

“And the Communion of the Holy Spirit”

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“The communion . . .,” “The fellowship . . .,” “The intimate fellowship. . .,” “The communication of . . .”: all of these are translations of the Greek word “*koinonia*” in English versions of 2 Corinthians 13:13. Granted there is a general agreement among translators that either “communion” or “fellowship” is the best choice here. And yet, for modern English speakers there is a great difference between these two words. “Fellowship” is perfectly understandable in everyday speech and has no particularly religious overtone. But “communion” is very different. We rarely use the word except in a specifically Christian context, and usually it is equated with the Eucharist. We know that it can mean a sense of deep unity with another person or with many people, but we rarely use it in that sense. For most of us, it has become part of a religious vocabulary. Therefore, to have to choose between these two possible translations presents a dilemma: either we choose a word that means something quite ordinary, “fellowship,” or we use a religious word that does not have a very clear meaning for us in the context of this verse. No wonder that when speaking we often choose to use the Greek, *koinonia*, which has become a commonly understood word in many churches. This lets us avoid the choice of English words but leaves us with a vague sense that the early church had an ethos that we cannot define and probably do not understand.

Had the early church intended to stress the element of fellowship, there were words that would have done this without the ambiguity of *koinonia*. Yet they chose a word that came more from the world of commerce than from any discussion of human associations. *Koinonia* refers to joint ownership or partnership or joint participation in something. In Luke 5:10, James and John are listed as partners (*koinonoi*) in a fishing operation with Peter. Partner or partnership is a perfectly good word, and we understand its meaning in a secular context. Yet in the setting of this verse in 2 Corinthians 13:13, what does participation or partnership in or with the Holy Spirit mean? We probably hesitate to assume that we as Christians are somehow joint owners of the Holy Spirit, nor is being partners with the Holy Spirit much easier to imagine. Do we “participate” in the Holy Spirit? All of these possibilities raise questions, which probably is why the translators choose to use the words *communion* or *fellowship*—though the NRSV adds *sharing* in a footnote as an alternative. Perhaps “sharing” has the same problem as “participation”; it leaves open the suggestion that as Christians we become part of the Holy Spirit, which is theologically questionable.

However the word *koinonia* is translated—or left in Greek—it has to do with the character of the Christian community, not only with the relationship of the individual Christian with the Holy Spirit. This prayer, this benediction at the end of Paul’s letter to Corinth, is to the congregation gathered to hear his letter, and the hope is that they will have the fellowship, the sharing, and the participation in the Holy Spirit that leads to that peculiar character of the Christian community that we still call “*koinonia*.”

What was it that caused the infant church to seek a different word to express what they were experiencing that went beyond normal human fellowship? We know

that the early church was composed of mostly those in the lower echelons of society—craftsmen who made their livelihood by making and selling things; slaves, especially household slaves since the church was largely an urban phenomenon in its earliest days; women, some of whom were from upper levels of society; and Jews. We also know that the small congregations—the house churches—met almost daily, and their meetings often included meals.

The surrounding Greco-Roman culture had very clear ideas about how slaves and free people, how men and women, were to relate to each other. Jews had strong rules about how Jews were to behave toward Gentiles. Many of these cultural norms centered on meals. And in the midst of this culture that strongly affected all of those who became part of the church, a different society came into being, one in which Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free people, men and women all sat together, ate together, and related to one another as equals. Granted, it was not always easy for these new Christians to change their behavior, to shed the cultural expectations in which they had grown up. We can see that in Paul's rebukes to the Corinthian church, both in their sexual behavior and in their eating habits at what was supposed to be the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:17-22). It was hard for them to leave behind what had been quite acceptable and even expected behavior and live now in a completely new way. And yet, it happened, if not always, often enough for the church to know it was a part of something radically new. Paul writes that those who are baptized into Christ no longer experience the divisions between slave and free, male and female, Jew and Gentile (Galatians 3:27-28). They could all sit together at meals; they could share their lives and their goods; their love for one another overflowed to those outside the community. At least it was supposed to, and the experience of this new life happened with sufficient frequency and power that neighbors and friends took notice, and the infant church grew.

Rightly they believed that such a changed life was beyond human power. It was indeed the Holy Spirit who had made them into a new people, with a new set of behaviors. By their baptism they had been engrafted into Christ, made part of his Body. The power of the Holy Spirit continued to empower them to act in new ways, to cease being governed by the customs and culture of the Empire around them, and to live out of values that showed the Reign of God of which their congregational life was a foretaste. It was this relationship to the Holy Spirit—this *koinonia* with the Holy Spirit—that gave them *koinonia* with one another, with all the others who had been made part of the Body of Christ. Words that meant normal human fellowship could not express this new reality. The church needed a word that showed that something beyond them, something in which they participated together, could now let them live such new lives. That “something” was the Holy Spirit. The church is a holy community, the People of God, not merely a human society or the association of like-minded people. *Koinonia* was a word that made such meanings possible.

The word *koinonos*, translated “partner,” occurs in Paul's letter to Philemon, a letter that accompanies Philemon's runaway slave whom Paul converted when they were in prison together. Paul had also been the one who had brought Philemon to Christ. Paul asks that if Philemon considers Paul his *koinonos*, “his partner” (Philemon 17), then he is to welcome Onesimus as he would welcome Paul. They are now all partners held together by their joint participation in the Holy Spirit. That participation or fellowship or communion leads them to relate to one another in a new way, no longer

taking into account the divisions of slave and free—in this case, slave and master. It is as though Paul is setting out the theological issue and then saying to Philemon that he is interested in seeing how they work out this new relationship. He expects to visit soon and will be able to see how they have lived into their new *koinonia*.

The Holy Spirit is not all the early church understood it held in common—that is, something that created their *koinonia* because it was jointly shared. There is a second and third basis for the community's experience of *koinonia*. They are not in addition to the Holy Spirit, but ways in which the Holy Spirit is manifested.

The second: There is a parallel usage of *koinonia* in I Corinthians 10:16. Paul writes, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?" In both cases, *koinonia* is translated "sharing in." It has the same overtones of common involvement in something other than the human beings with whom we are associated. Several contemporary translations use the words "participation in." The King James translates it "communion." The house churches ate meals together all the time, but especially on Sunday, when the meal was part of the Eucharist. The *koinonia* of the bread and cup and the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit came together as one experience. We do not know how early, but clearly in the second century as reported by Hippolytus,¹ the great Eucharistic prayer concluded with words invoking the Holy Spirit to bring together the faithful into one, in words that have overtones of Paul's phrase that the faithful who partake of the one loaf are made one. Even earlier, the *Didache* uses the imagery of the wheat that had been gathered from many hills in order to be brought together in this one loaf. The prayer (evidently at a Eucharist) asks that the whole church may be brought together as one into the kingdom.²

The third: The house churches had the experience of "having all things in common"—in *koinos*. Because they were partners in that which led them to love one another, all that they had was at the disposal of the community. This was part of the experience of *koinonia*: sharing in the Holy Spirit, the bread and cup, and all that they possessed. When Acts gives a brief summary of the life of the early church, it includes both the breaking of bread and the sharing of goods as part of the community's experience of unity (Acts 2:44-46).

There are two passages in the New Testament that make clear the sharing of goods is related to the sharing of the Holy Spirit. The first is the strange account of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. It is made clear in this chapter that "having all things in common" did not mean establishing a commune. It meant rather that there was such love within the community that if a need arose, someone who had more than enough supplied the need of the other. What gifts were made were given to the Apostles to distribute as needed. Ananias and Sapphira were under no obligation to sell some property and give it to the Apostles. They decided to, evidently in order to gain the approval of the community that Barnabas had enjoyed (4:36-37). Their sin was lying to the church by saying that they were giving all the proceeds from the sale, whereas in truth they had given only part and kept back the rest. What is interesting is Peter's rebuke: they had lied to the Holy Spirit. He also said they had lied to the church. This was the same thing. The Holy Spirit was the basis of the church, that which all the members participated in. The wayward couple assumed it was just a matter of lying to some human beings, but in reality it was the Holy Spirit to whom they had lied. Having all things in common, as well as having the bread and cup in

common, was part of having the Holy Spirit in common.

There is another example in 1 Corinthians 11:20-22. When the Corinthian church gathered for the Lord's Supper, the wealthier members seemed to forget who was the host. They acted as though it was an ordinary meal, and whatever they brought was for their party and no one else. The poor had been able to bring little and therefore had little to eat. Obviously, the richer members did not believe in the commonality of goods as far as the meal was concerned. If they could not share at this point—with the significance of the common loaf, common cup, common Lord, common Table—they were probably even more unable to share in the rest of their lives. Paul rebukes them, saying that they have “shown contempt” for the church. They have humiliated the poor. And so Paul indicates either in a mild rebuke, that this is no way to approach the Lord's Supper, or in a far stronger way, that they are merely eating a picnic and not the Lord's Supper. Both are possible translations. The NRSV reads, “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper.” The NIV reads, “So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat.” There is quite a difference in the meaning of these two translations. In the second, if there is no expression of the commonality of goods, at least in the Supper itself, then it is not the Supper. It is simply an ordinary secular meal, not in need of any sharing. The Lord's Supper, to be truly experienced, requires both the presence of the Holy Spirit and the underlying sharing of goods. If the church cannot share among its members in the daily life of the congregation, something essential will be lost when they join together at the Lord's Table.

It might appear that the unity already discussed is confined to the local congregation that partakes of the one loaf. But that is not the case, at least in the mind of Paul. He reminds the church in Corinth of the pledge that they had made to help the church in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:10-15). The *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit goes far beyond the local congregation. It ties together all the churches that, through the sharing in the bread and the cup, have been united in the one Body of Christ. There should therefore be also a commonality of goods throughout this whole Body. Just as those members of the local church who have more than they need freely offer assistance to those who lack, a congregation should respond to another congregation that is in difficulty. This is an act of love, showing that they are part of one partnership, one *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit. The example that Paul uses is from Exodus 16:16-19, the gathering of the manna. The people were told to send one person from each household to gather an omer for each family member. But some gathered too much and others could not gather enough. A miracle occurred, and, regardless of what they had gathered, each household had exactly the right amount. Paul's point seems to be that as those churches bound together by the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit into the one Body of Christ, a manifest miracle should not be necessary in order for them to share the gifts of God that they have received with their brothers and sisters in need, even those at a distance whom they have never met.

How does that ethos of *koinonia* in the early church compare with what we experience in our congregations today? For many Christians, the fellowship they have with other church members is not very different from the friendships they have in other groups in society. They do not count on their church community to help with their mortgage if they lose their jobs; they do not anticipate help with clothes for their children. They do not assume that current Christians “have all things in common”

as did the early church. The congregation may provide for emergency food banks and for services to the homeless, but this is a matter of charity to those outside the congregation, and it is probably not expected that members will need such services. Nor is there the hope that those so served will become part of the congregation. And yet, there are occasions when congregations do rally round a member who is ill or where there is a family emergency and provide constant loving support with meals and other needed help. On such occasions, something more than “fellowship” is experienced. Something peculiar to the church has come to the fore, and perhaps we have had a glimpse of what the early church called *koinonia*.

We cannot simply blame the church for the changes that have occurred. The dramatic alteration in the church’s situation brought about by Constantine was in many ways beyond the church’s control. We need not list all the changes here except to say that by and large the Constantinian church assumed that almost all members of the society were also members of the church, and it allowed the divisions in the society to continue even within the church. Therefore, the possibility of experiencing the radically new life of *koinonia* rarely existed. “Having all things in common” is now a mark of the monastic life and no longer expected of the rest of the church. More recent denominationalism has lessened the sense that the Christian church is one fellowship, one *koinonia*. If there is a disaster in some distant place, our usual thought is to help everyone there, without reference to church membership. And there is good reason for it to be so. But we have lost much of the sense of responsibility Christians have for one another in a world that is so radically divided between rich and poor.

Now that the Constantinian arrangement is ending, we are finding more instances of *koinonia*, of intentional communities that cross the lines of the divisions of the wider society, divisions of race, of class, of gender identity, of immigration status, and so forth. The majority of the church continues to let the divisions of the wider society govern its life, so congregations are generally composed of those who are of the same class, etc. As the old patterns disappear, a careful study of what the early church understood by the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit could be a great help in guiding our own tentative steps in a new direction. It would appear that the depth of the experience of the Eucharist for a congregation may well depend on how well they manage to share their earthly goods in the rest of their life together. The New Testament questions whether those who cannot use earthly goods in an appropriate manner—remembering that the Creator is the true owner of all things—can hardly be expected to share in heavenly things (Luke 16:10-13). At least such awareness gives a congregation that is concerned to make its worship more meaningful a place to begin working: with sharing their earthly goods.

In summary: When in the benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:13 we read or hear the words “and the communion of the Holy Spirit,” we are to see this as a prayer or blessing that we will experience the power of the Holy Spirit to mold all believers into one body, a body that has in common the Holy Spirit, the bread and cup, and indeed, all possessions. Such a community is the birthright of all the baptized, but it is also a gift into which, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we must grow.

An interesting aside: There is a phrase in the Apostles’ Creed that has a connection to these words in 2 Corinthians. It occurs in the section having to do with our belief in the Holy Spirit. In the Creed we affirm that we believe in “the one, holy,

catholic church, the communion of saints.” There has been much written on whether this is one affirmation or two. Is “the communion of saints” a further description of the church or a different issue? And no matter whether it is one or two concepts, what do we mean by “the communion of saints”? We are used to the English translation that eliminates the ambiguity of the original Latin. The *sanctorum communio* can be translated either as the communion of holy people or the communion in holy things.³ The translation as “the communion of saints” clearly chooses to interpret the words as meaning people. But sometimes in the history of that Western creed, “the communion in holy things” was understood to mean the *koinonia* in the bread and cup⁴—just as the words are often said in the communion service: “holy things for the holy people.”

Though this was a minority understanding of the phrase, it is interesting to note that John Calvin viewed the phrase as meaning that the communion of saints—the church—shared in all things, especially the gifts of the Holy Spirit to different members, but also in the voluntary sharing of earthly possessions. This is part of Calvin’s discussion of the phrase “and in the communion of saints” in the creed:

This does not, however, rule out diversity of graces, inasmuch as we know the gifts of the spirit are variously distributed. Nor is civil order disturbed, which allows each individual to own his private possessions, since it is necessary to keep peace among them [Acts 4:32]; and such as Paul has in mind when he urges the Ephesians to be “one body and one Spirit, just as” they “were called in one hope” [Eph. 4:4]. If truly convinced that God is the common Father of all and Christ the common Head, being united in brotherly love, they cannot but share their benefits with one another.⁵

Calvin manages to put together the two different understandings of the phrase, interpreting the words to mean the communion of holy people and yet showing that these holy people share in all that God has given them, both spiritual and material realities.

“The communion of the Holy Spirit” is often interpreted in only spiritual terms. Therefore we need a solid reminder that for the early church and occasionally thereafter, Christians have understood that this communion involves the sharing of their material possessions as well. It may well be that in our own day, the recovery of the overwhelming spiritual significance of the sacraments will depend upon our first learning to share our material possessions with one another.

Notes

1 Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, trans. Burton Scott Easton (Cambridge: Archon Books, 1934), I:12.

2 *The Didache*, 9.4.

3 Stephen Benko, *The Meaning of Sanctorum Communio* (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1964), 139-141.

4 J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1950), 390-396.

5 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV.1.3.