

# The Communion of Saints and Prayer: New Testament Perspectives

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**Abstract:** This article studies the Christian Church as a communion of saints by focusing on the New Testament references to prayer. Because of their content, some prayers are directly and expressly concerned with the communion and unity of Christian believers. But independent of their specific topic or request, all prayers provide worthwhile insights with regard to the communion of saints. The importance (and even necessity) of Christians praying together as well as interceding and giving thanks for each other is stressed. Numerous prayers having been uttered by individual believers in solitude are later reported in letters in order to strengthen the rest of the Church. By taking into account the unfortunate physical fragmentation of churches during the Covid-19 pandemic, the contribution highlights what the Church today, as a physical (and digital) communion of saints, can learn from the New Testament's teaching on prayer.

**Keywords:** Communion of Saints, Gathering of Believers, Intercession, New Testament, Online Prayer, Prayer for the Dead, Prayer Reports.

## Introduction

For the reference to the *sanctorum communio* in the Apostles' Creed,<sup>1</sup> four interpretations have been offered in the history of research:<sup>2</sup> Firstly, “[t]he traditional interpretation ... is that it means ‘fellowship with holy persons’, the word *sanctorum* being taken either in a narrow sense of the saints proper and martyrs, or in the broader, more primitive sense of the faithful generally, living as well as departed.”

Secondly, “an alternative exegesis, suggesting that the words should bear in the creed the sense their Greek equivalents undoubtedly bore, viz. ‘participation in the eucharistic elements’, has gained increasing support since the late nineteenth century. The word *sanctorum*, it should be observed, may be either masculine or neuter.”

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<sup>1</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, third edition (Harlow: Longman, 1972), 369.

<sup>2</sup> For the first three interpretations cf. Kelly, *Creeds*, 390.

“Yet a third school of interpretation would read a concrete meaning into *communio*, translating the phrase as ‘fellowship, i.e. community, consisting of holy persons’ and so would understand it as a further description of HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH.”

Fourthly, the word *sanctorum* is understood in terms of a reference to the holy angels with whom the Christian believer has already entered into a community that will, however, become fully conceivable only in eternity.<sup>3</sup>

The first and third interpretations are closely related to each other, even to the point that the latter may be conceived as a sub-category of the former.<sup>4</sup> In the present article, the phrase *sanctorum communio* is primarily understood in the sense of the third exegetical approach.<sup>5</sup>

As Heinz Kruse aptly states, the entire *Apostolicum* is derived from the New Testament.<sup>6</sup> This is particularly also the case with regard to the creed’s reference to the “communion of saints” (*sanctorum communio*) in the sense of the third of the explanatory approaches just summarized. Repeatedly in the New Testament,<sup>7</sup> the Christian believers of the early churches are called οἱ ἅγιοι, i.e., “the holy ones” (Rom 1:7; 15:26; 1 Cor 1:2; 16:1; 2 Cor 1:1; 8:4; Phil 1:1). In 1 Cor 14:33, Paul refers to a situation “in all the churches of the saints” (ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις τῶν ἁγίων), and, thus, considers not only the specific local churches, but also Christianity in general (*Gesamtkirche*) a communion of saints (cf. also Col 1:12).<sup>8</sup>

However, besides these passages, also the New Testament’s teaching on, citations of, and references to prayer are worthwhile and enriching source texts with regard to the communion of saints. In the following, the New Testament material will be presented, explained, and applied. In so doing, “prayer” is understood in terms of a human being on earth directly addressing a heavenly divine being in the second person singular. In the New Testament, mainly God the Father (cf. Mt 6:9-13), but at times also Jesus Christ (e.g., Acts 7:59-60; 2 Cor 12:8; Rv 22:20) is addressed in prayer. The Holy Spirit, however, never appears as an addressee of prayer.

While not all prayer texts can be discussed in detail, the present article provides a comprehensive inventory and categorization of the most important New Testament references relevant for the relationship between the communion of saints and prayer. So far, the various crucial reciprocal links have not received due recognition in theological scholarship. In the main studies on New Testament prayer, the communion of saints is not even mentioned.<sup>9</sup> Granted, in the first volume of Adalbert Gautier Hamman’s

<sup>3</sup> Heinz Kruse, “‘Gemeinschaft der Heiligen.’ Herkunft und Bedeutung des Glaubensartikels,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 47, no. 3 (1993): 246-259.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. similarly Kruse, “Gemeinschaft,” 249.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: Eine dogmatische Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche*, Theologische Bücherei 3, third revised edition (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1960).

<sup>6</sup> Kruse, “Gemeinschaft,” 246.

<sup>7</sup> In the present article, New Testament words/passages are cited from the 28th edition of the *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Greek text) and/or the *New Revised Standard Version* (English translation).

<sup>8</sup> Udo Schnelle, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, third revised edition (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 317.

<sup>9</sup> Cf., e.g., Richard N. Longenecker (ed.), *Into God’s Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, McMaster New Testament Studies 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

seminal work *La prière*, the French word *communion* does appear in the index of subjects.<sup>10</sup> On each of the three indicated pages (i.e., 188, 314, and 384), however, the topic is narrowly treated in terms of the Eucharist. In his dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* (1927; first published in 1930), Dietrich Bonhoeffer refers to intercessory prayer,<sup>11</sup> but without mentioning, let alone studying, the respective New Testament texts.

By comprehensively focusing on the communion of saints and prayer, the following pages might, thus, make an original contribution to theological scholarship. In terms of its ninefold procedure, the article subsequently studies New Testament prayers (1) asking for someone's inclusion into; (2) requesting the unity of; (3) portraying; (4) requiring; (5) interceding on behalf of; (6) giving thanks for; (7) asking for forgiveness within; and (8) being reported to the communion of saints. In the ninth section, the findings will be applied to the present-day situation. It will be asked as to what churches can learn from the New Testament texts today. In so doing, special attention will be paid to the various difficulties and obstacles churches experience(d) during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## 1. Prayers Asking for Someone's Inclusion into the Communion of Saints

When addressing the Gentile Christians at Rome (Rom 1:7), Paul considers them "saints" (ἅγιοι). In Rom 10:1, Paul, then, writes concerning the Jews, "Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer [δεήσις] to God for them is that they may be saved." Paul here, thus, prays for the reception of Jews into the communion of saints. The adding of outsiders to the communion of saints is also the goal of Paul's prayers for King Agrippa and his other listeners in court: "I pray to God [εὐχαίμην ... τῷ θεῷ] that not only you but also all who are listening to me might become such as I am [i.e., a Christian] – except for these chains" (Acts 26:28-29). According to 2 Cor 4:15, a growing of the communion of saints leads to a growth of thanksgiving (εὐχαριστία): "So that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God." For other prayers of thanksgiving see below section 6.

## 2. Prayers Requesting the Unity of the Communion of Saints

In the course of his high priestly prayer in John 17, Jesus utters the following request on behalf of his disciples: "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one" (verse 11). A few verses later, Jesus, then, adds the following request:

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (verses 20-23).

<sup>10</sup> Adalbert Gautier Hamman, *La prière*, Vol. 1, *Le Nouveau Testament*, Bibliothèque de Théologie 436 (Tournai: Desclée & Cie, 1959), 476.

<sup>11</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum communio*, 132-137.

Jesus here, thus, prays for “later generations of believers.”<sup>12</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger aptly observes that Jesus “has one overriding concern that he presents to the Father in prayer: his disciples’ unity.”<sup>13</sup> In requesting this unity, the Greek neuter numeral ἓν (“one”) is repeatedly used in the Johannine reproduction of Jesus’s Aramaic prayer (verses 11, 21, 22, and 23). The ultimate goal of Jesus’s request, however, is that unbelievers, by witnessing the disciples’ unity, will become believers. Jesus here, thus, also prays for the eventual inclusion of outsiders into the communion of saints (cf. above section 1).

In some cases, believers pray that they might, again, personally experience the communion of saints. While being in prison, Paul writes to the church of Colossae meeting in the house of Philemon: “Prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you” (Phlm 22; cf. also Rom 1:10; 1 Thes 3:10; Heb 13:19).

### 3. Prayers Portraying the Communion of Saints

The New Testament promotes both praying in solitude and praying in community. With regard to the former, the gospels repeatedly picture Jesus as praying all by himself (Mt 14:23; 26:36; Mk 1:35; 6:46; 14:32; Lk 5:16; 6:12). Accordingly, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commands his disciples to isolate themselves in their rooms for their prayers (Mt 6:6). Peter is also presented as praying alone (Acts 10:9). Prayers in solitude are also suggested in 1 Cor 7:5 (temporal sexual abstinence within marriage) and 14:28 (praying in tongues without interpretation).

However, at the same time, the New Testament vividly portrays early Christians praying *together* in a group setting: After Jesus’s ascension, his disciples, mother, and brothers prayed together in the upper room (Acts 1:12-14). The disciples are joined in prayer regarding the choice as to who should replace Judas (Acts 1:15-26). In their gatherings, the believers of the Jerusalem church devoted themselves, among other things, to prayer (Acts 2:42). A beautiful prayer of the Jerusalem Church is quoted in Acts 4:24-30. Paul is praying with the elders of the church of Ephesus (Acts 20:36). Paul and Luke are praying with the Syrian Christians of Tyre (Acts 21:5). Christian men and women pray in the context of worship gatherings at Corinth (1 Cor 11).

In 1 Corinthians 14, important rules for prayer in the context of worship gatherings are communicated. The subject matter of glossolalia leads Paul to state that prayer in tongues should either be interpreted/translated (verse 13) or uttered in a language that everyone present can understand:

Otherwise, if you say a blessing with the spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say the “Amen” to your thanksgiving, since the outsider does not know what you are saying? For you may give thanks well enough, but the other person is not built up. I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you; nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue (verses 16-19).

In terms of inside local settings, the early Church gathered for prayer in (1) the Upper Room (Acts 1:13-14: ὑπερῶον); (2) the Jerusalem Temple (Acts 2:46; 3:1: ἱερόν); and (2)

<sup>12</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, Biblical Theology of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 248.

<sup>13</sup> Köstenberger, *Theology*, 248.

private houses (Acts 2:46: οἶκος; 12:12: οἰκία). Prayers in the outside are mentioned in Acts 20:36 where Paul and the Ephesian church elders meet for prayer in the Harbor of Miletus. Prayers on the beach (αἰγιαλός) of Tyre are reported in Acts 21:5. Even though it does not directly concern the early Christian Church, it is worth mentioning that in the city of Philippi, a group of women – consisting of both Jews and Gentile worshippers of God – meet and pray outside at the river (Acts 16:13: ποταμός).<sup>14</sup> According to Acts 16:13,16, this was their regular “place of prayer” (προσευχή).

#### 4. Prayers Requiring the Communion of Saints

Some New Testament prayers require to be uttered by a (gathered) community of believers. In both its Matthean and its Lukan wording, the so-called Lord’s Prayer that Jesus has taught his disciples (Mt 6:9-13; Lk 11:2-4) is supposed to be uttered by them together as a community.<sup>15</sup> This is suggested by the prayer’s first-person plural verb forms as well as by its personal pronouns ἡμεῖς.

According to Mt 18:19-20, promises of divine answering (by the Father) and presence (of Jesus) are attached to prayers that believers utter together, even if there are only two or three of them. Accordingly, Acts 16:25-34 provides a report of two imprisoned believers, Paul and Silas, who pray together and experience God’s presence and help.

In New Testament times, *praying* together meant *coming* together as the words συνάγω (Mt 18:20) and ἀναβαίνω (Acts 1:13) in respective contexts make clear. For some sorts of prayer, this gathering in one room was particularly important and necessary, namely for prayers accompanying (1) the laying-on of hands (Acts 28:8); (2) the anointing with oil (Jas 5:14); and, to a lesser degree, (3) the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42) and (4) the Eucharist (Mt 26:26-29).

#### 5. Prayers Interceding on Behalf of the Communion of Saints

According to the New Testament, early Christians interceded on behalf of their fellow believers. As will become obvious, those praying and those prayed for were often separated from each other locally. The prayers of intercession on behalf of others can be put into the following two categories each having two sub-categories:

- (1) A group of believers praying for
  - (a) another group of fellow believers;
  - (b) individual fellow believers.
- (2) Individual believers praying for
  - (a) a group of fellow believers;
  - (b) fellow individual believers.

<sup>14</sup> In this contribution to *Theological Reflections as Eastern European Journal of Theology* (per the subtitle) it is appropriate to mention that according to the Acts of the Apostles, one of these gathered women, Lydia, along with her household, became the very first convert to Christianity on (Southeastern) European soil (Acts 16:15).

<sup>15</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *Das Gebet im Neuen Testament: Zugleich Versuch einer vom Neuen Testament aus zu erteilenden Antwort auf heutige Fragen*, second revised edition (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 51; however, as Cullmann convincingly argues, it is not excluded that believers might also utter the Lord’s Prayer while being alone.

For each of these four types of prayer, examples will now be presented. Firstly (1a), Paul and Timothy, at times together with Silvanus, ask the churches in both Corinth and Thessalonica to pray for them (2 Cor 1:11; 1 Thes 5:25; 2 Thes 3:1-2). In turn, they also intercede on behalf of these churches (2 Cor 13:7-9; 1 Thes 3:10; 2 Thes 1:11). They also pray for the church at Colossae (Col 1:9).

Secondly (1b), an example of a church praying for an individual fellow believer is found in Acts 12:5: “While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him” (cf. also verse 12). When imprisoned, Paul asks the Christians at Ephesus: “Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak” (Eph 6:19-20). In another instance, Paul asks the Roman Christians to intercede on his behalf (Rom 15:30-33).

Thirdly (2a), the New Testament unmistakably teaches that also prayers uttered in solitude (cf. above section 3) should concern and intercede on behalf of the communion of saints. Repeatedly, individual believers pray for entire groups of fellow Christians. The imprisoned Paul intercedes for the churches in Philippi (Phil 1:9) and Ephesus (Eph 1:17; 3:16-19). He also prays for the Christians in Rome (Rom 1:9-10). Epaphras intercedes for the church in Colossae (Col 4:12). The imprisoned Paul praying for fellow believers is an impressive example of how an individual believer despite personal hardships was still capable of praying for others.

Fourthly (2b), an example of an individual praying for another individual is found in the Gospel of Luke where it is narrated that Jesus prayed for his disciple Peter: “Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you [ἐγὼ δὲ ἐδεήθην περὶ σοῦ] that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Lk 22:31-32). Jesus’s example is, then, followed by the early church. While being in prison, Paul not only prays for entire churches, but also for individual fellow believers. As Paul writes to Timothy: “I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day” (2 Tm 1:3; cf. also Phlm 6).

Paul’s so-called “wish prayer”<sup>16</sup> to “the Lord” (ὁ κύριος)<sup>17</sup> for a certain Onesiphorus in 2 Tm 1:16-18 is particularly important because many Catholic (e.g., Ceslas Spicq; Joseph Freundorfer; and Joseph Reuss), but also some Protestant (e.g., Joachim Jeremias and Helmut Merkel) and Anglican (e.g., Walter Lock; J.N.D. Kelly; and A.T. Hanson) commentators, consider it a New Testament proof text for the (Catholic and Orthodox) practice of praying for the dead.<sup>18</sup> The passage in question reads as follows:

May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus [δῶη ἔλεος ὁ κύριος τῷ Ὀνησιφόρου οἴκῳ], because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chain; when he arrived in Rome, he eagerly searched for me and found me – may

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Richard N. Longenecker, “Prayer in the Pauline Letters” in *Into God’s Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, edited by Richard N. Longenecker, McMaster New Testament Studies 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002),

<sup>17</sup> According to many commentators, ὁ κύριος refers to the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Tm 1:2) who is, thus, the addressee of the prayer. Cf., e.g. Walter Lock, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles (I & II Timothy and Titus)*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924), 90.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. David M. Chapman, “Rest and Light Perpetual: Prayer for the Departed in the Communion of Saints,” *One in Christ* 34, no. 1 (1998): 39-49; James B. Gould, *Understanding Prayer for the Dead: Its Foundation in History and Logic* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2017).

the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day! [δόξη αὐτῷ ὁ κύριος εὐρεῖν ἔλεος παρὰ κυρίου ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ] And you know very well how much service he rendered in Ephesus (2 Tm 1:16-18).

The “household of Onesiphorus” (ὁ Ὀνησιφόρου οἶκος) is mentioned, again, in the epistle’s closing greeting section (2 Tm 4:19). In that same verse, other people (Prisca and Aquilla) are greeted personally. Because this is – repeatedly – not the case with Onesiphorus, however, the above-mentioned commentators conclude that he was already dead. Consequently, they consider 2 Tm 1:18 one of the earliest Christian references to the practice of praying for the dead (cf. 2 Mc 12:44-45). Walter Lock, for instance, states: “The context implies that Onesiphorus was separated from his family, probably that he was dead ..., and so would provide a sanction for prayer for the departed.”<sup>19</sup> This view is in accordance with the traditional interpretation of the Apostles’ Creed summarized in the introduction, namely that the *sanctorum communion* consists of fellowship with living *and departed* believers.<sup>20</sup>

With regard to the expression ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ in 2 Tm 1:18 (cf. also verse 12), Ralph Earle states in agreement with the scholarly consensus, “Paul prays that mercy may be shown to Onesiphorus ‘on that day’ – presumably the day of judgment.”<sup>21</sup> However, as a growing number of (also Catholic) commentators (e.g., Lorenz Oberlinner; I. Howard Marshall; William D. Mounce; Luke Timothy Johnson; Alfons Weiser; and Philip H. Towner) emphasize, it is not certain (or even not probable) that Onesiphorus was already dead when Paul was writing his letter since this is not expressly stated in the text and, thus, remains speculation. As Earle aptly states with regard to Onesiphorus, “But we know nothing further about this devoted Christian.”<sup>22</sup> One should, thus, be hesitant to consider 2 Tm 1:18 a proof text for praying for the dead. As Donald Guthrie convincingly states: “[I]t is precarious to base a doctrine, which finds no sanction anywhere else in the New Testament, upon the mere inference that Onesiphorus was already dead.”<sup>23</sup>

## 6. Prayers Giving Thanks for the Communion of Saints

In the New Testament, Christian believers do not only intercede on behalf of, but also give thanks for one another. The four categories employed in the preceding section (i.e., 1a, 1b, 2a, 2b) can be applied again. Firstly (1a), several New Testament texts refer to a group of believers giving thanks (εὐχαριστέω) for another group of believers. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy repeatedly give thanks to God for the Thessalonian believers (1 Thes 1:2; 2:13; 2 Thes 1:3; 2:13). Paul and Timothy thank God for the church in Colossae (Col 1:3). Two examples from the Second Epistle to the Corinthians need to be singled out. In addressing the church at Corinth, Paul and Timothy (2 Cor 1:1) write:

<sup>19</sup> Lock, *Pastoral Epistles*, 90.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Kelly, *Creeeds*, 390, cf. Chapman, “Rest,” 43.

<sup>21</sup> Ralph Earle, “2 Timothy” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, edited by Frank E. Gaebelein, Vol. 11, *Ephesians-Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 398.

<sup>22</sup> Earle, “2 Timothy,” 417.

<sup>23</sup> Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, second edition, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 14 (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 148.

We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again, as you also join in helping us by your prayers, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many (2 Cor 1:8-11).

In the last verse, Paul and Timothy refer to the Corinthians' intercessory prayer (δέησις) for their continuous divine protection. In a next thought, they already envision the future thanksgiving (εὐχαριστέω) that many (πολλοί) will direct to God for answering the intercession of many (πολλοί). In 2 Cor 1:11, there is, thus, a close link between intercessory prayer and thanksgiving.

This is, then, again the case in epistle's ninth chapter. Paul considers the Corinthian believers "saints" (1 Cor 1:2) and applies this term (ἅγιοι) to all Christians of Achaia (2 Cor 1:1). In 2 Cor 9:1, saints of still another area come into view. Paul here refers to the Corinthians' ministry to "the saints" (οἱ ἅγιοι). As Paul's earlier reference in 1 Cor 16:1-3 suggests, these saints are the Christian believers of, particularly, the church at Jerusalem. The Corinthians' ministry is the collection of a monetary gift for the Jerusalem believers. As Paul envisions, this gift will result in both thanksgiving (εὐχαριστία) and intercession (δέησις):

You will be enriched in every way by your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (2 Cor 9:11-15)

Secondly (1b), even though, strictly speaking, not employing thanksgiving terminology, Gal 1:24 comes close to a group of believers giving thanks for a fellow individual believer. Paul here reports how the churches of Judea reacted to his conversion from being their persecutor to being their fellow Christian believer: "And they glorified God because of me [καὶ ἐδόξαζον ἐν ἐμοὶ τὸν θεόν]." However, it is not clear to what extent the verb δοξάζω refers to a prayer in the sense of the definition provided in the introduction.

Thirdly (2a), Paul individually gives thanks (εὐχαριστέω) for the Christians in Rome: "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world" (Rom 1:8). Likewise, Paul also gives thanks to God for the churches in Corinth (1 Cor 1:4) and Ephesus (Eph 1:15-16). Fourthly (2b), Paul thanks (εὐχαριστέω) God for his fellow Christian believer Philemon (Phlm 4-5; cf. 2 Tm 1:3).

Summing up the fifth (intercession) and sixth (thanksgiving) sections, the table below provides an overview of the four ways Christians pray for each other in the New Testament.



Praying for Those praying	Group of Fellow Believers		Individual Fellow Believer	
	Intercession	Thanksgiving	Intercession	Thanksgiving
Group of Believers	2 Cor 1:11; 13:7-9; Col 1:9; 1 Thes 3:10; 5:25; 2 Thes 1:11; 3:1-2	2 Cor 1:11; 9:11-15; Col 1:3; 1 Thes 1:2; 2:13; 2 Thes 1:3; 2:13	Acts 12:5, 12; Rom 15:30-33; Eph 6:19-20	(Gal 1:24)
Individual Believer	Rom 1:9-10; Phil 1:9; Eph 1:17; 3:16-19; Col 4:12	Rom 1:8; 1 Cor 1:4; Eph 1:15-16	2 Tm 1:3, 18; Phlm 6	Phlm 4-5

## 7. Prayers Asking for Forgiveness within the Community of Saints

According to Christian theology, the Church is not only a Communion of Saints (*sanctorum communio*), but at the same time a Communion of Sinners (*peccatorum communio*). This teaching (cf. Rom 7:14-25) is also expressed in some of the New Testament references to prayer. Most prominently, in the *Pater Noster*, the disciples are supposed to pray, “And forgive us our sins [καὶ ἄφεξ ἡμῖν τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν]” (Lk 11:4). Instead of the Lukan term ἀμαρτία (“sins”), the Matthean parallel (Mt 6:12) uses the equivalent noun ὀφειλήματα (“debts”). Prayers for forgiveness of sins are also mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament (Jas 5:15-16; 1 Jn 1:9; 5:16). According to all these references, prayers for forgiveness of sin are uttered within the community of believers (but cf. also Acts 7:60).

## 8. Prayers Being Reported to the Communion of Saints

The earliest Christian prayers are known (to us) only because they are reported in the writings of the New Testament (especially in the Acts of the Apostles and in the epistles). All these prayer texts, thus, concern the communion of saints because both contemporary believers and Christians of later generations (including us today) could/can learn and profit from them. In the following, some of the so-called “prayer reports” in the narrower sense<sup>24</sup> will be presented and discussed. Many of the passages referred to in sections 5 and 6 above are “prayer reports.”

At first sight, an individual believer praying in solitude only on behalf of *himself* or *herself* is not so much concerned with the communion of saints as a whole. However, if this Christian later on reports his or her respective prayers to fellow Christians, the communion of saints does come into the picture.

A good example for this is found in 2 Cor 12:7-10. Paul here reports that he prayed three times to the Lord Jesus to remove the “thorn in the flesh,” i.e., probably a metaphor for some kind of physical malady. Even though Paul did receive a verbal answer to his

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Longenecker, “Prayer in the Pauline Letters,” 220-222.

prayers, his request itself has not been granted. In spite of the negative result, Paul's prayer report might have been an encouraging help to all Christians, both in Corinth and elsewhere, who also struggled with unanswered prayers and who might have been comforted by the Jesus's answer to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (verse 9). In this regard, Paul's prayer report was/is, thus, beneficial to the communion of saints, especially because the metaphor "thorn in the flesh" remains (deliberately) vague. As the Dutch exegete T.E. van Spanje aptly and pastorally comments, "For later readers who think that they also suffer from a 'thorn' of some kind or another, the lacking specification of the nature of the 'thorn' offers the possibility to easily identify themselves with Paul."<sup>25</sup>

## 9. The Communion of Saints and Prayer Today

As became obvious in the eight preceding sections, New Testament (references to) prayers are valuable sources with regard to the topic of the Christian communion of saints. In this final section, the various New Testament passages will now be applied to the present-day situation. It will be highlighted what the Church today, as a communion of saints, can learn from the New Testament texts on prayer. In so doing, the various challenges and obstacles that churches experience(d) during the Covid-19 pandemic will also be taken into account. This means asking the question as to what extent the prayers found in the New Testament might be put into practice today by making use of the various available digital communication technologies. Both the benefits and limits of electronic means and platforms will be clearly indicated.<sup>26</sup>

As has been demonstrated, some prayers in the New Testament are directly and expressly concerned with the growth (section 1) and unity (section 2) of the *sanctorum communio*.

Besides their efforts to invite people to the Christian faith and Church, believers today should also pray for the reception of outsiders into the communion of saints. In times of a pandemic, this requires special creativity because the doors of many churches cannot be opened to (as many) visitors as this would usually be the case.

Further, like Jesus in John 17, we can ask God for the unity of believers. This might be understood in the ecumenical sense, i.e., that churches and Christians of different denominations work together, as far as this is possible.<sup>27</sup> However, the Covid-19 crisis has highlighted another issue with regard to the unity of Christians: In view of the fragmentation of churches caused by the pandemic, prayers for (online) possibilities to reunite, to see each other "face to face" (1 Thes 3:10) are necessary. If gathered church services *inside* are impossible it might be considered to meet *outside* (if the weather allows/suggests it) in order to pray together (cf. Acts 16:13).

<sup>25</sup> T.E. van Spanje, *2 Korintiërs: Profiel van een evangeliedienaar*, Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament, Derde serie, Afdeling Brieven van Paulus (Kampen: KokBoekencentrum, 2009), 301 (my translation from the Dutch).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. also Chris Ridgeway, "Online Communion Can Still Be Sacramental: The Bread and the Cup Zoomed for You," *Christianity Today*, March 2020 (posted March 27, 2020), accessed on 13 September 2021: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/march-web-only/online-communion-can-still-be-sacramental.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 1135-1152.

As has been shown, the New Testament portrays Christians praying together (section 3) and stresses the importance (and even necessity) of common prayer (section 4). Different from the time of the New Testament, today, *praying* together does not necessarily mean *coming* together. The various communication technologies (e.g., telephone; internet) facilitate communal prayers of (lonely and isolated) believers that are locally (far) apart from each other. The early Christians made use of the means of communication available to them (i.e., letters; letter carriers; road system of the Roman Empire). As Udo Schnelle aptly states: “Ancient letters, including those of Paul, were a form of communication in which the communication partners were separated in time and space. The letter served as substitute for face to face communication (cf. Seneca, *Epistles* 75).”<sup>28</sup> The referenced passage from Seneca the Younger (4 B.C.E.–65 C.E.) reads as follows: “You [i.e., Lucilius] have been complaining that my letters [*epistulas*] to you are rather carelessly written. Now who talks carefully unless he also desires to talk affectedly? I prefer that my letters [*sermo*] should be just what my conversation would be if you and I were sitting in one another’s company or taking walks together [*si una sederemus aut ambularemus*], – spontaneous and easy; for my letters [*epistulas*] have nothing strained or artificial about them” (*Ep.* 75.1).<sup>29</sup> Like the early Christians, believers today can thankfully use the – in comparison with those of the ancient world much advanced – communication systems at their disposal in order to pray together.

However, as has been argued in section 4, prayers that accompany (1) the laying-on of hands; (2) the anointing with oil; (3) the breaking of bread; and (4) the Eucharist require believers actually gathering together in one place. It is difficult (and in some cases even impossible) to utter these prayers via the internet. As it seems, the New Testament suggests formulating the following practical rule: All prayers having a *haptic* component/dimension (e.g., laying-on of hands; anointing; breaking bread; distributing bread and wine) cannot merely be uttered and acted out virtually via the (haptic) computer screen.

A good example for this is the anointing of the sick commanded in Jas 5:14-15a: “Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.” Sadly, during the corona crisis, often especially the elderly, sick, and quarantined did not receive any (pastoral) visitors praying with, for, and over them. They would have needed a (healing) Christian touch similar to the one that the quarantined leper did receive from Jesus (Mt 8:1-4).

Thus, while the internet certainly opened up worthwhile opportunities for prayer during the Covid-19 pandemic, the most obvious manner for Christian brothers and sisters to pray together still seems to be by actually *meeting* each other in one place. During the pandemic, several believers might have gotten used to conveniently staying at home and watching a livestream of a church service on the internet. They should be encouraged to come to church again in order to participate in, contribute to, and be blessed by the fellowship of believers (cf. Heb 10:25).

<sup>28</sup> Udo Schnelle, *The History and Theology of the New Testament Writings*, translated by M. Eugene Boring (London: SCM Press, 1998), 33.

<sup>29</sup> *Seneca in Ten Volumes*, Vol. 5, *Ad Lucilium epistulae morales*, vol. 2, with an English Translation by Richard M. Gummere, The Loeb Classical Library 76 (London: William Heinemann, 1970), 136-137.

As was further demonstrated, prayers interceding on behalf of (section 5) and giving thanks for (section 6) fellow believers play an important role in the New Testament. Intercession remains a crucial part of the prayer life of churches today. When emphasizing the importance of intercessory prayer within the *sanctorum communio*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer quotes the following passage from Aleksej Stepanovič Chomjakov's essay on the unity of the church:

No man is saved alone; he who is saved is saved in the church, as its member in unity with other members. Does anyone believe? – he is in the community of faith. Does anyone love? – he is in the community of love. Does anyone pray? – he is in the community of prayer. Do not ask: “What prayer can benefit the living or the dead, since my prayer is not even sufficient for myself?” Since in any event you do not understand how to pray, what is the purpose of your praying for yourself? The spirit of love prays in you ... If you are a member of the church your prayer is necessary for all its members ... But the blood of the church is the prayer of intercession for one another.<sup>30</sup>

Like the early Church did with regard to both Peter (Acts 12:5) and Paul (cf. Eph 6:19-20), Christian communities today should not forget to pray for fellow individual believers feeling and being lonely and isolated because of sickness, disabilities, imprisonment, persecution, lockdown, or quarantine. Vice versa, during and in spite of his imprisonments, Paul did not forget to pray for fellow Christian believers and churches. Likewise, during the Covid-19 pandemic, many faithful Christians, despite their (feelings of) isolation, solitude, and loneliness, used their quarantine to pray for others. However, the (Catholic and Orthodox) prayer practice of interceding for the dead (cf. also the reference to “the dead” in the above citation of Chomjakov) is not found in the New Testament, even not in 2 Tm 1:18. One should be hesitant to interpret this verse in the sense of Paul praying for an already deceased Onesiphorus.

In view of the New Testament passages presented in section 6, it becomes obvious that thanking God for each other played a crucial role in the early Church. This should be no less the case today. Hopefully, during the difficult time of the pandemic, many Christians have felt and expressed (a fresh and renewed) thankfulness for their fellow Christian believers. The *sanctorum communio* should never be taken for granted. As the New Testament believers teach us, it is a gift of God to whom thanksgiving is due.

The thankfulness for the privilege of one's membership in the *sanctorum communio* is probably increased when realizing that this group of people is at the same time a *peccatorum communio* (section 7). Prayers for the forgiveness of sins (cf. Lk 11:4) should, thus, be part and parcel of church services today.

While all New Testament prayer reports have been addressed to concrete historical persons or communities of the first century C.E. (section 8), we can still profit from them today by reading them. These texts provide us with encouragement, instruction, and inspiration for our personal Christian life in the communion of saints. Putting this

<sup>30</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints: A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church*, Third Edition, translated by R. Gregor Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 132; for the German version cf. Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 134.

communion into practice today should also mean informing fellow believers by letter (as did Paul), telephone, SMS, e-mail, or instant messaging services that we prayed, are praying, and will continue to pray for them.

Hopefully, not only the early Jerusalem church, but also the present-day Church (in its various meeting places around the globe) is characterized by the words in Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers [καὶ ταῖς προσευχαῖς].”

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## СПІЛЬНОТА СВЯТИХ І МОЛИТВА: НОВОЗАВІТНЯ ПЕРСПЕКТИВА

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Анотація: У цій статті християнська церква розглядається як спільнота святих з увагою до новозавітних згадок про молитву. Своїм змістом деякі молитви прямо й чітко стосуються спілкування та єдності віруючих християн. Та попри окремішність їхніх тем чи прохань, усі молитви дають цінне розуміння щодо спільноти святих. Підкреслено важливість (і навіть необхідність) спільної молитви християн, а також заступництва та подяки один за одного. Окремі віруючі виголосили багато молитов наодинці і пізніше їх поширили у листах з метою підкріпити решту Церкви. Беручи до уваги гідний жалю факт фізичної фрагментації церков під час пандемії Covid-19, це дослідження підкреслює, що корисного може взяти сучасна церква, як фізичне (і цифрове) спілкування святих, з новозавітного вчення про молитву.

Ключові слова: спільнота святих, зібрання віруючих, заступництво, Новий Завіт, молитва онлайн, молитва за померлих, молитовні повідомлення.

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