

## The Reformations - the Saints and Relics

A common touchpoint for all Christian denominations remains the Apostle's Creed. The creed most likely originated in 5th-century Gaul as a development of the Old Roman Symbol: an older Latin creed of the 4th century. It has been used in the Western Catholic liturgical rites since the 8th century and, by extension, in the various modern branches of Western Christianity, including the modern liturgy and catechesis of the Catholic Church, Lutheranism, Anglicanism, Presbyterianism, Moravianism, Methodism, and Congregational churches.

The creed proclaims belief in *sanctorum communionem* - the communion of saints. How do the Protestant and Reformed churches understand this? This understanding will lead to different conclusions about saints, relics, indulgences, and more.

Protestant reforms accused Catholicism of not making insufficient differentiation between the Creator and his creatures and of giving an exaggerated and lofty status to Saint above the believer. St. Paul referred to them as "saints." The conviction common to all Christians that "God alone is God" meant for the Reformers that God alone is holy, and that no other person or object deserved to be worshiped. Depending on the particular reform, veneration of Mary and the Saints was understood in different ways.

The 16th century Augsburg Confession from the Lutherans says: "Our people teach that the saints are to be remembered so that we strengthen our faith when we see how they experienced grace and how they were helped by the faith. Moreover, it is taught that each person, according to his or her calling, should take the saint's good works as an example." In our modern times, many Lutheran Churches carry the names of Saints; however, the Lutheran prayer tradition largely avoids directly addressing Mary or a particular saint, especially in community worship.

The later reformers rejected as unbiblical the idea that the communion of saints allowed the saints to share their merit with others, or that we can or should communicate with them by prayer. They critiqued the idea that only certain believers were saints, emphasizing that all Christians are saints. Yet, they did see the communion of saints as not only a true doctrine, taught in passages like Romans 12:4-8, Ephesians 4:1-6, John 15:1-12, Acts 2:42, and 1 John 1:1-7, but they also viewed it as a great benefit to believers.

John Calvin summarized the doctrine by saying that "saints are united in the fellowship of Christ on this condition, that all the blessings which God bestows upon them are mutually communicated to each other" (Calvin, 4.1.3). This meant that by being a member of Christ, one could claim a share in all God's promises to the church. Even the diverse gifts of the Spirit were given to us to be shared with each other. Calvin saw this as an important means of assurance and consolation that enabled the individual believer to appropriate to one's self all the blessings God bestows on His members. Calvin described it as an aspect of the invisible church, a unity received and perceived by faith (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559).

The **Heidelberg Catechism** (1563) understood the communion of saints to mean that:

"First, that believers, all and everyone, as members of Christ have communion with Him and share in all His treasures and gifts. Second, that everyone is duty-bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members."

This catechism was used by the German and Swiss faithful to find a common theological ground between Catholics and Anabaptists.

This describes two parts, the indicative (what is) and the imperative (what should be). We share in Christ's treasures and gifts together, therefore we should use His gifts for each other. Unlike the medieval

doctrine of the communion of saints, which led Christians to seek help from the dead, the Protestant doctrine taught them to give help to the living. When we come to the **Westminster Confession of Faith** (1646), we can recognize the same indicative/imperative pattern. While the Westminster Confession is unique among statements of faith in having an entire chapter on the doctrine, the first section of chapter 26, "Of the Communion of Saints," is essentially a restatement of the answer of the Heidelberg Catechism:

"All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by his Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with Him in his grace, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory: and, 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 do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man." (WCF 26.1)

The second section of chapter 26 specifies the actions to which this communion binds us: common worship, mutual edification, and outward relief.

"Saints by profession are bound to maintain a holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offers opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus." (WCF 26.2)

It is to be extended to "all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus" because this obligation rests on our union with Christ. This paragraph realizes that we are limited as finite creatures by our abilities and opportunities, but it rejects boundaries of denomination, race, geography, and age. Union with a particular congregation is important for the fulfilling of these duties - indeed, the creation of local congregations is an outworking of these duties - but this communion is not restricted to them. The foundation is Christ.

The third section adds two important qualifications. This union does not imply that we become divine, nor does our communion with the saints mean that private property is abolished.

"This communion which the saints have with Christ, does not make them in any wise partakers of the substance of his Godhead; or to be equal with Christ in any respect: either of which to affirm is impious and blasphemous. Nor does their communion one with another, as saints, take away, or infringe the title or propriety which each man has in his goods and possessions." (WCF 26.3)

Once one realizes the meaning of communion – that we have a claim to each other's gifts – it becomes clear why private property would seem threatened. Anabaptists and others were ready to take this doctrine to what they saw as the logical conclusion. Yet, this qualification is not only valuable in practice, but also biblical (Acts 5:4, 2 Thess. 3:8, Eph. 4:28).

In the end, the Anglican tradition, while it has no canonization process such as in Catholicism, it does maintain a calendar of saints in which they are venerated and honored, but devotional materials are not incorporated into public worship.

In general, the reformers believed that while saints can be inspiring, at their root they are a distraction from worship of the one true mediator, Jesus.

## **Relics**

The veneration of saints and their relics has its origins in early Christianity by means of honoring martyrs. The earliest attestation is Polycarp's martyrdom in 156 A.D. described in the 2nd century *The Martyrdom*

of Polycarp, whose bones were called "more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold" by the Smyrnaean church and were kept to recall and celebrate the anniversary of his martyrdom. At the same time, we see widespread cults of saints began in cemeteries outside of Roman cities in the digging up, dismembering, and public display of the bodies of dead Christians; in turn, many of those places became centers of worship.

In the 4th century, veneration of relics in the west carried a distinctly different attitude towards the dead when compared to pagan cultural norms of the deceased. Augustine of Hippo, for example, described these devotions to the martyrs as "signs of respect to their memory, not sacred rites or sacrifices to the dead as if to gods ... We do not, then, worship our martyrs with divine honors of human crimes as the Egyptian pagans worship their gods." By the end of the 4th and 5th centuries, the cult of relics had grown to include secondary objects such as clothing. Relics were kept in churches, monasteries and royal houses, and were widely traded; the trade in relics increased after the Crusades. Even fake relics were richly decorated with gold, silver, and precious stones for display to pilgrims who considered them authentic. At the onset of the early middle ages, relic veneration had reached levels of attention, religious and secular, previously unknown.

By the mid-16th century, the number of relics was enormous and it was nearly impossible to determine a relic's authenticity. The Reformation criticized the veneration of saints and relics, and in 1543 Calvin published his Tract on Relics, a biblical and theological book about the authenticity of many Christian relics. Calvin harshly criticizes the relics' authenticity, and suggests the rejection of relic worship. The book was published in Geneva, and was included in the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, List of Prohibited Books, those publications deemed heretical or contrary to morality and thus forbidden for Catholics to read.

Calvin listed in detail the falsified Christian relics known to him, which were kept in churches and monasteries. According to him, saints had two, three or more bodies with arms and legs; extra limbs and heads also existed. Calvin did not understand where the relics of the Biblical Magi, the Bethlehem babies, the stones which killed Stephen, the Ark of the Covenant, or Aaron's two rods (instead of one) came from. Objects of worship included Jesus' robe and a towel with which he wiped himself. The relics had several copies, in different places. Others included a piece of fish which Christ ate after the resurrection, Christ's footprint on a stone, and his tears. Cults of hair and the Milk of the Virgin were widespread. The combined quantity of Mary's milk was so great that, according to Calvin, only a cow could produce that much. Other objects of Marian worship were a very large shirt, two combs, a ring, and slippers. Relics associated with the Archangel Michael were a small sword and shield with which the disembodied Michael defeated the disembodied spirit of the Devil.

At the conclusion of his tract Calvin wrote:

And so completely are they all mixed up and huddled together, that it is impossible to have the bones of any martyr without running the risk of worshiping the bones of some thief or robber, or, it may be, the bones of a dog, or a horse, or an ass. Nor can the Virgin Mary's ring, or comb, or girdle, be venerated without the risk of venerating some part of the dress of a strumpet. Let every one, therefore, who is inclined, guard against this risk. Henceforth no man will be able to excuse himself by pretending ignorance.

The tradition of relics was roundly and thoroughly rejected by all the Reformers.

Trent affirms the tradition of relics, veneration of the saints, purgatory, and indulgences - but most of the final canons of the Council and its stated reforms actions are dedicated to denunciation of the practices which the Reformers pointed to.