



# ALL SAINTS' DAY – NOVEMBER 1

All Saints' Day is a glorious celebration of the church. On this day, we remember our unity with all God's saints, past and present. Contrary to some teaching, the "saints" are not a subset of super-Christians within the church. As is obvious from the New Testament's epistles (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:2), all Christians have the status of "saint." To be a saint means to be a "holy one" – it means you belong to God. More specifically, saints are those with sanctuary access – they serve God in his heavenly temple. In Christ, we are saints because we are members of his royal priesthood (1 Pt. 2:5-10) and minister in God's presence (Heb. 10:19-25). We offer the Lord Spiritual sacrifice before the throne of grace.

All Saints' Day grew out of the early church's desire to commemorate Christians who had been especially faithful or who had been martyred during times of persecution. All Saint's Day is a healthy (and very Reformed!) alternative to celebrating individual saint's days throughout the year. Earliest traces of a common saints' day are found in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. While we celebrate the dead in Christ, we do not worship them, or pray to them. Reformer Martin Bucer explains: "We teach that the blessed saints who lie in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ and of whose lives we have biblical or other trustworthy accounts, ought to be commemorated in such a way, that the congregation is shown what graces and gifts their God and Father and ours conferred upon them through our common Savior and that we should give thanks to God for them, and rejoice with them as members of the one body over those graces and gifts, so that we may be strongly provoked to place greater confidence in the grace of God for ourselves, and to follow the example of their faith." In other words, we should use the history of the church to encourage us in our walk with Christ, through all of life's trials and tribulations.

All Saints' is a time to remember *all* those who have lived before us and through whom God has worked: the old covenant saints, tracing all the way back to Adam and Eve, and running up to John the Baptist; the saints of the apostolic era, including the first disciples; the saints of the early church who stood their ground against the Roman Empire; the medieval saints, who developed a glorious Christian civilization, full of beautiful art, architecture, music, and literature; the Reformation era saints through whom God brought about great renewal in the church and the world; our ancestors in the faith – great grandparents, grandparents, parents, and others who have passed on to us a legacy of faith; and the saints of the modern era, who continue to live out the gospel in our time, however imperfectly.

It is quite fitting and instructive that Reformation Day and All Saints' Day occur so closely together in the church's calendar. All Saints' Day celebrates the *church catholic*. It celebrates the glory of the universal church. In Christ, we are all one. The church militant on earth and the church triumphant in heaven form one cosmic covenant family. In worship, we who are on earth enter the heavenlies, and join our prayers to the

company of heaven (Heb. 12:18ff). Together with them, we await eagerly the final revelation of Christ and the resurrection of the body.

All Saint's Day meshes well with Reformation Day because the Reformation was not a break with the catholic church in the true sense. Indeed, the Reformers sought to purify and heal the catholic church from corruption and disease. It never occurred to the Reformers that they were starting a new church or starting from scratch. In fact, they routinely argued that they were recovering the heritage of the church fathers and carrying on the best of medieval Christendom. Sadly, just as many in the late medieval period were cut off from all that had gone before in the life and heart of the church, much to their detriment, so many Christians today have broken ties with the past life of the church and thus fallen into all kinds of error. All Saints' Day is a good time to remind ourselves of the importance of knowing church history. In the words of G. K. Chesterton, "If you want to know the size of the church, you have to count tombstones."

While the church's growth towards maturity is often in fits and starts, taking three steps forward and two steps backwards, overall we must affirm the reality of ecclesial progress in history (Eph. 4:11ff). The church is growing up into the full stature of Christ Jesus. The church's development through history is often mysterious and veiled from our sight. But there is a deep commonality and continuity within the life of the catholic church. Properly understood, the Reformation may be viewed as a legitimate outworking of the church's growth. John Nevin explains: "In this view, the Middle Ages form properly speaking no retrogression for Christianity. They are to be regarded rather as the womb, in which was formed the life of the Reformation itself . . . If Protestantism be not derived by true and legitimate succession from the Church life of the Middle Ages, it will be found perfectly vain to think of connecting it genealogically with the life of the Church at any earlier point." Likewise, Phillip Schaff argued that the Reformation stands in "catholic union with all previous church history." In other words, just as the early church grew organically out of the apostolic era, and the medieval era out of that, so the Reformation grew out of what preceded. This is an important point: Church history did not begin in 1517 or 1646. Our story traces back through the Reformation, to the medieval era. It traces back through the early church to the apostles, and through them to the old covenant era. It's all one family line, with one running story. Our heroes are not only Luther and Calvin, but Augustine, Aquinas, and Anselm. Our villains are not only Servetus, Bolsec, and Muntzer, but also Arius, Marcion, and Cerinthus. The Reformation was a glorious chapter in our story, but it is certainly not the first chapter, or even the most important chapter. Each chapter in the church's story arises out of all that has gone on before.

The Reformers had a good grasp of this continuity with the church of all ages. They traced their church back through the centuries. They did not concede "catholicity" to the Romanists; indeed, they claimed to be "reforming catholics," desirous of restoring and maturing the same church that had always existed. Thus, they wanted to avoid schism as much as possible. They did not believe they were leaving the old church to form a new one; they believed they were continuing the life and work of the old church, and had been abandoned by Rome's hierarchy.

All Saints' Day is a time to rejoice in the work of God down through the centuries. We are standing on the shoulders of giants. Give thanks for the doctrines that have been hammered out in ages past against the encroachments of heresy, the territories conquered for Christ through missionary expanse, the way saints of old stood fast in the face of tyranny and persecution in order to maintain the faith and win our liberty, and all the countless other blessings passed on to us. We have received a great legacy and we should honor our Spiritual ancestors by maintaining their heritage and building on their work. Through the church, the story goes on.

All Saint's Day is also an appropriate time to mourn over the church's many divisions. If we are all saints in Christ, we all belong together in the same church, under the same confession, and at the same table. Because of sin, the church's unity is only dimly witnessed in the world today. The world does not know we are Christ's disciples because our love for one another is obscured. We need to repent and heal the breaches that separate us institutionally and doctrinally, if not organically. To be sure, there are still boundary lines to be drawn. The church must be pure as well as unified, and false ecumenism always threatens God's truth and the church's holiness, especially in a relativistic, pluralistic age like ours. But surely every saint should feel the same burden as Schaff: "To the man who has the right idea of the Church, as the communion of saints, this state of things must be a source of deep distress. The loss of all his earthly possessions, the death of his dearest friend, however severely felt, would be as nothing to him, compared with the grief he feels for such division and distraction of the Church of God, the body of Jesus Christ. Not for the price of the whole world, with all its treasures, could he be induced to appear as the founder of a new sect. A sorrowful distinction that in any view; and one besides that calls for small capital indeed in these United States." Sectarianism is perhaps the greatest American ecclesial sin. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "It has been granted to the Americans less than any other nation of the earth to realize the visible unity of the Church of God." Luther's last words revealed his greatest fears. According to Schaff, "Luther exhibited the doctrine of justification as precisely *the true ground of Christian union*, and fought with all the strength of his gigantic spirit against the fanatical and factious tendencies of his time. His last wish, as that of Melancthon also, wrestled for the unity of the church. His most depressing fear was still: 'After our death, there will rise many harsh and terrible sects. God help us!'" May we repent of ways we have made Luther's nightmare come true.

