Theology
10/22/2015

Section I
Confessional Heritage

The presbytery’s worship committee is planning to observe All Saints Day at the upcoming presbytery meeting. It has asked you to write a bulletin insert explaining the Church as the communion of saints. You discover that the phrase *communio sanctorum* (from the Latin version of the Apostles’ Creed) can be interpreted several ways including “communion of the holy ones” and “communion in the holy things.” You consult *The Book of Confessions* to see how people in the Reformed tradition have interpreted “communion of saints” throughout the centuries.

REQUIRED RESPONSE *(Total responses for this Section not to exceed 1,200 words.)*

1. Write an essay that explores at least two (2) Reformed understandings of the Church as the communion of saints. In the insert, identify and discuss at least one (1) citation from *The Book of Confessions* (e.g., 0.000) for each of these understandings.

2. Building on the essay, write a bulletin insert explaining those two Reformed understandings of the communion of saints (including the chosen citations from *The Book of Confessions*) appropriate to the presbytery’s worship in observance of All Saints Day.

Answer

1. In the Apostle’s Creed, the Church confesses its belief in “the communion of saints” (2.3). The Church unanimously professes that its communion (*communio*) is essential to the faith. Yet, the nature of that communion has been interpreted in various ways. Recognizing that the Latin word *sanctorum* can be translated in different ways, the Reformed tradition has carefully considered the theological implications of each translation in its historical confessions. More importantly, the Reformed tradition has deemed the different interpretations as reconcilable and not mutually exclusive.

   The traditional reading of the “communion of saints” is that it refers to the communion of “holy people”. This reading can be found in the Heidelberg Catechism where, in the answer to the
questions regarding the “communion of saints,” the catechism responds. “First, that believers one and all, as members of this community, share in Christ…” (4.055). The communion is one of people, particularly believers. These believers are members of the community that that Jesus Christ “gathers, protects, and preserves for himself” (4.054). Furthermore, this communion “share[s] in Christ.” The “holy people” are not holy in and of themselves, but are made holy through their union with the Lord Jesus Christ. It is because they are united to Christ that they are also necessarily united to one another in His One Body.

That this communion is effected and sustained by Christ means that it cannot be broken or compromised. The tradition has taken this to mean that even death cannot terminate one’s partaking of this communion. The Second Helvetic Confession asserts this when it reads,

The Church is divided into different parts or forms; not because it is divided or rent asunder in itself, but rather because it is distinguished by the diversity of the numbers that are in it. For the one is called the Church Militant, the other the Church Triumphant. The former still wages war on earth, and fights against the flesh, the world, and the prince of this world, the devil; against sin and death. But the latter, having been now discharged, triumphs in heaven immediately after having overcome all those things and rejoices before the Lord. Notwithstanding both have fellowship and union one with another (5.127).

The Body of Christ cannot ontologically be torn apart. Though geography and time may physically separate the saints, their union in Christ persists. The most powerful witness to this truth is the Church’s confession that those saints who are still alive (or “the Church Militant”) and those who have passed away (“the Church Triumphant”) are in eternal fellowship with one another in the communion of saints.

Another way to read the noun sanctorum is that it refers, not to holy people, but rather to holy “things.” This interpretation insists that Christians share in the holy blessings and gifts that have been bestowed upon them. This reading can also be found in the Reformed confessions. The aforementioned quote from the Heidelberg Catechism continues to assert that, along with sharing in Christ, believers also share “in all his gifts and treasures” (4.055). It further explains that it is the responsibility of the saints to use these gifts in service to the mutual edification of the communion (ibid.). This belief is echoed by the Westminster Confession, where it reads, “being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other’s gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as to conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward [human]” (6.146).

The distinct understandings of sanctorum as “holy people” and “holy things” coexist in the Reformed tradition. Both are faithful interpretations and are not mutually exclusive. The reason for this is that what makes a person or a thing holy is his/her/its connection to Jesus Christ. It is because we are united to Christ that we share in his blessings and with one another. This is why both interpretations are found in Heidelberg and Westminster.

2. Beloved of God,

Today, we gather as one Body in observance of All Saint’s Day. This is the day when we celebrate the communion that we share with one another in Christ Jesus. Unlike other communities and institutions in which people are brought together by common interest or common ethnicity, we are united by our common identity in Christ. As expressed in the Heidelberg Catechism, “believers one and all, as members of this community, share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts” (4.055).
Christ has grafted all believers into Himself, so that we can truly be called brothers and sisters in Him.

It is because we confess to be eternally united with one another that we can trust that this union will not be undone by any force, including death itself. The Second Helvetic Confession states, “The Church is divided into different parts or forms; not because it is divided or rent asunder in itself, but rather because it is distinguished by the diversity of the numbers that are in it... For the one is called the Church Militant, the other the Church Triumphant.” (5.127). We, the church on earth (“the Church Militant”), are forever in communion with those who have passed away (“the Church Triumphant”). It is for this reason that we will remember the saints of this community who have gone before us. This is our "Memorial Day."

Not only do we share in fellowship, but we also share with one another our blessings and gifts. The Westminster Confession claims that we are “united to one another in love, [and] have communion in each other’s gifts and graces...” (6.146). Our communion means that we share our individual talents... we share the gifts of our community... and we share in the sacraments (which are the gifts of God to us)... We share in all of these holy things as holy people because we are united to Jesus Christ, the source of all holiness. So come. Let us lift up our hearts as one Body in the worship of our God and King!

**Reader Responses**

| S | 1. This essay is excellent: well resourced, well organized, well written. One can also find the double understanding in II Helvetic 5.125. The term "holy things" has often traditionally been understood as the sacraments.  
If one were to continue to read in Westminster Confession 6.147, the paragraph following the passage quoted, one would find still another aspect: the obligation to meet the "outward" needs of those in communion "in every place," not just the spiritual needs, and not just in the local community.  
2. The bulletin insert's focus on Christians of all times is appropriate for All Saints' Day, and the resources support that. Adding the global dimension of Christians of all places would strengthen the image of the all-inclusive body of Christ and the obligation of mutual support. The pastoral quality of the insert is also appropriate for the occasion. |
| S | The essay is clearly written, is well-organized and captures well the flow of the task assigned. Each aspect of communitio sanctorum is clearly addressed, and the citations are appropriate. The essay clearly enables the reader to hear the breadth and depth of the "communion of saints" and effectively counters a possible division between the holiness of the people of faith and the things we share as part of that faith. The response fulfills well the task assigned.  
The bulletin insert is well constructed, and is consistent with the expressions of the theme. They mesh well. Consistently with the presbytery's celebration of All Saints Day, the bulletin insert has a celebrative tone. The ending lines are well done; they would be even more powerful if the context of the worship service included communion.  
This is an excellent response. |
Section II

Constructive Statement of Christian Doctrine

As associate pastor, you are leading a new member class in a study of The Apostles’ Creed. During the discussion of the first article of the creed, the following conversation ensues:

| Jose: | How can we say that God is “almighty”? Sure, God has created everything that is possible to create. But even God can’t create a square circle. If God were really “almighty,” there would be a way for God to do the impossible. |
| Sarah: | The creed isn’t talking about God’s doing the impossible. It says that God is an almighty parent – someone who will do anything to provide for and protect their children. |
| Phil: | Why wouldn’t an almighty parent have protected Jesus from suffering under Pontius Pilate and being crucified? That should have been within God’s power to do. |
| Wachira: | Maybe God’s power doesn’t kick in until after we are dead. You know, at the resurrection when we go to heaven. |

REQUIRED RESPONSES (Total responses for this Section not to exceed 1,200 words.)

1. Write an essay presenting a Reformed understanding of the power of God. Base the essay on your knowledge of Reformed theology, using at least two (2) of these resources: the Scriptures, classical theology, contemporary theology.
2. Building on the essay, describe how you would respond theologically to two (2) of the class members.

Answer

1. The Reformed tradition places a particular emphasis on the power of God. The tradition is known for its focus on the mighty acts of God in salvation history, including God’s sovereign providence that guides it. However, notions of power are fraught with misunderstandings, which can lead (and, sadly, often have) to horrific images of God. This often occurs when conceptions of “power” from outside of the Christian tradition are imposed upon our image of God. In contrast, Reformed theology maintains that one can only understand true “power” when one starts with who God has revealed Godself to be in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
When we begin any consideration of the attributes of God, our starting point must be the perfect revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The Confession of 1667 emphatically declares, “The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate...” (9.27). This is drawn from the first chapter of John’s Gospel in which we read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Later we read that this “Word became flesh” in the man, Jesus (John 1:14). The definitive Word, by which we can hear, see, and know God is Jesus Christ. The Epistle to the Colossians states this even more explicitly: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15). That Jesus is the perfect image of God means that what we see in Him is who God is. Therefore, all understandings of God’s power must stem from what we see in Christ Jesus and not from the external musings of society and philosophy.

In Christ, we see that the power of God goes beyond human conceptions of power and might. This is perhaps no more evident than in the story of Jesus’ passion. While He is on the cross, the crowd mocks Jesus, saying that God would save Him if He truly was God’s Son (Mat. 27:38-44). However, what the crowd does not realize is that it is on the cross where Jesus is exercises God’s power unto salvation. We might assume that God could have saved Jesus from the cross, but the fact that God determines to save the world by dying and subsequently rising means that the power of God does not preclude suffering and death. God’s power looks like Jesus dying on a cross. As the Scriptures state elsewhere, “[W]e proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:22-25).

In its witnessing to the person and work of Jesus Christ, Reformed reflection on the power of God is not so much concerned with the ability of God, but rather on the persistence of God’s love and determination to be God for us. The sovereignty and providence of God cannot be disconnected from God’s decision to be in covenant relationship with human beings. As the Westminster Confession states concerning the perseverance of the saints,

This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father, upon the efficacy of the merits and intercession of Jesus Christ, the abiding of the Spirit and of the seed of God within them, and the nature of the covenant of grace; from all which ariseth, also, the certainty and infallibility thereof. (6.095)

Here, the tradition is not concerned with the ability of the Triune God to keep saints from falling away. Rather, it trusts that God will uphold believers out of God’s free, covenantal love. It is the power of God’s loving determination to free us and bring us into relationship with God that is brought to the fore when Reformed theology speaks of the power of God. As Karl Barth succinctly states in his commentary on Romans, “The power of God is power - unto salvation (Barth, 37).

2. I choose to respond theologically to Phil and Wachira.

Phil: I would first affirm his question as a valid question of the faith. Not only have Christians throughout the centuries struggled with this matter, but even Jesus Himself asks the Father, “Why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). This is a great question... One that we need to wrestle with as people of faith.

I would respond to Phil, first by stating that the Father could have saved Jesus from suffering. During His betrayal, Jesus states that God could have sent angels to deal with his aggressors (Mat. 26:53). So, Phil is right to assume that it is in God’s ability to prevent Jesus from
suffering. However, God's ability is not the precise question here. What Phil (and the tradition) is struggling with is how a loving parent could allow this to happen to their child.

It is here that I would raise the point from the essay that God's power does not look like the world's power. In worldly conceptions of power, it would have made total sense for God to send angels and crush the executioners. Yet, in the kingdom of God, true power is exercised in the sacrificial love of Christ on the cross. God had the ability (worldly understanding of power) to take Jesus off the cross, but God doesn't because self-sacrificial love is the character of God. In Jesus' death, God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, suffer together in order to bring you into a saving relationship with God, Phil. That is the power of God, in which you can trust.

Wachira: I would affirm Wachira's inclination that God's power is manifest in the resurrection. Indeed, it is in the resurrection that we see retroactively see the power of God in Christ's cross. The power of God does persist upon and after our death, and will sustain us in the resurrection.

On the other hand, I would attempt to broaden Wachira's understanding of the power of God to include the past and the present. God's will and determination for loving relationship extend to this life, as well as the next. Indeed, as Ephesians 1:4 states, we were chosen in Christ for this purpose before the foundation of the world. God's power is present at and even before creation!

I would also direct Wachira's attention to the power of God at work in and through our community. The fact that God has brought us together in Christ, sustains our faith in Him, and compels our ministry is a testament to the fact that the Holy Spirit is working in our midst. Without the power of God, you would not be here in this new member's class. Praise be to the God whose power has brought us together!

Cited Works:


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**Reader Responses**

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<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>1. This is a fine, thoughtful, well-constructed essay, properly resourced. Since Barth is cited, a bit more could have been said about the degree to which C67 depends on Barth. C67 is key to the essay.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. The replies are pastorally sensitive and theologically appropriate. The strategy of first affirming something from the questioner's question as a starting point for a response can be very helpful, while going on to broaden the understanding of the questioner. [For example, &quot;I would affirm Wachira's inclination...on the other hand I would attempt to broaden Wachira's understanding...&quot;].</td>
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<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>The essay shares the qualities of the previous response: it is clear, it is easy to read (but with an appropriate note of challenge, to engage the reader in thinking along with the writer). The response fulfills all the requirements of the question,</td>
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and in fact includes all of the elements: scripture, classical theology (the Westminster Confession), and contemporary theology (Confession of 1967 and Karl Barth). All of the citations are appropriate to the points the essay makes.

The first paragraph is an elegant, gently challenging expression of how interpreters easily impose external images, assumptions, and prejudices of who God is (or who God should be), while forgetting the core expression of who God is: the love and power of God as expressed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The essay’s beginning is well done, in that respect.

Moreover, without expressly saying it, the essay lifts up the power of the counterintuitive. The reader is invited to engage how the most powerful actions of God are not what people would normally expect . . . of parents . . . of a suffering person or people . . . or even of God. The essay movingly and clearly addresses these concerns. The gentleness, respect, and openness of the writing is a model of what the writing is about. And it is powerful.

That power is well expressed in the responses to the two class members. The responses engage them with respect and appreciation, but with a firmness about the Reformed tradition of which the two persons are becoming a part. The essay acknowledges the reasonableness of the questions—even honors them and offers a self-effacing acknowledgement that their questions are the writer's questions as well. There is a hint of Obiwan Kenobi telling Luke Skywalker, “What I told you is true . . . from a certain perspective.” The responses to Phil and Wachira offer a certain perspective that is grounded in the power of God’s grace and love.

The responses to Phil and Wachira model a powerful way of doing theology pastorally.

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Section III
Application to Ministry

Mindful of the rampant consumerism during the Advent season, the Christian Education Committee is planning a study that encourages families to focus their attention less on buying gifts for one another and more on the gift of Jesus Christ.

| Henry: | I think this is great. I don’t even like Christmas anymore. I’m too stressed about whether my kids will like their gifts. |
| Nancy: | The thing that stresses me out is the credit card bill that comes in January. |
| Isabella: | But gifts are the way I show my family I love them. |
| Cathy: | Is it loving to spend Thanksgiving shopping at the mall instead of with your family? |
In preparation for the study, they ask you to write a blog post about living as a Christian in a consumer culture.

REQUIRED RESPONSE (Total response for this Section not to exceed 1,200 words.)

Write a blog post that presents a Reformed perspective on living as a Christian in a consumer culture, using at least two (2) of the following resources: the Scriptures, classical theology, contemporary theology.

Answer

The Christmas season is truly special time of the year for our culture. Many people get vacations from school or work. It’s a time for families to reunite and enjoy one another’s company. And, of course, it is the time of year when Americans break open their wallets and spend an unusually large amount of cash in an effort to show their appreciation for their loved ones. It is marketed as a magical holiday filled with jubilee and generosity. And, indeed, many of us nostalgically look back on past Christmas’, hoping to replicate the magic.

Yet, in recent years, it has become more evident that this yearly ritual of excess spending is taking its toll on us. By now you have probably seen the videos of Black Friday stampedes. People are literally dying to buy the right gifts at the right price. Recent studies have also found that the rates of cardiac deaths spike during the holidays, no doubt in part due to the stress triggered by holiday planning and shopping (http://www.cnn.com/2013/12/23/health/christmas-death-rate/). This consumer frenzy is unsustainable for our society.

You need not have a Black Friday horror story in order to feel the strain of our consumeristic take on the season. More and more people in our congregations are finding it difficult to enjoy Advent. It has become a time of work – a time to prove our worth and love to others through material gifts. We’re so concerned with whether we got the right gifts or what the bill is going to look like, that we rarely take the time to thoughtfully consider the question, “What does it mean to be the people of God in the midst of a consumer culture?”

The truth of Advent that we celebrate in the kingdom of God is that God has given us Godself in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. We witness to the truth that when God decides to reveal Godself, God does so by plunging into our broken world (John 1:14). He comes, not only to bring salvation, but to reveal the eternal purpose of the Father to, in the words of Karl Barth, “give [Godself] for the sake of [humanity]” (Barth, II/2,161). And not only is God for us, but in Christ Jesus God is also “with us” (Mat. 1:23). The gift that we receive in the Incarnation is the knowledge of a God who is with and for us. Before we buy any Christmas gifts, we must remember that the greatest gift of all has already been given!

When we get this truth, then we can see how futile our culturally conditioned consumerism really is. The law of American Christmas is that one must buy gifts in order to be relevant. Advertisers tell us that the primary way to express your devotion to your loved ones is to buy a particular product or service. And we get the impression that if we don’t spend enough money and buy enough gifts, then we didn’t do enough to make Christmas meaningful. In our consumer culture, it is our job to save the season.
But in Jesus Christ, we see that this season – and all seasons – have already been saved! We don’t need to make Christmas meaningful because Christ does that for us. We are not defined by our ability to give adequately expensive gifts, but by the gift of grace that God has purchased for us. In the words of Ephesians 2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” How vital it is that we hear these words in a season characterized by work and stress!

But wait... does that mean Christians are forbidden to buy gifts for others? Absolutely not! Gift giving is a wonderful way to express your love for others. As children of the gift giving Father, Christians can faithfully give presents as a sign of God’s love flowing through them. However, as with all good works, we must remember that we do this out of the freedom of grace and not the slavery of the law. John Calvin reminds us of this truth when he writes, “[T]his name of righteousness, when given to works, is founded on free pardon. Believers, therefore, are righteous by works, just because they are righteous without any merit of, or without any respect to works, seeing that the righteousness of works depends on the righteousness of faith” (Calvin, 248). We give gifts out of the abundance of grace that God has given us, not from an obligatory adherence to the commandments of secular society.

Also, living as a person of God’s Kingdom means that our practice of gift giving must be holy. That is to say that our gift giving must not be characterized by the greed, stress, and dehumanization found in the consumer mentality. In contrast our giving is distinguished by justice and self-sacrificial, other oriented love that flows from the freedom that we have been given by God in Christ. What this looks like in practice will vary by specific social context and personality type, but I am confident that Christ can redeem all things... included our giving.

Finally, we cannot buy into the market’s inclination to rush through the holidays. We can see this in the yearly trend of Black Friday encroaching on Thanksgiving. It happen toward the end of the season too, as many retailers post their “post-Christmas sales” on Christmas eve. And in our frantic endeavors to keep pace, many Christians find themselves thinking, “Where did the time go?” We work so hard for a holiday that we barely have time to enjoy. In contrast, Advent is a time of patient, yet eager expectation – A time when we wait upon the promise of God to be with us and for us. As Karl Barth says elsewhere in the Church Dogmatics, "Patience exists where space and time are given with a definite intention, where freedom is allowed the expectation of a response" (Barth, II.1, 408). Patience and freedom go together. In Advent, we Christians exhibit our freedom in our patient waiting for the sure response of God.

So, as you journey through this often hectic season, slow down and bask in the promise that your salvation has already come... and will come again.

Cited Works:


**Reader Responses**

S This is a thoughtful, well-written blog, citing the appropriate resources. Drawing in justification by faith is a useful approach. Still, the critique of consumerism is fairly superficial, and the suggestions for Christian living in the midst of
consumerism are comforting, not challenging. Since Calvin is cited, there is a notable absence of discussion about Calvin's passionate concern to assure a living wage for workers (when much of the "stuff" bought is made by poorly paid workers), about Calvin's stress on the need for a simple style of life that takes pleasure in good food and beauty and lovely things in creation but emphasizes moderation so that resources can be fairly shared among all people, about his insistence on generous support for those in need. Had the paragraph about holy gift-giving been developed with greater specificity and boldness, the essay would have been stronger. What is gift-giving characterized by "justice and self-sacrificial, other oriented love"? What does it mean at Christmas that Jesus -- God's gift to humanity--was born homeless and soon became a refugee?

S This post was fun to read, and at the same time very moving. Since Christmas, as the essay expresses, is a celebration of what God has done in the world in the person and work of Jesus Christ, it is impressive and touching how well the essay lifts up the intersection between what God has done/is doing and the world of our Christmastimes in which God is doing that work. Incarnation shouts joyfully that "intersections matter." So this essay intersects in an engaging way with the real lives in which people of faith celebrate, decide, choose, and give.

The blog post brings appropriate Scripture to bear on these intersections. The blog post offers a breadth of classical theology (John Calvin) and contemporary theology (Karl Barth) as those powerful people of faith offer words that challenge us to faithfulness.

What is particularly moving is that this blog post has a depth and breadth that goes way, way beyond the typical Christian/cultural urge to "put Christ back in Christmas." The blog is clearly saying as much as, "You can't put back what's already there." In this sense, the blog post is inviting reflection on the source of what the huge holiday is about, and engages the reader in thinking about the deeper dimensions of gift-giving and celebrating and anticipating and... as is so well-expressed in Barth's words... honoring the expectation of a response.

All of this while fully connecting with all of the requirements of the task!

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**Overall Evaluation**

**General Comments for Examinee and/or Presbytery**

Please include here any comments about the examination as a whole or notes for the presbytery committee/commission overseeing the examinee's preparation for ministry.

**Reader Responses**

The examination shows substantial academic preparation in theology and very good communication skills. There is less evidence of reflection on the practical, ethical implications of Reformed theology's preoccupation with justice, concern for the poor, and the struggle against idolatry, important marks of Reformed identity.

Several words came to mind throughout this entire examination response (some of which appear in the reader responses):
thoughtful, measured (in the best sense of that word), respectful, honoring our humanity while engaging the divine, lively and engaging, deeply attentive to the grounding of faith that helps people and communities of faith to remain strong.

Never once did this reader get the sense that the writer was "getting through the question" and/or "completing a task." There is a remarkable sense that this writer was just as engaged with this writing process as if it were an interaction with real situations and real people. That quality deepened the impact of the responses. The writer clearly knows the material, and the citations from the confessions were completely on target but not ones that would necessarily have been expected.

At least twice the evaluation employed the word "elegant." That choice of word is from the heart. Moreover the seemingly simple, clear, and easy-to-read quality of the responses reveal a strong, deep current of faith which serves to engage the reader and draw the reader into a conversation and a search. May those qualities continue to grow in the writer's life and ministry.