
THE KOINONIA OF THE CROSS

The ancient Greeks imagined a community of brotherly fellowship where all members were equal, all shared common property and no one went without. Plato's Republic and Laws, written in 380BC sketched this ideal of a communistic utopia but translating that vision of a perfect society into reality suffered 'shipwreck', as have similar attempts down the centuries to modern times. The difficulty seems not in the particular political system imposed but in the corrupted nature of humanity.

However, while what man aspires to cannot be achieved through human will or wisdom, God has created in the body of his Son, the church of the living God. The missing element that makes the communion of the church workable while human efforts founder is God himself: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. At the heart of this unique society is a fellowship of the cross with Jesus Christ as the foundation.

There are some words in the original Greek of the New Testament that are worth knowing: *koinonia* is one of those words: translated as 'fellowship' 'communion' 'partnership' 'sharing' 'relationship'. Genuine Christianity is a vertical *koinonia* with God and a horizontal *koinonia* with God's people. For us to experience all that God has to share with us and each other in the *koinonia* of Christ we'll need to keep on returning to and be renewed in 5 key elements: a handful!

1. KOINONIA is about **belonging**. When I first became a Christian, I wasn't too keen about going to church. I liked Jesus but not necessarily his family! Yet, God is all about family. He created us to be born naturally into a family and to be nurtured and loved in a family. Through his Son and the power of his Spirit, God has recreated us to be born again into a spiritual family, so we can be nurtured in the fellowship of his church. If you belong to God you automatically belong to his people: you can pick your friends but you can't pick your family. You did not choose me to be your brother-in-Christ, and I did not choose you.

The instant we received Jesus into our heart and believed in him we belonged to him, and in that same instant we belonged to each other in him. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. Romans 12: 4-5. If you believe, you belong. We belong to each other.

2. KOINONIA is about **attending**. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:25. Just as we are responsible for responding to God’s love by choosing to worship him and obey his word, so we must choose to activate our membership of God’s family by joining and attending and supporting a local church. Koinonia begins with making a choice to practice belonging by attending.

Prof Tom Frame has observed that according to sociologists the minimum attendance that allows community to exist meaningfully for any group is monthly. Indeed, the pattern of Christian meetings has been weekly for millennia. One of the very earliest historical descriptions of Christian’s gathering for koinonia is a report on Christians by Pliny the Younger, the Governor of Bithynia (Turkey), to the Emperor Trajan in AD110: “...it was their habit on a fixed day to assemble before daylight and recite by turns a form of words to Christ as a god ” Before daylight! Now that’s dedication! Of course the fixed day was no doubt the day of Christ’s resurrection, Sunday, a working day in Roman times, and regrettably even today!

Christians have gathered regularly and frequently because we’re drawn together by the Holy Spirit to enjoy meaningful koinonia as Christ’s family. Not only so but we have a duty to each other as spiritual siblings. Duty and obligation are unfashionable along with habit and routine. Yet, I believe that just as we have a duty to obey God, so we have an obligation to meet together as God’s family. Sadly, the church has learned from experience that imposing duty doesn’t work.

We must not be legalistic about attendance for there may be all sorts of things that might prevent us from attending weekly or monthly or even attend at all. So let's drop any guilt trips. However, I believe that aspiring to meet as God's family on the Lord's Day is a testimony to our love for God. And just as all relationships are time-intensive so having a weekly routine of attending church and habits of fellowship, prayer and bible reading are all aspects of experiencing real koinonia.

3. KOINONIA is about **loving**. Jesus said "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." John 13:34-35. The essence of all true friendship and fellowship is love. Only the genuineness of our koinonia in Christ will make our mission for Christ believably authentic to a cynical world. Love is the proof of true koinonia, for all the world to see; and the world certainly is watching.

The world will have its own forms of koinonia but God's love is the ingredient that makes Christian koinonia so uniquely powerful. Peter said "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart." 1 Peter 1:22. When I came to Christ I was in the Airforce where I enjoyed great friendship and camaraderie. But I could hardly believe the contrast between worldly mateship and the koinonia with mates who were my brothers in Christ. Sharing in the love of Jesus with God's family, I enjoyed a loving trust and intimacy that had been completely unknown to me.

John wrote, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers." 1 John 3:16. We have a duty to sacrifice our lives for each other in Christ. In a free country, the sacrifice will be minimal: merely our time, talents and treasure; whereas Christians in other times risked far more, even their lives, as they do in many countries today as sisters & brothers meet in fellowship. True koinonia will always involve loving sacrifices.

4. KOINONIA is about **sharing**. Genesis 2 says, “It is not good for man to be alone.” The immediate context is the nature of humanity being male and female, and the core relationship of husband and wife. However, it also applies to us all whatever our marital state. Human beings are created for relationships – we all need friends; life is not a solo act. Solitary confinement is the worst punishment because it goes against the basic human need for companionship. Money doesn’t make the world go round: friends do. And sharing Koinonia is the essence of friendship.

TV shows about people who stick by each other in good times & bad are always popular: *M.A.S.H.*, *Friends*, *How I Met Your Mother* etc. The morality might often be dubious but they tap into God-created longing for real koinonia.

Real God-empowered koinonia first burst upon the world on the Day of Pentecost. Powerful signs and wonders were performed by the apostles, yet the most incredible display of God’s power was the way the Christians treated each other. They formed a community of friends the like of which had never been seen.

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship (koinonia), to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Acts 2:42. No wonder this church grew exponentially! People flocked in to hear the gospel of Christ & to experience koinonia with Christ and with his family.

The apostles said, Practice hospitality (Romans 12:9). Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. (1Peter 4:9). All Christian ministry can lapse into a grudging sense of duty, and at times we might resent the effort or inconvenience.

But we don't have to impress our guests with the best silver or a perfect house, do we. Loving hospitality is not a show but sharing ourselves in friendship and it is the greatest untapped resource for Christian fellowship & Christian mission

5. KOINONIA is about **participating**. From him (Christ) the whole body (the church), joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. Ephesians 4:16 It's not rocket science! When we all do our part and participate, the body will grow. When we don't, it won't!

The Bible calls us 'God's fellow workers' (1Cor 3:9) and says we have a 'partnership (koinonia) in the gospel' (Phil 1:5; 4:15). Of course, the way we participate will depend on our gifts and practical factors like our availability and health, etc. Yet God will have a unique part for each of us to participate in his family that will be appropriate for us and special to us. Only you can do your part, and me mine.

By way of conclusion, I'm going to end with one more vital ingredient to our koinonia in Christ and that is forgiveness. I don't know if you've noticed but the body of Christ is not a perfect brotherhood – we are not an ideal church – that perfect church is gathered around Christ in heaven as we read last week in Hebrews 12. We have, sadly, rather too much in common with those shipwrecked secular attempts at communal brotherhood which founded on our shared human nature.

Yes, we are united in Christ; and yes we have the bond of the Holy Spirit; but we are still subject to the attrition of the world the flesh and the devil. Indeed I believe the evil one will especially target a Christ honouring, Spirit-filled, gospel focused church so that we will be less effective in our fellowship and our mission.

So, when we fail one another, as we surely will this side of heaven, then we need to be humble enough to admit our faults as individuals and as a church. And we will need to be willing to forgive one another as Christ forgave us and gave himself up for us. We are at the heart of our fellowship, the koinonia of the cross.