word.

The second half of Acts 11 is a picture of the **Communion of Saints**. What can we learn from it?

First, it shows us the **nature** of this Christian communion. What **kind** of communion do we have, and what is the **basis** for it? Look again at this passage and notice the various ways it alludes to our **shared Christian identity**. We are **believers** in Christ. Verse 19: Christians are those who **receive** the **word** and (verse 20) the preaching of the **gospel**. The Greek word translated in verse 20 as “preaching” is ***euangelizomai*** from which we get the words **evangelism** and **evangelize**. We are united in the **gospel of Jesus Christ**. Along the same lines notice the description of those who “**believed**” in verse 21, and of the “**faith**” of Barnabas, the model Christian, in verse **24**.

But we are not only **believers in Christ**, we are also **disciples of Christ** (verses **26** and **29**), which is to say that we are His **followers** and **students**. To be a Christian is not **only to believe** the right doctrines **about** Him, but also to **trust** Him in such a way that we **follow** and **imitate Him**. That is why, after hearing the initial proclamation of the gospel, the nascent church at Antioch spent a year absorbing the **teaching** of Paul and Barnabas (verse 26). It wasn’t enough for them **merely to know** and **agree with** the **facts about** Jesus: that he was the Son of God, that He had lived a sinless life of perfection, that He had died a substitutionary death to atone for sins, and had been raised etc etc. These early Christians of Antioch **also** wanted to know how they should **live in light** of these great truths. They wanted to push the creed **into the corners** of their **lives**. They not only wanted to know who the Lord was, but **what he would have them do now**. And so they spent this year imitating **Paul** as he imitated **Christ**. Christian fellowship is about **learning, growing, and following Christ**.

But we aren't just believers and disciples, we are also **the church** (verse **26**). The Greek word translated as church is *ekklesia*, and it has a **broader** meaning than the **English** word church. It means "**assembly**," "**meeting**," or "**gathering**." In Acts 19:32, for example, when the angry mob of Ephesus assembles to protest Paul's evangelism, Luke calls the crowd an "*ekklesia*." While Paul certainly gives a distinctive theological layer to the term, this background is helpful to remember when we think about what the church is. It reminds us that, first and foremost, Christian communion is about **assembling to worship** God through Christ our great high priest. As Christians we are united in our **worship**!

Our text also reminds us that Christian communion is about being inhabited by the **Spirit** of Christ. Look again at verse 24 and notice how the model Christian in this passage, Barnabas, is characterized as "**full of the Holy Spirit**." The evidence of that was to be found not only in his faith and goodness (vrs 24), but in this general picture of his joyful service to both the church of Antioch, and the church of Jerusalem. These churches ate from the fruit of the Spirit that grew on the tree of Barnabas' life.

Look again at verse **28** and notice **another** mention of the **Spirit** in this passage. The prophet Agabus prophesied **by the Spirit**. By the way, most commentators suggest that the phrase "**stood up**" implies that the prophecy took place during a worship service, as in "stood up during a worship service to speak." While we believe that the **office** of prophet has **ceased** and is **no longer necessary** now that we have the **completed New Testament**, that does **not** mean that we believe that the **ministry** of the **Spirit** through the **word** has ceased. Christ is still present with us, even now, by His **Spirit**, **guiding** us through His **word**. We are bound together **by the Spirit**!

Another aspect of our **Christian communion** appears in verse **29**. Notice how these **Gentile** believers in Antioch refer to the **Jewish** believers of Jerusalem as "**brothers**." Through Christ we are brought into the **family** of God: we born **again**, we are **adopted**, we are given access to the same **Father**, and we are being shaped into the same **family resemblance** of **Christlikeness**.

At the end of Ephesians 2 Paul brings these several of these aspects together as he waxes eloquent about the church: “For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you [*Gentiles*] are no longer **strangers** and **aliens**, but you are **fellow citizens** with the **saints** and members of the **household** of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy **temple** in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

Put all of these together: **Believers** in Christ, **disciples** of Christ, those assembled to **worship** Christ, those indwelt by the **Spirit** of Christ, and the **family** of Christ. With a description like that, it is no wonder that that these early followers of Jesus came to be known as “**Christians**.” Verse 26 implies that the term “Christian” (*which, by the way, only appears 3 times in the entire Bible*) is not one that early Christians gave to **themselves**, but rather one which was given to them by **outsiders**. “In Antioch the disciples were first **called** Christians.” We can safely assume that it was because of their many associations with the **name** of **Christ**, some of which we have been outlining!

Commentators and historians debate whether or not the term was intended in a **sarcastic** or **derisive** sense, but whatever the case may be, it is hard to imagine a more **fitting** title and summary for those who belong to such a communion! As each of these descriptions have illustrated in various ways, the **core** and **essence** of our **fellowship** is **Christ**. He is our **creed** and our **code**, our **worship** and our **master**, our **exemplar** and our **hope**! We are the **people** of **Christ**; we are **Christ-ians**!

And we are what we are **only** because of the **grace** of Christ. Look again at verses 21 and 24 and notice how they illustrate the **sovereign grace** that is the **foundation** of Christian communion. Verse **21**: It was not **merely** the **preaching** of the gospel that made Christians of these Gentiles at Antioch, but the preaching of the gospel **with the blessing of Christ**. Notice the emphasis in Verse **24**: people didn’t **add themselves** to the Lord, they **were added**. In other words, Jesus sought each

wandering sheep, found each lost coin, and drew each prodigal son or daughter. We are united by the **sovereign grace** of Jesus.

But our text not only shows us the **nature** of Christian communion, it shows us, secondly, the **duties** of Christian communion. Look again at our passage as a whole, and consider that these two churches not only understood and believed the same **theology** which was the basis for their fellowship, they also **lived it out** in tangible expressions of **love** and **unity**.

Look again at verse 22, and notice, first, that they **identified** with each other. When the Jewish believers of Jerusalem heard about the conversions happening in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to investigate. Notice how Barnabas **affirms** the Christian identity of these believers at Antioch in verse 23, “when he came and **saw the grace of God**, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to **remain faithful** to the Lord.” It’s easy to miss how **encouraging** this affirmation must have been for these first Gentile converts in Antioch. Remember that this is only the **second** group of Gentiles to become Christians, and, that this is the **first** church that 1) was significantly outside of the Promised Land 2) that consisted of a Gentile **majority**. Significant as it was, the conversion of **Cornelius** and his family had **not** changed the fact that the churches of **Judea and Samaria** were dominated by **Jews** and **Samaritans**. **Antioch** was the **first** church whose atmosphere would be defined by **Gentile** sensibilities, and so it was a huge encouragement for them to receive the affirmation of Jerusalem through Barnabas.

But, as we alluded to earlier, the **identification** went both ways. Again, notice in verse **29** that the Gentile Christians of Antioch **reciprocate** the gesture, calling the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem “**brothers**.”

To **identify** with our fellow believers, regardless of their background, culture, language, race, status, income level, or any other worldly differences, is the **first** duty of Christian fellowship. It is a duty **so basic** that it would be hard to **quantify** how many ways the Bible **assumes, models, or teaches** it. Think of the Lord Jesus calling disciples to forsake father and mother for his sake, adding the promise that we will receive one-hundredfold fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers in Him. Think of how

the writer of Hebrews commends Moses because, “when he was grown up, [he] refused to be called the son of **Pharaoh’s daughter**, choosing rather to be mistreated **with the people of God** than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.” Think of **Paul’s** many, **theologically-rich greetings** throughout his epistles, addressed to his fellow saints. Think of Paul’s command in Romans 15:7 “welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” Negatively, think of a passage like 2 John 10, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do **not** receive him into your **house** or given him any **greeting**.”

This doctrine of the communion of the saints means that, for **Jesus’** sake, wherever we find fellow believers in Christ, whether they be **rich** or **homeless, old** or **young, familiar** or **foreign, Reformed** or **not**, agreeable or irritating, likeminded in politics or not, that we should **greet** them **warmly, welcome** them into our churches and homes as we have **opportunity, consider** them **brothers, sisters, fathers, and mothers**, and generally identify with them as “**my people**.”

Sadly, the church hasn’t always **lived up** to this calling. I once had the opportunity to tour an old church building in the middle of nowhere Alabama. The local who gave me the tour explained how, in the 1800’s, the balcony had been for **blacks** only. They were allowed to come to church, but not to sit with the **whites** in the main part of the sanctuary.

What a **shame**. Christian communion means **believing**, and **acting** like, baptismal **water** really is **thicker** than **blood**.

The **second** duty of Christian communion that our text illustrates is **spiritual nurture**. We can see this on display in several ways in this passage: the general **concern** of the Jerusalem church for the nascent church of Antioch (vrs 22); the way the Jerusalem church sent one of their best men, **Barnabas**, to encourage and support the church at Antioch (vrs 22); the way Barnabas **encouraged** them in the Lord (vrs 23); and the way Barnabas recruited **Paul** to **teach** these growing Christians (verse 26).

Our text reminds us that Christian fellowship requires us to be concerned about the **spiritual welfare** of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Think of Paul’s description of the body of Christ building itself up as we **speak the truth in love** to one another. Think of the writer of Hebrews tell us to “**exhort** one another every day...that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” Think of Paul telling the Galatians, “if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should **restore** him in a spirit of gentleness.” Think of the many **one-another** commands of the New Testament: bear one another’s **burdens**; **stir one another** up to love and good works; speak to one another with **psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs**; and pray for one another (just to name a few!).

There are, of course, dozens of ways to fulfill this duty of spiritual nurture, some of them common to **all** of us, some of them specific to our own **callings**. Simply participating in **corporate worship services** is a vital way to **address** each in spiritual songs and to **encourage** the faith of fellow Christians. **Sunday school** is an ideal time to speak the truth in love to one another. **Prayer meeting** is an excellent opportunity to **bear** each other’s **burdens** and to **pray** for one another. **Small groups** have been designed with the goal of being another avenue for **spiritual nurture** as we gather in each other’s homes to discuss sermons, pray for each other, and share lives. **Financially supporting** the church (specifically **ministers**) through tithes and giving, according to Paul in Galatians **6**, is another way to invest in the spiritual nurture of our fellow Christians.

But our text illustrates that this duty does not **end** with the **walls** of our local church. Just as the church at **Jerusalem** sent Barnabas across many borders of geography, language, and culture to strengthen the infant church of **Antioch**, so **we** should promote the spiritual nurture of Christians **everywhere** as we have opportunity and ability.

This is one of the many reasons that we are not an independent church, but part of a denomination, with formal connections to other Christians and churches across the country and the world. Through Presbytery, General Assembly, denominational ministries like RUF, through our Missions agencies like Mission to the Word, and

Mission to North America, we are spiritually nurturing churches and Christians all over the world.

Even closer to home, last Sunday, we had Blake Purcell from Hope Russia here to update us on the work of training Russian pastors and planting new churches in Russia. Our church has been privileged not only to support Hope Russia **financially**, but to send some of our **pastors, elders, and lay people** to further encourage and equip these Russian pastors who do not have the same benefits of strong denominational support, generations of faithful Christian parenting, or seminary training.

Similarly, this past Wednesday at prayer meeting Elder Jeff David talked about his recent trip to Cuba with 3rd Mil, a ministry which seeks to provide free theological education to the world. Jeff talked about how pastors and layleaders in Cuba are learning Reformed theology through this ministry, and how a new Presbyterian and Reformed denomination is being formed there! Within recent months our church has prayed for this ministry, given financially, and sent one of our elders!

I also want to remind you that every Wednesday Kim spends several hours consolidating the newsletters of various missionaries and ministries so that we can pray for evangelism and the spiritual nurture of Christians **around the world!**

Whatever our calling, whatever our gifting, whatever our age and stage of life, whatever our limitations, we can **all** contribute to the spiritual nurture of Christ's body in some way.

And the **third** duty of Christian communion which our text illustrates is **physical provision**. Look again at verse 29 and consider that the fact that the care and concern which the Jerusalem church expressed to the church at Antioch was **reciprocated**. The more spiritually mature church, Jerusalem, sent spiritual support (Barnabas) to Antioch to nurture these young Christians in the faith. And in time of need, the wealthier church of Antioch sent financial support back to Jerusalem.

Consider the significance of Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, accompanying Barnabas to bring this financial aid to Jerusalem. Many commentators have

suggested that this was the same event that Paul refers to in Galatians 1 when talks about going to meet Cephas in Jerusalem. Whether it was or not, Paul continues to speak of this theme of Gentiles supporting impoverished Jewish believers throughout his letters. For Paul, this giving was a profound expression of unity in Christ, a living illustration that the barrier between Jew and Gentile had been broken down, and a fulfilment of the eschatological blessing associated with the gathering in of the nations. Furthermore, Paul often describes financial generosity in the language of worship. Generosity towards other believers, Paul teaches, is a fitting response to the grace of God, and Paul does not hesitate at many places to marshal his most profound Christology in order to motivate us to it.

But consider as well the significance of Barnabas carrying this gift. We've already heard about his exemplary generosity earlier in Acts, and we've seen earlier in this text that he is a model Christian in the way he identifies with and encourages the nascent Gentile church at Antioch. But consider as well how Barnabas in many ways fulfills Joseph typology. Remember that Barnabas' given name was actually Joseph (Barnabas was his nickname) and notice here how he brings food money from Gentiles to Jews during a famine (like the original Joseph)!

The echoes of God bringing deliverance are another confirmation that the Lord is delivering his people, and this time through the inclusion of Gentiles! The image of Joseph bringing food to Jews is also another picture of Gentile-Jew table fellowship in christ (compare with food Cornelius!)

Picture of our duties: Ideally, Christian fellowship should be mutual. May be times that we can only receive, and there may be other times when we are in a position to give generously, but

The Joy of Christian Communion

Look again vres 23

One of the great blessings of the Christian life

A fellowship that crosses every border of culture, language, nationality,
geography...that stretches across time

-my testimony that the church has always been there