

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 40

Paul and Fellowship

Have you had any mentors? Any spiritual mentors? I was blessed to have several wonderful mentors when I was in the critical teenage years. One was a fellow named Rick Reynolds.

Rick was a recent graduate of Abilene Christian College (now, “University”) when we met. He moved to Lubbock to take a job and a mutual friend introduced me, a young 15 year old to Rick. Boy, was he cool! (At least to a 15 year old in Lubbock!)

Rick loved life, loved his guitar, and – most importantly – loved the Lord. He had mercy on me, a kid, and asked me to join him, some undergrad’s home for the summer, and even another high school kid or two, in a home Bible study he started. It was incredible for me to see college age people who were so excited to be studying the Bible. It not only pointed me in the right direction, it propelled me along that path fast and strong.

A highlight of the time with Rick came when we were waiting for everyone to show up. Rick would pull out his guitar and sing us one of the “college songs.” Abilene Christian was a hot bed for the brewing Contemporary Christian Music avalanche. Key people like Chris Christian, Brown Bannister, and others were tied into the school in some way. I always thought Rick had the talent of the others put together.

One song that Rick played came straight from Psalm 133:

Behold, how good and pleasant it is
When brothers dwell in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down on the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!
It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion!
For there the LORD has commanded the blessing,
life forevermore.

This small group study seemed to me to be the perfect embodiment of the Psalm. I was not too sure that precious oil running down the beard would be a good thing (not that I could even imagine having a beard at the time!), but the concept of

close fellowship in that group was truly a blessing. I looked forward to it each week. It became a place that brought me into deeper study with God, dearer relationships with godly friends, and greater awareness of self. I am a more godly man, and a better person today, because of the year I spent in that small group.

Are small group fellowships and their benefits unique to adolescents, college students, and young professionals? Absolutely not! This week, let's pause our discourse on Paul's anthropological terms to discuss Paul and *koinonia*!

KOINONIA?

“*Koinonia*?” you asked, “Why did you italicize it and what is it anyway?” Well, *koinonia* is italicized as a foreign word. It is the Greek term (κοινωνία) that Paul used to discuss fellowship. In this study, we shall start with that term and then see what we can learn from Paul's usage of it in his writings.

Paul was not inventing anything new when he used the Greek word *koinonia*. It had, if anything, been over used in the Greek language. While at its core, *koinonia* referred to sharing, having something in common, or taking part in a thing with another, its usage covered a world of contexts. It was used to cover a business partnership, an accomplice to murder, sexual intimacy, marriage, schoolmates, acts of charity, taxes, and even common good luck.¹ The Greek key was the link of commonness or sharing.

We point out the Greek usage because Paul would not have found the word *koinonia* at play in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the “Septuagint”). It was not a common word used in his Hebrew studies. It was found only in Leviticus 6:2² where the English Standard Version translates it “security,”³ but the word was all around him in the everyday Greek of the people. Paul took the word, and infused it with a special understanding that set it apart from worldly understanding as he put the word to use in the context of the kingdom of God. It is to Paul's usage we now turn.

PAUL ON FELLOWSHIP (*KOINONIA*)

Paul writes of *koinonia* with a frequency and application unequaled by all the other New Testament writers combined. The noun form *koinonia* is used 19 times

¹ Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford 1968) at 969-970.

² If you are reading it in the Septuagint, find it in Lev. 5:21 (it is numbered differently there).

³ The passage is translated, “If anyone sins and commits a breach of faith against the LORD by deceiving his neighbor in a matter of deposit or *security* (*koinonia*), or through robbery, or if he has oppressed his neighbor...” Word forms related to the same root as *koinonia* are also found in the Septuagint, although even those are infrequent.

in the New Testament, 13 of those by Paul.⁴ Paul also uses the word forms related to *koinonia* more than all the other New Testament writers. Paul uses the verb (*koinoneo* – κοινωνεω) five of the 8 times it occurs in the New Testament.

We can take Paul's 13 verses with *koinonia* and study them easily, inserting the verb passages, and getting a fuller understanding of the blessings God has set out in Psalm 133! We will cover Paul's passages in two groups: those that speak of the believers having a share in fellowship (taking part in fellowship) and those of the believers contributing in the sharing of fellowship.

Fellowship as Taking Part

The largest area of Paul's usage of *koinonia* involves a sharing or fellowship of which we Christians all take part. P. T. O'Brien wrote:

In several significant Pauline instances of the *koinonia* word group the dominant idea is of believers sharing together in something, often spiritual realities.⁵

For Paul Biblical fellowship is not rooted in simple human relationships. Something more significant is occurring. The fellowship is beyond human. At its core is a commonness the human group is sharing with the Divine. We see this in several seemingly ordinary usages of the word:

- 1 Cor. 1:9 “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the **fellowship** [*koinonia*] of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”
- 2 Cor. 13:14 “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the **fellowship** [*koinonia*] of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

Paul taught that the believers' fellowship is not simply a social club or networking opportunity. “Church” itself, as many of us use the term, was not simply a worship experience. There was a deeper truth being expressed in the fellowship of Christians. That truth was that all believers are sharing in an intimate relationship with Christ.

This relationship is one where the sum is greater than the individual parts. We are gathered into a vertical relationship. The main thing that gives meaning and expression to the human *koinonia* is the commonness of sharing corporately with the divine. We see this in the teachings, not just of Paul, but first by Jesus himself:

⁴ Some old Greek New Testaments give another usage of *koinonia* in Ephesians 3:9, however, most modern scholars considered it the early manuscript equivalent of a “typo.” That would bump the numbers up to 14 out of 20, which we find listed in a few other places.

⁵ Hawthorne, Martin, and Reid (eds), *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (IVP 1993) at 294.

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them (Mt. 18:20).

This is why *koinonia* is the word Paul uses when writing about the Lord's Supper. In 1 Corinthians 10:16 Paul uses the word twice:

- 1 Cor. 10:16-17 “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a **participation** [*koinonia*] in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a **participation** [*koinonia*] in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”

In studying this passage from 1 Corinthians, it is interesting to note how translators begin the section in verse 14. The English Standard Version and American Standard Version have it as, “Therefore, my beloved.” The King James Version has, “My dearly beloved” while the New International Version has “my dear friends.” The Greek scholar Anthony Thiselton believes the translation “my dear friends” is too distant to convey the closeness Paul is asserting by the Greek (*agapetoι μου αγαπητοι μου*). Thiselton also believes “my dearly beloved” may sound too “archaic.” Thiselton suggests the translation “my very dear friends.”⁶

The point is that Paul begins this discussion of the fellowship in communion calling the Corinthians his *agape* friends, urging them to flee from idolatry and cling to the Christ they hold in common. Paul then drives home his point that we come to the Eucharist not as individuals entering into the presence of Christ, but as a community of believers, as a *koinonia* who participate in the life and death of the Lord. This is why Thiselton suggests translating the passage, “Is it not a communal participation in the blood of Christ?”⁷

This Christian commonness extends to the work that we do together in the cause of the kingdom of God. It is in this sense Paul used *koinonia* in speaking of his joint mission work with the apostles, Paul and Barnabas to the Gentiles and Peter, James and John to the Jews:

- Gal. 2:9 “And when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of **fellowship** [*koinonia*] to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.”

⁶ Thiselton, Anthony C. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans 2000) at 755.

⁷ *Ibid.* at 756.

I suggested in the introduction, that one power of the intimate fellowship found in small group gatherings was the drive to holiness and growth before God. This is hopefully found in all the fellowship before the Lord, large group or small. Still, it is particularly found in the more intense focused interaction found in small group interaction. It is a focused result of *koinonia* fellowship:

- Phil. 2:1-5 “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any **participation** [*koinonia*] in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.”

Paul exhorts the Philippians to Christian behavior and interaction appealing to the *koinonia* they shared in the Spirit. Believers participate in God’s Holy Spirit. He is something we share. The indwelling Spirit is a tie that believers hold in common. As such, if the Spirit leads us, our minds should have unity over rivalry, humility over pride, and the interests of the group over those of the individual. Paul can make the appeal for proper interpersonal relations within the church group by reminding them of who is at the core of all fellowship and all believers making church more than a mere social event.

The context of Paul’s concerns finds great fruition in small group assemblies. Where one believer is a full participant among other believers who hold not the same economic affinities, not the same familial and social circles, nor even the same education or other divergent interests, wonderful things happen. The commonness is Christ and his Spirit. The shared participation in Christ trumps all earthly distinctions.

Before we leave the “sharing in” part of Paul’s *koinonia* story, we need to look at another passage in Philippians:

- Phil. 3:8-10 “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may **share** [*koinonia*] his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

Integral to Paul’s knowledge of Christ was Paul’s sharing in his sufferings. Paul was not talking of some time portal where he actually relived the sufferings of

Jesus. Instead, Paul suffered for the cause of Christ, but as a sharer in Christ, such suffering was that of Christ as well. Paul knew first hand that the commonness the believers share, the participation in the body of Christ, was not always one of unbridled good events and happy times. There was real suffering in the believer's life, just as there was in the life of Jesus, but these times of suffering deserve the word *koinonia* because in them we share with Christ, and we share with each other. Accordingly Paul asks the Philippians, and many other believers, over and over, to remember him in their prayers.

We find a fellowship over suffering to be part and parcel of our fellowship as a church. Large churches work hard to provide a prayer outlet for those hurting. Small groups especially provide a greater opportunity not only for prayer, but also for communicating hurts and needs.

Finally, we note that Paul uses *koinonia* in a contrasting way to distinguish the proper fellowship of the believers from wrong fellowship. Consider in this light two passages:

- 2 Cor. 6:14 “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what **partnership** [*koinonia*] has righteousness with lawlessness?”
- 1 Cor. 10:18-20 “Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices **participants** [*koinonia*] in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be **participants** [*koinonia*] with demons.”

Paul knew that the believers had a unique fellowship, something higher and greater than that experienced by the world. The believer's intimacy was not to be shared with non-believers in business or with pagans in cultic practice. Christian *Koinonia* is for the light, not for the darkness. It is an experience with other believers in the light and life of Christ. In this sense, we now consider how Paul used the word not only to convey what we share, but also what we bring to others in the process.

The Sharing of Fellowship

A natural by-product of believers sharing in the commonness of Christ is the believer sharing with others before Christ. In this sense, all believers join together in sharing the vertical relationship with God, but it translates practically in the sharing individuals have with each other. Consider in this sense the following passages:

- 2 Cor. 8:1-4 “We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of

affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of **taking part** [*koinonia*] in the relief of the saints—

- Phil 1:3-5 “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your **partnership** [*koinonia*] in the gospel from the first day until now.”

Consider carefully the scene Paul described in the 2 Corinthian passage above. Paul spoke of the sharing from one congregation to others, as one where the Macedonian churches “begged” for “the favor” of giving and partnering/sharing (*koinonia*) with Paul’s relief fund. We miss the import of this if we fail to note in using *koinonia* Paul draws a motivating point that the action of giving was a community action, not only the community of givers, but the larger community of both giver and receiver.

Similarly in the Philippians passage, Paul spoke of the contributions of the Philippians to his ministry as ones that recognized the unity and wholeness of the entire church. Both of these passages find Paul writing of one group giving aid to another group (directly or through Paul’s ministry), but the idea goes beyond money. Fellowship is the sharing/generosity that flows from a proper understanding of the commonness believers share in before the Father. This is why Paul can tell Philemon:

- Philemon 4-7 “I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the **sharing** [*koinonia*] of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.”

Paul writes this letter most carefully. The letter came to Philemon with a stolen/lost possession of Philemon – the slave Onesimus. Onesimus had run away, subjecting him to any discipline of choice by Philemon, including execution. While on the run, Onesimus met Paul, and the Lord Jesus. Onesimus was returning to Philemon as not simply a runaway slave, but also as a Christian brother! Paul wrote to ensure the proper treatment of Onesimus, both for the sake of Onesimus and for the sake of Philemon and the kingdom!

Paul begins his letter reminding Philemon in the most generous terms of the *koinonia* of Philemon’s faith. O’Brien sees this as Paul’s appeal to Philemon’s

“generosity or liberality.”⁸ Since the coming treatment of Onesimus was the issue for which Paul was laying the groundwork, Paul carefully starts by reminding Philemon of the way his (Philemon’s) faith is shared with others. As we remember and understand the implications of *koinonia*, we more readily respond with our own actions of sharing. We share by and through actions rooted in our faith.

Consider how this comes full circle in Paul’s thinking and teaching:

We share in the fellowship of Christ. This affects how we behave and interact. We share in this together with other believers as well as with the very Spirit of God. In turn, we find areas where we are able to help and aid each other. We do so, building up the body of Christ in the process. This snowballs into more and more fellowship/sharing as the body grows stronger in faith and service.

In this sense, Paul urges the Corinthians to continue the tradition of *koinonia* as sharing and contributing:

- 2 Cor. 9:13 “By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your **contribution** [*koinonia*] for them and for all others.”

CONCLUSION

As Paul takes an ordinary Greek term, he brings a special light to it in the unique calling of Christ. Paul sees a fellowship and sharing that covers not only the way Christ relates to his body, the church, but also one that covers how we relate to each other. We find in true Christian fellowship a commonness and sharing that produces fruit of God’s Spirit in the lives of believers.

The small group fellowship that I spoke of beginning this lesson was not unique to that time and place in Lubbock. It is the design and purpose of fellowship in the Lord. I should add a note here, Rick Reynolds, the mentor of whom I spoke in the beginning, is part of the fellowship that reads these lessons, offering comments and suggestions on the matters before they are presented each week. Over 30 years later, the *koinonia* continues!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “*God is faithful, by whom you were called into the **fellowship** [*koinonia*] of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord*” (1 Cor. 1:9).

⁸ *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* at 294.

True *koinonia* always starts with Jesus. God sought us to be in relationship with him. We are not mere contingent troops God keeps in store to throw into a battle as needed. We are friends of the Most High. Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13). It is the friendship we have with Christ that draws us into friendship with each other. Therefore, Jesus gives the commandment, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12). Our fellowship together flows from the fellowship we each have with Jesus.

2. “*So if there is ... any **participation** [koinonia] in the Spirit... complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.*” (Phil. 2:1-4).

Let the fellowship we have with and before God affect who we are and how we treat each other. We are not a social club. Nor are we a clique of people finding others similar in social/economic form for camaraderie. We come together holding eternal life in the Father as our possession and our bond with each other. This stirs up the richest fellowship.

3. “*I pray that the **sharing** [koinonia] of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ*” (Phi. 6).

All believers have more than a personal walk with God. We have a responsibility toward others. This responsibility includes the need to share our faith, our possessions, and our talents. Here is where this lesson comes to a practical conclusion: Do you have a format where you are sharing? Do you have a small group fellowship? Do you seek opportunities to interface in true *koinonia* fashion? If not, make a decision now to change!