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COMMUNION WITH THE DEAD ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES*

Richard J. Gehman

Many Christian theologians in Africa have suggested that the Christian church needs to develop a theology which will provide a substitute for the traditional belief in the living-dead. Since the Africans have been very near to their ancestors, they say, we need to ensure that they continue to feel near to them. Therefore, we are being told, we need to enable the Christians to continue a sense of fellowship with their departed loved ones. This fellowship with the dead is what the Christian church has defined as the "Communion of Saints." Included in this is fellowship in prayer. What these theologians are doing is reviving a Roman Catholic theology of the "Communion of Saints" and prayers for the dead in the form of an African Christian Theology.

All Christians, who testify to their Christian faith by saying the Apostles' Creed, declare, "I believe...in the communion of saints." But what does this mean? What does the Bible teach concerning "the communion of saints"? Unfortunately, these theologians follow the old Roman Catholic tradition rather than the Scriptures, as we shall see.

"The Communion of Saints"

The Meaning in the Apostles' Creed

The phrase, "communion of saints," is not taken from the Scriptures but from the Apostles' Creed. The final form of the Apostles' Creed took many centuries to develop. The phrase, "communion of saints," is absent from the writings of the early church fathers, nor is it found in the African Creed nor the

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Main Interpretations of the Phrase: There are two main opinions of what the phrase means. Most believe that this is a communion with persons (“saints” in English). Pannenberg believes that the original meaning was “communion with holy martyrs” (Pannenberg 1972:149). The stated purpose in writing about the suffering and death of Perpetua and Felicitas was to help the readers have “communion with the holy martyrs, and through them with Jesus Christ” (Pannenberg 1972:153).

Others, however, believe it is a communion with “holy things,” that is, the sacraments (Holy Communion and Baptism). They point to the Latin word, *sancta*, which is neuter inform. They believe this refers to the impersonal meaning of participation in the “holy things.” Benko believes that the phrase refers to the forgiveness of sins which is granted by taking Holy Communion (Benko 1964).

Karl Barth says that the meaning of the phrase is unclear, having both a personal and impersonal meaning. Therefore Barth thinks the phrase refers both to the communion of persons and the communion with God through baptism and Holy Communion.

Roman Catholic Interpretation: The primary meaning found among Roman Catholics is “the spiritual union existing between each Christian and Christ, and so between each and every Christian, whether in Heaven ... in purgatory ..., or on earth” (Cross 1958:320).

Origen taught that love was the chief virtue and should mark the care of all members within the church. Not only does this apply to the living but also to the departed saints. “We must hold that the saints who have fallen asleep before us exercise it towards those who are struggling in this life much more than do they who are compassed about [surrounded] with human weakness and are struggling in company with feebler folk” (Quilton 1954:195). He reasons that if the angels rejoice over one sinner who repents, so do the saints who have fallen asleep. His support is quotations from the Apocrypha (Tobit 12:12; 3:16, 17).

Pope Leo XII defined the Communion of Saints in his encyclical on the Eucharist in 1902 with these words:

As everyone knows, the communion of saints is nothing else but a mutual sharing in help, satisfaction, prayer and other good works, a mutual communication among all the faithful, whether those who have reached

heaven, or who are in the cleansing fire (purgatory), or who are still pilgrims on the way in this world. For all these are common together to form one living city whose Head is Christ, and whose law is love (Lawlor 1967:vol.4, 41).

Protestant Interpretation: The Protestant Reformers broke away from the Roman Catholic teaching of the saints and prayers to the dead. The Reformers believed that the Communion of Saints in the Apostles' Creed was an expansion of the preceding phrase, "the Holy Catholic Church." They limited the "communion" to the fellowship between believers and Christ and fellowship between Christians living upon the earth. This is reflected in the Protestant creeds and catechisms. For example, The Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647 affirms that,

All saints that are united to Jesus Christ their head, by his Spirit and by faith, have fellowship [communion] with him in his graces, 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 [contribute] to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man (Schaff 1882:vol.3, 659).

The Heidelberg Catechism of the Lutheran Church in 1516 says something similar (Schaff 1882:vol.3, 325). Therefore, it is no surprise that the Protestant commentaries are silent on any communion of saints with departed believers. The sharing is among the living and not between the living and the dead.

An Anglican Interpretation: Although very many (perhaps the majority) within the worldwide Anglican Communion regard themselves as Protestants, there are some in the Anglican Church who believe in fellowship between the living and the dead. Such an Anglican was Swete, who argued,

Spiritual fellowship based upon union with God in Christ cannot be terminated [ended] by physical death. If 'I am persuaded that neither death nor life...shall be able to separate us from the love of God,' (Romans 8:38f), it is reasonable to believe also that the accident of death cannot separate us from fellowship with those who have gone before (unless death is followed by a suspension of consciousness) (Swete 1915:210).

Since prayer is the chief means of fellowship between Christians separated by long distances, Swete argues, “there seems to be no reason why this kind of fellowship should not exist between the living and the departed. It is natural to suppose that departed Saints remember in their prayers those whom they knew on earth, and that those who are still on earth can return the benefit” (Swete 1915:210).

New Testament Teaching

Although the phrase, “the communion of saints,” is not found in the Bible, both “communion” and “saints” are biblical terms. What does the scripture teach concerning “communion” among the saints”?

Communion (*koinonia*): *Koinonia* occurs twenty times in the Greek New Testament. This word carries the idea of “participation” and “fellowship,” a specially close bond. There is a two-way relationship of giving and receiving in communion.

Koinonia is defined by Bauer in four ways: “(1) Association, communion, fellowship, close relationship; (2) Generosity, fellow-feeling, altruism; (3) Abstract for the concrete sign of fellowship, proof of brotherly unity, event gift, contribution; (4) Participation, sharing in something” (Bauer 1979:*ad loc.*).

As we look at the ways *koinonia* is used in the New Testament we may divide them into two groups: fellowship is either with the living saints or with God.

Fellowship with God is a common emphasis (I Corinthians 1:9; 2 Corinthians 13:13; Philippians 2:1; 3:10; I John 1:3b, 6). In the Old Testament a *koinonia* kind of fellowship was never used of our relationship with God. The emphasis among the Hebrews was the holiness and majesty of God. He is high and separated from creation and especially from sinners. The nearness of God was never thought of in terms of *koinonia*. It is distinctively Christian (a New Testament emphasis, not an Old Testament teaching) for John to say, “...that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (I John 1:3). This close relationship of giving and receiving, this unity of spirit and participation in sharing, is with one another and with the Father and the Son.

There can be no *koinonia* fellowship with man apart from the primary fellowship with God. The Bible teaches that our communion (fellowship) with the saints depends on our communion with God. Unless God has forgiven our sins and reconciled us (brought us together) with Him, there can be no real *koinonia* between men and women.

But there is no evidence that those who developed the Apostles' Creed had fellowship with God in mind when they referred to the "Communion of Saints." Nor has the Christian church related the "Communion of Saints" in the Apostles' Creed to our communion with God (Swete 1915:170).

Koinonia is used with reference to Holy Communion (1 Corinthians 10:16). By taking the bread and cup we participate in the body and blood of the Lord. The communion is personal, with the Lord, through the taking of the material elements of Holy Communion. For these reasons we consider this Scripture along with our first category of communion with God.

It is during Holy Communion that the living saints are brought close together with their Lord. As the believers hear the Word of God preached, as they pray and as they share in the Lord's Supper, there is both the inward experience and the outward manifestation of the Communion of Saints. Our communion with the saints is based on our communion with the Lord.

The great emphasis of *koinonia* in the New Testament, however, is on fellowship between living believers, who are united together because they are "in Christ" (1 John 1:3, 7). This fellowship is shown by giving material gifts to help the poor and needy. We share with believers our deep unity in Christ by sharing with them our material things (Romans 15:26; 2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:13; Philippians 1:5; Hebrews 13:16). "An isolated life, self-contained, wholly occupied with personal interests, even though they be the highest interests of the individual soul, is far removed from the life of the Spirit of Christ" (Swete 1915:194).

Indeed, this *koinonia* was one of the chief characteristics of the early church, along with the apostles' teaching, breaking of bread and prayers (Acts 2:42). The right hand of fellowship was extended to Paul by the other apostles when they recognised the grace of God at work in and through him (Galatians 2:9). Sharing in the faith of a brother is rightfully expected (Philemon 6).

Koinonia refers to a brotherly unity, a mutual sharing among those who share Christ in common. It is “used specially of the closest of all human relationships, e.g. marriage contract” (Moulton 1949:*ad loc.*) Thus Paul says that light and darkness can have no fellowship together (2 Corinthians 6:14). Fellowship is very Christian, beginning with our close, personal relationship with Christ, and then moving beyond to all our fellow believers who have all been baptised into one Body through the new birth.

There is absolutely no hint in the Scriptures, however, of a *koinonia* with the dead. Whatever we may hold in common with the dead, however much we may believe that the unity of the Body of Christ includes those in the next life, *koinonia* is not the proper word to use in reference to our relationship with the dead. *Koinonia* refers to practical sharing, communication and mutual interdependence. There is a conscious exercise of fellowship. Nowhere in Scripture do we find any favourable attitude towards a conscious, active relationship with the dead.

Saints: The other word, “saints” (*hagioi*), refers to those human beings who are consecrated to God. In the New Testament all Christians are saints, as we have seen, because they have been declared righteous by grace through faith in Christ.

Communion of Saints refers to that bond which unites all true, living believers in Christ. Born-again Christians may be members of different churches, each with a different theology and history. But the Communion of Saints is a bond which goes deeper than membership of a particular denomination. Church membership is important and may be a partial, visible expression of the Communion of Saints. But the Communion of Saints is more than church membership. For it unites all those who know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

Conclusion

We conclude that the Communion of saints in Scripture does not refer to any fellowship between the living and the dead. Scripture nowhere suggests that the living and dead fellowship together during Holy Communion. Nor can our unsaved ancestors be included in the Body of Christ, as we shall see later in our study.

The Roman Catholic Church, by emphasising tradition above Scripture, continues to err. Only by returning to the simple teaching of the Word of God

can we find what the Communion of Saints really means in the Christian church. The liberal Protestants have also fallen into error by rejecting the authority of Scripture. There simply is no biblical basis whatsoever for including the unsaved ancestors with the living in the Communion of Saints. The final state of an individual's relationship with God is decided at the time of his or her death. No prayers on behalf of the dead, no taking a part in Holy Communion, can possibly bring about change. Only faith in Christ during this life can reconcile man with God.

Prayers for and by the Dead

Prayers for and by the dead cannot be separated from the subject of the "Communion of Saints." Every major study on the Communion of Saints includes a discussion on prayers. We need to turn our attention to this question now.

If we try to support prayers for and by the dead in church tradition, then we will find much evidence. The Christians in the second century after Christ, suffering from Roman persecution, found shelter and places of worship in the Roman catacombs (tunnels underground where Christians buried their dead and worshipped in secret). Hidden in these caves, under the earth, they wrote prayers on the walls for their dead loved ones. Tertullian in AD 211 was the first church father and theologian to mention prayers for the dead in public. At that time Christians prayed for their dead on the anniversary of their death. By the fourth century "the evidence is universal and abundant." Augustine in the fifth century defended the practice, referring to 2 Maccabees 12:43 and the customs of the church. Not until AD 1234 at the Council of Lyons did the church make any official statement on the subject. They said that the living could help the souls in purgatory through prayers (Wright 1967:672f).

But if one seeks to support prayers for and by the dead from the Scriptures, this becomes very difficult. Swete, a Bible scholar from the Church of England in another generation, believed that prayer was the chief means of fellowship between the living and the dead. He supported this by referring to 2 Maccabees 15:12f.

But he continues, "The New Testament has no exact counterpart, but the prophet of the Apocalypse sees the souls of the martyrs interceding with God for the speedy punishment of the persecutors of the Church (Revelation 6:9f). IN the ancient church it was a widespread opinion, if not an article of faith, that the

dead in Chris to pray for the living” (Swete 1915:221). He then quoted various church fathers. Can the living pray for the dead? He asks.

Are we at liberty to remember the dead before God, as the dead, we believe, remember the living? Can there be between us the fellowship of reciprocal prayer? The Biblical evidence is slight. According to 2 Maccabees, Judas Maccabaeus provided for the offering of sacrifices for the good estate of the souls of certain Jews who had fallen in battle for their country (Swete 1915:222f).

Wright, in the *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, States that the only passage in the New Testament which teaches prayers for the dead is 2 Timothy 1:18. He admits, there is “no indication of prayers for the dead” in the writings of the early church fathers. Not until the second century do we find Christians writing in the catacombs, praying of their dead loved ones (Wright 1967:672f).

Possible Support in the Bible

2 Timothy 1:18 is the only New Testament Scripture used to support prayers for the dead. Does this really give support, as the Roman Catholics and some in the Church of England claim? Are theologians in Africa really fair in using this verse to teach that Christians may pray for their dead loved ones?

Onesiphorus was to ashamed of Paul when he was in prison (1:16f). This seems to imply that Onesiphorus was not present with Paul in prison at the time Paul wrote this letter to Timothy. The deeds of Onesiphorus are placed in the past tense (the Greek aorist). This could mean that he had died and was therefore unable to continue helping Paul. Alford concludes, “it has been not improbably supposed, that Onesiphorus himself was no longer living at that time” (Alford 1873:vol.3, *ad loc.*). Therefore, when Paul prays for Onesiphorus in 1:18, it is said that he must have been praying for a dead person.

But there are good reasons which lead many others to believe that Onesiphorus was still living at the time of this letter.

(1) Nowhere does Paul say that Onesiphorus had died. If he had died recently as a faithful Christian witness, it seems strange that Paul says nothing of this.

(2) Paul greets the household of Onesiphorus and not Onesiphorus himself. This, however, may simply mean that Onesiphorus was not present at the time. There is no need to think that Onesiphorus must have died. Perhaps he had been

arrested in Rome and put in prison for helping Paul. Or perhaps Paul knew that Onesiphorus was somewhere else and had not yet returned home. In any case we do not need to conclude that Onesiphorus had died by this time.

(3) Paul prays for the household of Onesiphorus and not for Onesiphorus in 1:16. This may simply mean that his whole family helped in the ministry. They had all agreed for the head of the home to risk his life in showing kindness to Paul, who was accused of a capital crime. Therefore, Paul prayed for God's mercy to be shown to the whole family.

(4) The use of the past tense in 1:16f may only mean that Onesiphorus no longer had Roman permission to visit Paul. The Apostle was in chains (1:16), a condition much worse than his first imprisonment (Acts 28:16-31). His death was near at hand (2 Timothy 4:6-8). Therefore, Paul believed that the kind acts of mercy which were shown to him by Onesiphorus could no longer be continued. We do not need to conclude that Onesiphorus was dead.

(5) If Onesiphorus had in fact died recently, it seems strange that Paul does not offer sympathy to his family. Why would Paul not comfort the family?

(6) The final reason for believing that Onesiphorus was still living at this time is the teaching of the rest of Scripture. Nowhere else does Paul pray for the dead. Nowhere else within the holy canon of scripture do we find any prophet or apostle praying for the dead. When a Scripture is open to various interpretations, we cannot read into it some new doctrine. Scripture interprets Scripture. Albert Barnes goes so far as to say that verse 18 "proves that Onesiphorus was then alive, as Paul would not offer prayer for him if he were dead" (Barnes n.d., *ad loc.*).

Possible Support from the Apocrypha

Because the Scriptures do not teach prayers for the dead, those who believe we can pray for the dead use the Apocryphal writings, especially 2 Maccabees. Charles claims, "The later popularity of 2 Maccabees is due as much to the support found in it by the Roman Church for dogmas [teaching] like prayers for the dead (12. 43, 45) and the intercession [prayers] of the saints (15.11-16) as to the martyr-stories or the miraculous and legendary incidents" (Charles 1913:vol.1, 131). Let us now look at 2 Maccabees 12:39-45.

A summary of the story found in this passage is as follows:

Judas Maccabeus, after the victory over Gorgias who was governor of Idumea in 163 BC, returned after battle to take up the bodies of a "few of the Jews" who had been killed in battle. They discovered under their coats "sacred tokens of the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear." Then they realised that they had died in battle because of idolatry. They then collected 2,000 drachmas of silver to send to Jerusalem for "a sin offering." The conclusion is found in verse 45. "There fore, he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin."

Metzger observes that "This is the first known statement of the doctrine that a sin offering and prayer made atonement for the sins of the dead (verse 45)" (Metzger 1965:287).

The problem with this story found in the Apocrypha is that it teaches more than the Roman Catholics teach. While it is one of the few passages which theologians can quote to support prayer for the dead, it is not orthodox teaching, even by Roman catholic standards. For the prayers and sin offering were made for those who had committed idolatry. Idolatry in Roman Catholic theology is a mortal sin. Bartlett suggests that these "idols" were actually amulets, "worn as a protective charm, and probably bearing a representation of dagon of Azotus" (Bartlett 1973:319). Even though these Jews had died in idolatry, a sin offering was made for them because they had died for the cause of the Maccabees. The Maccabean Jews believed that those who died fighting on their side would be raised from the dead to share in the kingdom which was to replace the Syrian rule. The sin offering was intended to free the dead of their sin of idolatry so that they too could share in that kingdom.

But the Roman Catholic Church teaches that it is unlawful to pray for those who die in mortal sin. To pray for those in purgatory is an honourable practice, but to pray for those in hell is unlawful and useless. Because these Jews were guilty of idolatry, a mortal sin, it was unlawful to pray for them. Therefore, this example is not only contrary to the Jewish laws of the rabbis (Goldstein 1983:450) but is also contrary to official Roman Catholic teaching.

Several other references are mentioned to support prayers for and by the dead. In the Book of Baruch we read, "For thou sittest as king forever, and we perish forever. O Lord Almighty, thou God of Israel, hear now the prayer of the dead Israelites, and the children..." (Book of Baruch 3:3f). In 2 Maccabees 15:12f Judas Maccabeus had a dream in which he saw Onias III and Jeremiah praying. "Catholics...have taken Judas' vision as a factual proof from Scripture

of the doctrine that the souls of the dead saints may pray for the living” (Goldstain 1983:498).

However, such teaching in the Apocrypha cannot support prayers for the dead among evangelical protestants. For the Apocrypha was never part of the Old Testament canon of the Jews. Evidence indicates that the Lord Jesus accepted the Old Testament canon of the Jews. Though He frequently quoted from the three parts of the Jewish Scriptures, namely, “the Law of Moses, the prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44, He never referred to any of the apocryphal writings. Therefore, because Jesus and the Jews rejected the Apocrypha as being part of the canon of Old Testament Scripture, so do evangelical Protestants. The Apocrypha, and especially 2 Maccabees, is, unlike the Bible, filled with historical and doctrinal errors.

For these reasons the Protestant reformers rejected all belief in prayers for and by the dead. The confessions of faith for the Calvinists (Schaff 1882:vol.3, 647), the Lutherans (Schaff 1882:vol.3, 26) and the Church of England (Schaff 1882:vol.3, 26) all oppose prayers to, for or by the dead. However, the Church of England was slower to give up public prayers for the dead. Finally in the year 1552 the Church of England removed all prayers to the dead from the Book of Prayers. Praying for the dead is now left to the conscience of each individual Anglican. Today various Anglican clergy, possibly mainly from the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church, support these prayers for the dead.

Conclusion

The fact is that prayers for the dead were not introduced into the liturgy of Christian church services until the darkness of the Middle Ages had set in. Even Swete, who supports the practice of praying for the dead, admits this. He says that prayers for the dead have had a harmful influence on the church. Such prayers have “opened the door to the devotions which are practically a return to a form of polytheism” (Swete 1915:242).

Despite these facts, various theologians in Africa recommend that we return to the Roman Catholic tradition in order to preserve something of value in the African traditional culture. To introduce the African ancestors into Christianity by this means is to repeat the Roman Catholic error of the Middle Ages.

The Batak church is a younger church, and like many churches in Africa, the fruit of missionary effort in the 19th century. In 1951 the Batak church wrote

their own Confession of Faith. Should we not have the same courage as they did when they wrote Article 16? It reads as follows:

We believe and confess: Men are destined to die, but after that they will be a Judgment. Then they rest from their work. Jesus Christ is the Lord of the living and the dead. When we thus remember the dead, then we remind ourselves of our own death and put our hope on the communion of believers with God and thus strengthen our hearts in our struggle in this life.

With this doctrine we refute and reject the heathenish concept which teaches that the souls of the dead have influence on the living, as well as the doctrine which teaches that the soul of a dead person remains in the grave. We refute and reject also the doctrine of the Roman Catholics which teaches that there is a purgatory which must be experienced in order to purify the souls of the dead and to win eternal life, and that man may conduct a mass to intercede for the dead so that they come out of the purifying life earlier. We refute and reject the practice of praying to the souls of the saints and the hope that power or holiness may come from the dead (from their graves, from their clothes, their bones, mementos, relics) Leith 1963:565).

Prayers With the Dead

If the Bible does not teach that we can pray to or for the dead, can we pray *with* the dead, that is, believing that they are conscious of our prayers? Does the Bible teach that the dead can see the living and follow their activities with interest? Can the dead saints look down from heaven, watching men and women receive Christ as their Lord and saviour, and observe Christians running their race? If so, some suggest that the living can be in the conscious presence of the dead, praying *with* them, in their presence, knowing that the dead are watching whatever they do.

While the Bible is largely silent on this question, some Christians try to find support from a few passages that may suggest that the dead can observe all that takes place on earth.

Luke 15:10

Jesus finished his parable about the lost coin by saying, "In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." If angels rejoice over the conversion of sinners, some would say,

this means that they know what is taking place on earth. What of the Christian saints in heaven? Can they do the same?

Hebrews 12:1

The Bible verses most often quoted are from the book of Hebrews. The write of Hebrews observes, "since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses..." (12:1). The figure of speech is that of a great stadium in which sporting events took place during Roman times. After the athletes finished their races, they joined those watching the games as the last runners finished their races. Form this figure of speech some think that the saints in heaven sit as spectators, watching the Christians running their race. But the meaning of Scripture is not always what it appears to be at first.

The important word is "witness" (*marturon*). A "witness" is one who can testify to what he has seen or heard or knows by any other means (Thayer 1983:*ad loc.*). The verb form, *martureo*, means "to be a witness, to bear witness, testify, i.e. to affirm that one has seen or herd or experienced something" (Thayer 1983:*ad loc.*). Westcott states that "There is apparently no evidence that *martus* [witness] is ever used simply in the sense of 'spectator'" (Westcott 1955:391). "The normal word" used in Greek for "onlooker" is *epoptes* and this word is not found here. Therefore, we can find no word here to suggest that the saints in heaven are watching the living on earth.

To suggest that this Scripture teaches that the dead can witness or watch the living is to miss the whole point of the passage. The living are called upon to look on the example of the departed "... by their loyalty and endurance they have born witness to the possibilities of the life of faith" (Bruce 1964:346). "It would seem nearer the correct interpretation here to think of these first century readers running their Christian race, not having in mind the witness of 11:4-40 as spectators, but rather their testimony as examples urging them on to faith in the Messiah as High Priest (Wuest 1948:213).

In Hebrews 11 we read of the lives of believers who successfully completed their earthly life and are now resting in heaven. "It is what we see in them, not what they see in us, that is the writer's main point" (Moffatt 1924:193). The example of those who have gone before us should stir us on to complete our race in the same manner. The emphasis in 12:1 is on the living believers gaining inspiration to persevere in their faith by looking upon the examples of the departed saints. Our gaze is directed backward in time to their lives in the past, rather than directed to the saints watching us now from heaven. The passage

does not teach that the dead look upon the living. "There seems no Scripture in proof that departed saints are spectators of our conflicts..." (Moll 1868:vol.22, 233).

Hebrews 12:22f

Sometimes reference is made to these verses, which read, "But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the first born, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirit of righteous men made perfect..."

This is a great biblical passage speaking of the whole Church of Jesus Christ, which includes the living and the dead saints. But it does not teach a conscious, living fellowship between the living and the dead. What it teaches is the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old Covenant.

The New Testament Hebrew Christians "have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire" (Hebrews 12:18). This brought fear to the Old Testament saints. But the New Testament believers "have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God" (12:22). The Old Testament experiences were illustrations (types or parables) for the Christian church. That which was material in the Old Testament is spiritualised in the New Testament. The writer of Hebrews cannot mean literally that we have come to Mount Zion which can be touched with our hands. But in a spiritual sense, we have been made citizens of heaven. "You have come... to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven..." (12:22f).

The phrase, "you have come," means that we have been admitted into the Holy Catholic Church, the Church of Jesus Christ, through faith in Christ. IT refers to the conversion experience with all the rights and privileges this brings. Because we have been saved and made members of the Body of Christ we have become members of the great family of God which includes "the spirits of righteous men made perfect" (12:23). The Church of Jesus Christ is undivided by death. Both the living and the dead saints are one in Christ. "It is, of course, to meant that they are VISIBLE but that they are seen by the eye of faith. The ARGUMENT here is, that as in virtue of the Christian revelation, we become associated with those pure and happy spirits, we should not apostasize from such a religion..." (Barnes 1855:316). There is no reference here to communication or fellowship with the dead, in their presence. We cannot find any idea here that

we can pray *with* the dead, believing that they are watching us or helping us in any way.

I Corinthians 15:29

How desperate can theologians become? For lack of clear teaching, they search for anything which they might use as biblical support. Wanting to find support in the Scriptures, theologians sometimes refer to 1 Corinthians 15:29. "Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptised for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptised for them?" This is a very unclear text without any clear interpretation. To base a doctrine on such a verse is like building a house on sand.

There have been more than 36 different interpretations of this text (Robertson 1963:*ad loc.*). A.T. Robertson says that "This passage remains a puzzle" (Robertson 1931:vol.4, 192). Grosheide states that 15:29 "is one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament. Interpretations abound but no one has succeeded in giving an interpretation which is generally accepted" (Grosheide 1955:371).

We simply do not know enough background to the practice of baptising for the dead to make a proper interpretation. There is no information about baptism for the dead in any other New Testament writing. "We have absolutely no information about this practice" (Murphy-O'Connor 1979:144). We know nothing of such a practice in the early church and should not read a second century heresy into the first century church. The readers of this letter knew what Paul meant, but we do not.

When the meaning of a biblical text is so unclear, then theological beliefs and tendencies can enter into the interpretation of the text. And this is what these liberal theologians have done who desire to find a biblical basis for their belief that the living can affect the eternal destiny of the dead. For a more careful study of this text, see the End Note.

Conclusion

There is no place in Scripture where we find any teaching that the living can influence the dead or that the dead can pray for and help the living. Nor do we find any support for the idea that the living can fellowship with the dead or enjoy a personal, conscious communion with them.

Death is difficult not only for the dying but also for those who are left. The dying fear the unknown. They are unsure of their destiny. The living grieve over the loss of fellowship with a friend or loved one which they had enjoyed.

So it is natural that many peoples in many cultures have tried to maintain a living relationship with the dead. But God in His wisdom has closed the door. Fellowship between the dead and the living is broken. Wishful thinking cannot change that.

End Note

Baptising “for the dead” (1 Corinthians 15:29).

First, let us consider the context. In chapter 15 Paul teaches the doctrine of resurrection. He gives various arguments in support of the resurrection. But in verse 29 there is a sudden change. Instead of saying that God has revealed this to him, he adds in verses 29 and 30 two further arguments in support of the resurrection. The first words of verse 29, “Now if,” (*epei*, “otherwise”) point back to verse 20. (Verses 21-28 speak about something else – a digression.) Paul is thus saying, “If there is no resurrection of the dead...”

Verse 29 then speaks of a practice of Corinth which seems to contradict those who deny the resurrection of the dead. “What will they gain,” Those who baptise for the dead, if there is no resurrection of the dead? “The question implies that they will be in an absurd and piteous state. We might render, ‘what will be the position of those who receive baptism for the dead?’” (Robertson 1963:359).

In verse 29 there are three key words: “baptised,” “dead” and “for.” Though some think this verse speaks of spiritual death, the context would suggest a physical death. For he has been speaking of a bodily resurrection from the dead. “Baptism” should also be taken in the normal sense. Whether it refers to Christian baptism or non-Christian baptism, the essential meaning remains the same.

The preposition, “for” (*hyper*), can mean a variety of things. This could mean “over.” Some interpreters take “for” in this sense. that people baptised “over” the graves of the dead as an expression of the unity and communion in Christ with the dead (Grosheide 1955:373).

Hyper could also mean “in the place of, instead of, in the name of” (Bauer 1979:*ad loc.*). In this case Paul speaks of vicarious baptism, someone being

baptised in the place of another. This opinion is held by many (e.g., Conzelmann 1975:275; Craig 1953:vol. 10, 240).

What strengthens this meaning is the fact that this is the “normal” meaning of the word. And in later church history the church fathers refer to “vicarious baptism” of heretics. Chrysostom, for example, says this was a custom of the Marionites.

When any Catechumen departs (this life) among them, having concealed the living man under the couch of the dead: they approach the corpse, and talk with him, and ask him if he wishes to receive baptism; then, when he makes no answer, he that is concealed underneath saith in his stead, that of course he should wish to be baptized; and thus they baptize him instead of the departed one (Conzelmann 1975:276).

While this was a common interpretation in the 1500s, John Calvin rejected it because he said this made no sense. Those who would baptise someone vicariously would surely believe in the resurrection. Yet in 1 Corinthians 15:29 these people seem not to have believed in the resurrection. More than this, if someone were practicing such baptism, Paul would have corrected such a superstitious practice. The apostle often corrected the Corinthians when they erred. Why did he not correct this error if this was really vicarious baptism?

Instead, Calvin suggests that baptism here refers to normal Christian baptism, not a corruption of it. He suggests *huper* means “as.” Those baptised here were on their deathbeds and thought to be “as” dead. Because of their near death, they were baptised. Or, if a catechumen were sick, he would ask for baptism before his death in order to gain something. We do know that Christians in later days waited until their death to be baptised in order to be purified from all their sins.

This reasonable-sounding interpretation has only one problem: it is doubtful whether we can be fair by translating *huper* with the word “as.” Neither Bauer, nor Liddel and Scott, nor Kittel mention “as” for one of the meanings of this Greek word.

This word *huper* (“for”), not only means substitution but “with reference to.” Some suggest that the living who lost their Christian loved ones ended up believing in Christ and were baptised with the view of being re-united with their loved ones after death.

Such differing interpretations could be multiplied three dozen times. We simply do not know. Yet we are continually drawn back to what seems to be the plain meaning of the text, that some people were being baptised "on behalf of the dead." F.F. Bruce says that "baptism by proxy" is the natural meaning of the text (Bruce 1976:148). Riesenfeld, in his word study in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, notes:

In all probability the word has the representative sense in Paul's saying about baptism for the dead . . . None of the attempts to escape the theory of a vicarious baptism in primitive Christianity seems to be wholly successful. If one thus presupposes that there may be baptism 'for the dead,' this implies that the dead, probably relatives, were unbaptized at death. We thus have a kind of substitution even if, as one may suppose, the candidate was baptized for himself as well as with respect to someone who had died unbaptized (Riesenfeld 1972:vol.8, 512f).

If we accept this interpretation, we are then faced with the question whether this practice was approved by the apostle Paul and the Corinthian church, or whether it was a corruption of Christian baptism.

Some do not hesitate in believing that the Corinthians had "a magical view of the sacraments" (Conzelmann 1975:276). Others suggest that this vicarious baptism might be similar to prayers for the dead. Baptism for the dead and prayers for the dead are survivals of "a spirit of fellowship, of unity, and of solidarity in the community." They "do reflect a kindly, generous and Christian spirit on the part of those on earth in the desire for the continued and increasing well-being of those who have passed beyond the veil" (Craig 1953:vol.10, 240).

Others who accept the vicarious meaning of the phrase recognise that this has pagan overtones. So they believe this is a corruption or perversion of Christian baptism. Many suggest that although Paul did not approve of it, he based his argument on their practice.; While he did not approve of baptism for the dead, Paul points out that his practice assumes that there is a resurrection of the dead. Baptism for the dead is not consistent with a denial of a bodily resurrection (Buswell 1962:vol.2, 337; Murphy O'Connor 1979:144).

Morris points out that in other places Paul does build his reasoning on a practice which he opposes. For example 1 Corinthians 8:10 "where he refers to sitting at meat in an idol's temple without showing it to be wrong in itself, though he believed this, is clear from 10:21ff" (Morris 1958:218).

Paul does seem to separate himself from the practice of baptising for the dead. Paul asks the question, "what will *those do...*?" Though Paul does not condemn the practice, he does separate himself from those who teach it. The Greek phrase for the words, "those...who are baptised," does speak of a particular group separated from the rest of the Christians (Barrett 1968:*ad loc.*).

After we examine all the possibilities we must conclude that we do not really know what Paul meant by this verse. Any theology which uses such a text to support its belief will not stand the test of time. Paul did write the verse, but what he meant is uncertain.

We can be sure, however, that the apostle Paul did not support a practice which is contrary to the Word of God. God's Word reveals that the destiny of the dead is settled at the time of their death. The living cannot pray for the dead in an effort to change their eternal destiny. The living must not try to communicate with the dead. Once a man dies, he has passed through the veil and has no further chance to repent and be saved. The living cannot effect any change in the future of the dead, either through prayers or through a baptism for the dead.

Conclusion

Many peoples on all the continents and from time immemorial have maintained a living relationship with the dead through oblations and prayers. Throughout church history there has been a tendency for Christians to compromise their biblical faith by continuing with this practice of communing with the dead.

After the Roman Emperor Constantine gave official recognition to Christianity in AD 313, large numbers entered the Christian Church through baptism. They brought with them many pagan practices. Innocent memorial services for the martyrs, which were practiced in the second and third centuries, gradually changed into a cult of the dead so that Christians began praying to and for the dead. Cultural traditions played a great role in shaping doctrine and practice than biblical teaching.

Protestant theologians in Africa have latched onto the Roman Catholic approach to the dead and have gone even further by embracing universalism. Some hop and others believe that African ancestors will be saved through prayers during the Eucharist.

For example, Edward Fashole-Luke believes that “Ancestor veneration should not be abandoned because it is abused. Nor should it be thrown out because the exporters of Christianity said so.” He argues that “African Christians are intellectually Christian but emotionally traditional” and so the Christian Church should provide a substitute for the African traditional relationship with the dead. Fashole-Luke believes that the living may fellowship with their dead ancestors during the Eucharist. It is a “necessary Christian duty in Africa” to pray for the dead, “that God may grant them rest, refreshment, or a joyful resurrection and merciful judgement” (see Glasswell 1974:210-219). This communion with the dead is not limited to believers, according to Fashole-Luke. During this Communion of Saints was limited to baptized believers. He replied, “We cannot know the extent of God’s grace... We may believe that all African ancestors are part of the Body of Christ.”

However, our examination of Scripture reveals that we cannot embrace a communion with the dead if we want to be faithful to Scriptures. One can quote church fathers and cite church tradition, but no one can point to any clear teaching in Scripture. When our loved ones pass away into eternity they have been removed from any communication with the living. Christian faith rests in God our Saviour. Our emotions are transformed through the word of God as we grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ. The biblical substitute for the cult of the dead is a warm embrace of Jesus Christ through faith and a continual growth in grace in our knowledge of his Word.

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