

# Communion/Koinonia

## Entry in the forthcoming *New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*

In the last fifty years biblical studies, ecumenical studies, ecclesiology, theological anthropology, trinitarian theology and Christian spirituality have all benefited from renewed reflection on an ancient Christian concept, communion/*koinonia*.

## Biblical Background

There is no corresponding Hebrew term for the Greek word *koinonia* and it only rarely appears in early Greek translations of the Old Testament. The Greek concept does not appear to have been used by Jesus himself and first makes its appearance in the New Testament in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The term was translated into Latin as *communio* and is frequently translated into English as "communion," "fellowship," "participation in" or "sharing in." If one includes all related forms of the noun *koinonia*, it appears in the New Testament 36 times, most frequently in the Pauline corpus. Etymologically, its meaning is grounded in the Greek root *koinōn*, meaning "common."

*Koinonia* has a rich semantic field of meaning in Paul's writing. In 1 Cor. 1.9 Paul expresses gratitude for the Corinthians having been called by God into "fellowship" (*koinonia*) with Christ. A parallel usage is found in Paul's benediction to the Corinthians at the conclusion of the second epistle: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship (*koinonia*) of the holy Spirit be with all of you (2 Cor. 13.13, New American Bible)." Although 1 Cor. 1.9 refers to fellowship with Christ, Phil. 2.1 refers to a *koinonia* in the Spirit. Both passages, however, articulate an enduring relationship with God effected in baptism. 2 Cor. 13.13 may also bear a more ecclesial

sense in which *koinonia* is a gift *from* the Spirit, suggesting that it is the Spirit who brings about a shared relationship among believers. That Paul's understanding would seem to incorporate both a vertical element of *koinonia* (e.g., fellowship with Christ or the Spirit) and a horizontal one (e.g., fellowship among believers) is evident in 1 Cor. 10.16-7.

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf (New American Bible).

This passage appears in the context of Paul's treatment of the vexing Corinthian dilemma regarding the suitability of eating food sacrificed to idols. Paul wants to stress that the *koinonia* in Christ manifested in the Eucharist also creates unity among believers. This unity of believers must be considered when such questions are addressed. According to Paul, communion/*koinonia* is first effected in baptism and then further manifested in the Eucharist. This sacramental *koinonia*, in turn, places ethical expectations on members of the Christian community; the freedom proper to believers as followers of Jesus is conditioned by the obligations imposed upon them by their shared *koinonia*.

The dual dimensions of Paul's usage of *koinonia* —fellowship with God in Christ and the Spirit and fellowship with other believers—is articulated even more explicitly in the Johannine literature:

for the life was made visible; we have seen it and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was made visible to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; for our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ (1 John 1.2-3).

This passage highlights the simultaneity of the shared life among believers and their shared life with God, that is to say, “with the Father and with his Son.” The author's intention apparently was to forestall any idea that fellowship with God provided a

freedom to do as one wishes in the sphere of human relationships. The author of 1 John insists that true fellowship with God bears within it an ethical and even ontological imperative; one cannot separate fellowship with God from fellowship with fellow believers. The communal dimension of the Christian experience of *koinonia* is further reflected in Acts 2.42 in which the *koinonia* among the disciples is evident in their sharing all things in common.

When one considers both the Pauline and Johannine references above, what is striking is the connection between the spiritual life of the Christian and an incipient trinitarian theology. These passages relate the believer to a *koinonia* “in Christ” (1 Cor. 1.9), “of the holy Spirit” (2 Cor. 13.13) and “with the Father” (1 John 1.3). Yet nowhere is the term *koinonia* used to describe the relationships *among* the trinitarian persons, a strictly post-biblical development. Likewise, while the biblical usage of the term *koinonia* includes an ecclesial dimension, only in the post-biblical period will *koinonia* actually be equated with the Church or used to describe the communion that exists among various local churches.

## **Contemporary Developments**

Modern theology and spirituality have taken a renewed interest in the concept of *koinonia*, often treated under its most common Latin translation, *communio*. It has been particularly influential in ecclesiology and ecumenism. In ecclesiology, the early Christian use of *koinonia* as a way of describing the bond of unity among the various local churches within the whole body of Christ is seen as a helpful corrective to a universalist ecclesiology that subsumes local churches into the universal Church (e.g., the ecclesiology of baroque Catholicism) and a congregationalism that reduces the universal

Church to a confederation of autonomous local churches (the church polity of many evangelical Bible churches). It has also been influential in the development of eucharistic ecclesiologies that would see the Eucharist as the most profound sacramental expression of what it is to be church. In ecumenism, *koinonia* often refers to the spiritual unity that already exists, albeit imperfectly, among various Christian churches but which still demands a more visible expression.

Another fruitful line of development explores the conviction of early Christian writers that *koinonia*/communion describes not only the believer's relationship with the triune God but also the perichoretic relationship of the trinitarian persons. God is not a self-contained divine monad; God's action in the economy of salvation reveals a God who does not just *enter into* relationships of one kind or another, but rather, a God who is, in the divine being, perfect relationship. In trinitarian reflection, divine persons are understood, not as autonomous individual entities, but as differentiated relations. God's reality is most adequately affirmed, not as perfect self-sufficiency, but as perfect relatedness. God is *koinonia* in God's very being. From this perspective Jesus Christ is, for humankind, the prime analogate for an understanding of divine personhood, and as the incarnation of the second person of the trinity, he is also the key to understanding the nature, demands and possibilities of authentic human personhood. The implications of these assertions are immense.

Much of western philosophy, ancient and modern, has been based on a "substance ontology," that is, an ontology that analyzes being as encountered in individual substances. However, if the source of all being, God, is not an individual anything but perfect relationality, and if, according to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, all that is

proceeds from the creative act of God, then a substance ontology must give way to a “relational ontology.” “Personhood,” an inherently relational category, supplants “substance” as the starting point for modern metaphysics. This line of development places the concept of *koinonia*/communion, grounded in the triune being of God and manifested in the life and teaching of Jesus, at the forefront of contemporary theology and spirituality. If authentic existence is now understood not in terms of self-sufficiency, but in being-for-others, then spirituality can no longer be conceived as the exploration of one’s private relationship with God. Humans are made for communion. One’s spirituality is realized in one’s relationship to God, other persons and the cosmos itself. As the biblical witness consistently affirmed, being with God and being with others are intimately related. Consequently we find much contemporary writing that attends to a spirituality of communion in which communion with God is encountered in one’s experience of communion with the other.

This spirituality has appealed to Christian feminists concerned with the damaging effects of patriarchy on the flourishing of women and the welfare of humankind. Some feminist thinkers have claimed that the roots of patriarchy lie in a substance ontology’s tendency to engender relations of competitiveness and a view of power as domination. In contrast, the call to communion encourages a vision of human flourishing that is grounded not in competition and domination but in mutuality and cooperation. Likewise, spiritualities of communion have found a sympathetic hearing among those with deep ecological concerns who see in the notion of communion an openness to cosmic relatedness that would challenge the dominant anthropocentric view of creation.

## **For Further Reading**

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