

## **WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF FAITH XXVI**

*(Readings: 1 Corinthians 12:1-31; Acts 2:42-47)*

### **How Union With Christ Is Communion With His Own!**

Martin Luther once had a dream in which he stood before God. Satan was there to accuse Luther, and when the books were opened the accuser pointed to sin after sin in his life.

Luther despaired. How could he ever be right with God? Didn't that bring home some memories from his early life of how much he tried - and failed - to get credit with the Lord!

But then he remembered what was shown to him then. He thought of the cross and, turning to the devil, he quoted 1<sup>st</sup> John 1 verse 7, "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin."

You see, because of Jesus sinners are forgiven and stand before a holy God. That's why they do have fellowship with the awesome and most splendid Deity!

So what Martin Luther recalled is exactly how this 26<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Confession of Faith begins: "All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by His Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with Him in His graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory." This is what we call a mystical union with God. And that's not because it's something that we have to experience in ourselves or by opening up ourselves. It is something we can only know because it's revealed by God!

### **Where this Communion is Coming From**

This is why the first aspect this afternoon is about WHERE THIS COMMUNION IS COMING FROM. I mean, how else can you say, in the words of Romans 6 verse 6, that our old man is crucified with Jesus? Which other way can we explain, in the words of Ephesians 2 verse 6, that we have been raised up together and made to sit in the heavenly realms in Christ? What could the psalmist otherwise mean when, in Psalm 22, he describes his sufferings in the same words that the Lord used to describe His sufferings on the cross?

Well, it is a great mystery alright! Ephesians 5:32 is spot on with that. And it is spot on because it is the Word of God telling us so. The Bible tells us that within this relationship we are united with Christ as He is our representative, as we experience what He experienced, and as it's His Spirit who lives in us.

Now, we have heard about Christ as our representative in Chapter 7 of the Westminster. But here we confess what Scripture tells us about how our life is found in Christ. And what rich descriptions aren't there in the Bible about this? "I am the vine; you are the branches" says Jesus in John 15 verse 5. "For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body - whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink," says 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12 verse 13. And in Ephesians 5 verse 23, "For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour."

They are all picturing vital connections. Firstly with Jesus Christ who is the source of all our blessing, but just as importantly with each other.

Article 1 takes this communion with each other for granted. It says, "And, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces."

To say you can be a Christian on your own is an oxymoron. That means it's illogical - it doesn't make sense!

A well-known story shows this. There was a minister who had a parishioner who had not been to church for many Lord's Days. So he went to visit him one cold winter's night.

He found that member all on his own warming himself by the fire. And for a while he sat there with him next to that coal fire. He didn't say a word.

Then he took the fire poker and removed one of those coals from the fire. He dragged it so that it was apart from all the other burning coals. That coal began to die. Soon it was not burning anymore at all. It had gone cold.

The next Sabbath day that man was in church. And he was in church twice. He got the message. Without the communion with his brothers and sisters He was apart from Christ. There could be no Spirit's fire warming his soul.

Jesus was quite clear about this when He gave His disciples a new commandment. A new commandment which was actually very old, because in John 13 verse 34 He declares, "Love one another. "As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

And then He adds, in verse 35, "All men will know you are my disciples if you love one another."

Well, they would have to! Whether they wanted to or not! Because throughout the ages

Christians have been recognised as those who cared so much for each other, and for others also.

What Galatians 6 verse 10 said, as it told us to do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers, has been carried through. It had to! Otherwise the Church wouldn't have been true! As the rest of Article 1 goes on, we "are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man."

Don't forget WHERE THIS COMMUNION IS COMING FROM! It's Christ's Church and so it's Christ who has to come shining through.

Now, for a long time already it has been taught in much of evangelical Christendom that coming to faith is a personal decision. So it's up to you to respond to the Gospel and once you've decide for Christ it's up to you where you take that faith.

What the communion of the saints tells us, though, is that the Lord doesn't save us unto ourselves. The key words we read here - united, communion, and fellowship - tells us of a fundamental part of the Christian life, which is often overlooked. Because what really makes you a Christian? Something that took place in the inward privacy of your own life? Quite the opposite actually. The really decisive thing in you becoming a Christian is that you're taken away from yourself! You're brought into what the New Testament calls 'koinonia' - the fellowship of Jesus Christ.

That's where the Holy Spirit's fellowship comes in; that's where other believer's fellowship comes in; and that's where there's a whole future life of fellowship. We are not our own - we were bought at a price. And this is what makes all the difference! This is WHERE THIS COMMUNION IS COMING FROM.

### **Who this Communion is Joining Us To**

And now Article 2 adds another aspect to this. For in the second place we see WHO THIS COMMUNION IS JOINING US TO.

Paul in Philippians chapter 2 shows how this fellowship is not only a gift or privilege Christians enjoy - it's a task they have to work at. Because it is ours we have to live it out. As the apostle tells us in the verses 1 till 5 there, "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,

then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.”

This ‘koinonia’ starts in public worship, as Article 2 begins. It has to. It’s God Himself, through Jesus Christ, that this fellowship is joining us to.

So you don’t question whether you have to go to church every Sunday. I mean, do you question whether you have to visit your family or your friends? Well, maybe sometimes! But you are going to visit them, because you love them. And where Christian love has to begin is in connecting us with God. This is why Hebrews 10 verse 25 stirs us to keep meeting together. Because it’s there that He meets with us together.

From that communion with Him - the vertical - we have to turn to love each other - the horizontal. That’s why the devotion of the early New Testament Church in Acts 2 verse 42 to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship meant that in verse 44 the believers were together and had everything in common.

The apostle John describes this same thought in his first letter chapter 3. In the verses 16 and 17 there he says, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?”

This is what Article 2 means with what relieves each other in outward things. Not only do you learn a lot from sermons that are preached from the pulpit but also from sermons that are lived in people’s lives, for the Christian church is a throbbing, living, dynamic organism in which each member contributes to every other member’s spiritual welfare.

You see, we can confuse this communion of the saints. We think that when we’re comfortable and enjoy ourselves in a church we have that fellowship. Being friendly and social can easily be confused with it. In many churches it’s the range of so called ministries - from basketball to indoor bowls, from a weekday crèche to pensioner outings - that are the criteria for this communion. But the true fellowship is shown when the people of God share the gifts of the Spirit of God. For it’s as they live together out of His Holy Word and contribute to each other’s appreciation of the great work of the Lord Jesus Christ that they strengthen each other.

The story is told of a new young partner in a law firm. He was discouraged. The senior partners had set extremely high standards and had coached him carefully. He did well in some minor trials, but he lost the first big case.

The partners reviewed the trial, pointed out the errors, and suggested different strategies. Then he lost the next case. Their critique was sharper. He felt terrible. Were they ready to dump him?

Then one of the partners took him aside. “Look,” he said, you’re learning. Just keep going. You’ll start winning. Meanwhile, your position is secure. You’re one of us.”

Those words were exactly what he needed. Just like we have to be ready to give our fellow believer what they need, when they need it. When he or she falls apart there will need to be loving correction and acceptance. You have to stop despair and encourage growth in Christ-likeness.

The chain that binds us together here below is only as strong as the weakest link. And for too long those links have been breaking apart so that what the church is today is not a strong and long chain but hundreds and thousands and even millions of missing links! We haven’t been truly calling upon the name of the Lord Jesus!

My friends, we have often forgotten our place. Instead of being humbly together under the Word, Christians have been on top of that Word telling God what He ought to be doing for them.

### **What this Communion is Limited By**

It's this which Article 3 warns about. In the words of the third aspect this afternoon, we see, **WHAT THIS COMMUNION IS LIMITED BY.**

Now, reading through Article 3 you might have wondered what it was actually doing in the Confession of Faith. Who would ever think they are as God? Which believer could ever consider themselves equal with Christ?

Well, sadly, it's exactly those churches that make a big show about what they can offer you in their fellowship that teach such things! Much as the 1970's have brought us into a greater awareness of the body life that should be in the Church, after a time when it was somewhat neglected, now we have moved right over to the other side of the pendulum.

This is what happens when the mystical union believers have in Christ becomes a mystical blending with Christ. Throughout church history there have been those who experienced raptures or ecstasies where they felt fused with the very being of Christ. Thus the danger you have here is mysticism.

Some years ago I was involved on a churches advisory board to a Christian radio station. One of the segments on that radio station, as it is with most Christian radio stations, is interviews with visiting Christian speakers or celebrities.

On one occasion, a former Roman Catholic nun was interviewed - a Sister Martha. She was sharing how closely personal her relationship with Jesus was. In fact, she said they were so close she spoke about how they went for walks together, held hands together, and He even cuddled her close up against His chest, holding her on his lap.

What she was saying was indeed both "impious and blasphemous," in the words of the Confession of Faith. But for us as an Advisory Board, when this was referred to us, it was the action of the Radio DJ that disturbed us most. He was a recognised and popular local Christian - a person that many young people admired immensely. And he was openly enjoying what she was saying - even encouraging her more. No sense of discernment whatsoever!

And, then, there was the procrastination of the radio station management about this. While the churches advisory board were unanimous about the concern, the actual Board in control of the station and the staff couldn't really see the point. It took over a year before it was noted by them that perhaps it was all a little inappropriate!

We need to carefully note that while we have been brought into this most special relationship, Scripture is quite clear about the roles in the relationship. In 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 6 verse 16 only Christ alone is immortal and lives in unapproachable light. Man's distinctness from God and his responsibility to God are part and parcel of the Christian faith.

This false teaching in churches today is actually showing the influence of eastern religions through the new age movement. We saw that with the so-called anointing of the Toronto Blessing, which was simply the 'shakti pat' imported from Hinduism. And how much of Kenneth Copeland and Morris Cerullo and those Word of Faith preachers and their claims to be gods themselves doesn't come from this?

The other danger Article 3 points out is that of 'communism'. Because also throughout church history there have been groups who took Acts 2 verse 44 to the extent that they started living in

communes and sharing everything together. In that way they believed they could make heaven on earth - utopia!

But Acts 2 was a very temporary situation. Those Jews had come from all over the known world to be at that Jewish festival. And so while they would indeed have had that precious fellowship for the weeks they were together they would have all gone back to their home and jobs and other commitments. Of course, they would have taken their faith with them. And soon enough the church was all over the Roman empire, and elsewhere.

Later in Acts 5 verse 4 it is clear the right of private property was recognised by the apostles. And in the chapter after that it is quite clear this attempt at communal property didn't work out, even in the apostolic church. It certainly hasn't worked out since then!

What the New Testament does teach us is that there's acceptance of the social position we have when we become believers. Paul in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7 verse 20 speaks about that.

And the other thing Scripture tells us is that the needs of those in Christ are recognised so that the whole body is built up. That was what we read of most vividly in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians chapter 12. And it's how the apostle also draws together his passage in Ephesians 4 on the unity there is in the Body of Christ. For in the verses 15 and 16 there, he says, "speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

The conclusion, then, is very clear: We must live out what we are in Christ. Let's be the living parts of His body.