

Koinōnia as the Basis of New Testament Ecclesiology? (ARCIC 103)

Perhaps the most basic theological problem arising out of our present ecumenical situation is how to reconcile the plurality of Christian churches with the unity of the one Church of Christ.¹ An attractive answer to this burning question is suggested by J. Hamer: the permanent form of the unity of the church is communion.² The equation ecclesia = communio is based on the expanded version (T) of the old Roman baptismal creed (R). In this version the phrase "sanctorum communionem" stands in apposition³ to "sanctam Ecclesiam catholicam."⁴ Whatever the precise meaning of the added phrase may be,⁵ the creed implicitly affirms the Church to be a communion, or community,⁶ of some kind.

But is this equation ecclesia = communio derived from an identification in the New Testament between ekklēsia and koinōnia? Does the New Testament teach, as the Apostles' Creed implicitly does, that the Church is a koinōnia? An affirmative answer to this question was given many years ago by C.A. Scott: "the word koinōnia, or 'fellowship,' was used as a self-designation by the early Christian community, and was in fact the earliest of such self-designations to be adopted."⁷ Scott supposes that koinōnia is the Greek translation for the Hebrew ḥabûrâh and that the Christians called themselves the "ḥabûrâh of Jesus of Nazareth."⁸ The reference in Acts 2:46 to the Christians "breaking bread in their homes" (cf. v.42: "the breaking of bread") may suggest the table-fellowship (ḥabûrâh)⁹ which introduced the Sabbath, but this does not entitle us to suppose that koinōnia in v.42 is a translation of ḥabûrâh or that the first Christians called themselves the "ḥabûrâh of Jesus."

Moreover, Scott's conjecture has no support in other New Testament occurrences of koinōnia. The koinōnia Iēsou Christou to which the Corinthians have been called (1 Cor 1:9) is not "the ḥabûrâh of Jesus" but

10

"participation in Jesus." The genitive expresses the thing shared. So too in Phil 2:1 and 2 Cor 13:13 the genitive is best taken as participative: "participation in the (holy) spirit," whereas an ecclesiological interpretation would require a subjective genitive: "a community brought into existence by the (holy) spirit." In the New Testament koinōnia is used abstractly ("participation" or "fellowship"), not concretely ("community"), and consequently a direct identification between koinōnia and ekklesia is impossible.¹¹

Not only is koinōnia never equated with ekklesia in the New Testament.¹² We never find the two words related to each other in any way. But from this it scarcely follows that koinōnia tells us nothing of the New Testament understanding of the Church.¹³ If koinōnia is never attributed to the Church as such in the New Testament, it is certainly attributed to Christians and may thus have at least an indirect bearing on ecclesiology. However, such ecclesiological significance will be found not in the word koinōnia or its cognates taken by themselves but in their use in context. The reason for this is clear: the koinōn-word-group does not, of itself, signify anything specifically Christian, or even anything specifically religious. Christians may share in the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4), but they also share, with all other men, in flesh and blood (Heb 2:14). They may share in tribulation on account of the word of God (Rev 1:9; cf. Heb 10:33), but they may also share in the sins (1 Tim 5:22; cf. Rev 18:4) or wicked work of others (2 Jn 11; cf. Eph 5:11).¹⁴

15

The word-group is "especially adapted to express inner relationship" and hence is uniquely apt to express religious relationship, but no religious connotation is suggested vi vocis. To determine the religious significance of koinōnia in the New Testament and its possible ecclesiological

relevance it will be necessary to ask in each case: who is participating
¹⁶
 in what, and with whom?

Where koinōnia or its cognates appear in the New Testament without any further determination, we may be able to infer from the context that participation in something of a religious nature is meant, but such uses of the word-group will not contribute to our understanding of Christian koinōnia. Rather, they will have to be interpreted with the help of passages where the object of koinōnia is explicitated. This is the case, first of all, with the two "absolute" uses of koinōnia: Acts 2:42 and Gal 2:9. Although Scott's interpretation of the former passage is surely unconvincing, it is not easy to say positively what the word means here. This difficulty is evident in the variety of interpretations offered by the commentators.¹⁷ Perhaps a contextual interpretation, based on Acts 2:44 and 4:32 is most likely, so that koinōnia would mean "common ownership of property." The koinōnia of Gal 2:9 has also been variously interpreted.¹⁹ Consequently, despite the significance of Gal 2 for understanding "ecumenical relations" in primitive Christianity,²⁰ nothing very definite can be concluded from the occurrence of koinōnia in this chapter.

In Phm 17 Paul makes his "partnership" with Philemon the basis for his appeal on behalf of Onesimus ("receive him as you would receive me"). The context suggests that koinōnos entails more than a relationship of friendship (the meaning "companion" claimed for the word by the dictionaries seems to be without foundation), but the spiritual good in which the apostle and the addressee both participate is not specified.

We are a little better off in 1 Jn 1:3.6.7. To be sure, the koinōnia among Christians ("that you may have fellowship with us;" "fellowship with one another") is not explained in itself. However, it is set in direct relationship to koinōnia with God ("our fellowship is with the

Father and with his Son Jesus Christ;" "fellowship with him," i.e. God). Just as a participation in Christ leads necessarily to unity among Christians,²¹ so there can be no true fellowship with God on the part of Christians who do not have fellowship with each other.

Occasionally the otherwise indeterminate character of the koinōn-word-group is specified by the context. When Paul, in 2 Cor 8:23, refers to Titus as "my partner," the character of the partnership is defined by the phrase that follows: "my fellow worker."

Grammatical purists maintain that the koinōn-word-group properly expresses "having a share" and not "giving a share." But there can be no doubt that Paul uses the word-group in connection with the material assistance to be rendered to the poor of the Jerusalem church. It is therefore of secondary importance whether, in particular cases, the idea of "giving" is contained in the word itself or whether it is suggested by the context. Thus it is not crucial, for our purposes, whether or not Rom 12:13 is properly translated by the RSV: "contribute to the needs of the saints." Even if Paul is directly urging the Romans simply to "share" in their needs, there can be no doubt that this interior sympathy is to express itself in material assistance.

Similarly, the "good deed" which Paul acknowledges in Phil 4:14 is not just the sympathy that the Philippians extended to him by "sharing in my affliction." Whether or not the compound participle sygkoinōsēsantes directly expresses the gift that the Philippians sent Paul in prison, this material assistance is certainly included in the "good deed" by the context. The generosity of the Philippians represented a revival in their concern for their founder (v.10a), a concern expressed by the "partnership" between Paul and the community which existed from "the beginning of the gospel" (v.15), i.e. the beginning of Paul's missionary activity

in Europe, which started with the evangelization of Philippi (Acts 16:
²²
 11-40).

The use of the koinōn- word-group to designate material assistance directly seems evident in Gal 6:6, which enjoins the catechumen to share "all good things" with his catechist. The substantive, koinōnia, is used of the collection for the poor in Rom 15:26 (RSV: "For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem"). This is likely to be the case also in 2 Cor 9:13 (RSV: ²³ "the generosity of your contribution"). In 2 Cor 8:4 koinōnia has its more usual abstract sense, but it is used together with another noun, diakonia, which clearly designates the collection ("a participation in the relief of the saints").

Although the word-group may be used in such passages for something very concrete, it always suggests an inner relationship to the beneficiary, and not simply an external gift. Thus Paul can relate the material contribution to the Jerusalem poor to the "spiritual contribution" (Rom 15:27) which these same poor have made to the Gentile Christians by sharing the gospel with them. A similar exchange is also expressed in Phil 4:15 by means of a technical expression taken from accounting. Literally, "No other church shared with me an account of giving and receiving." In exchange for the apostle's gift of the good news (cf. 1:5) the Philippians have given Paul material support in his missionary activities, something which he declined to accept from any other church (1 Cor 9:11-18; 2 Cor 11:9).

Paul's use of the koinōn- word-group in connection with the rendering of material assistance is certainly not without ecclesiological significance, ²⁴ but this significance derives as much from the way the word is used in context as it does from its root meaning. The collection for

the Jerusalem poor served to promote that communication between Christian communities which the spirit of Jesus requires.

We move on now from occurrences of the koinōn- word-group where the context suggests what is shared to instances where what is shared is explicitly stated. We have already considered 1 Cor 1:9, where a sharing in Christ is said to be the object of the Christian vocation.²⁵ The Christian shares in Christ here and now, in imperfect fashion, and this participation will be perfected in the eschaton. The Christian's present sharing in Christ is first of all a sharing in the gospel (Phil 1:5: koinōnia . . . eis to euaggelion)²⁶ and the faith that comes through the gospel (Phm 6: koinōnia tēs pisteōs).²⁷ The spiritual communion which results from the acceptance of the gospel in faith entails a sharing in the sufferings of Christ (Phil 3:10; 2 Cor 1:7). The Christian's present sharing in Christ is also a sharing in the spirit of Christ (Phil 2:1; 2 Cor 13:13).

The eschatological object of koinōn- may be affirmed in 1 Cor 9:23,²⁸ where Paul expresses his hope of sharing in the blessings of the gospel. An unambiguous expression of koinōn- in relation to the eschaton is expressed in 1 Peter, a letter which often echoes Pauline themes. There "Peter" characterizes himself as "a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed" (5:1; cf. Rom 8:17).^{28a} Yet the joyful aspect of koinōn- is not reserved for the end-time. Besides the eucharistic sharing (see below) Paul also affirms a sharing in consolation (2 Cor 1:7) which corresponds to the sharing in Christ's sufferings, and there is no reason for taking "consolation" here to be exclusively eschatological (cf. Mt 5:4). The Christian's sharing in Christ is a sharing in God's promises to his people. Hence Paul can say in Rom 11:17 that the wild olive/^{shoot}(= the Gentile Christians) shares in the richness of the olive tree (= Israel).

Christian participation in Christ takes place sacramentally as a participation in Christ's body and blood (1 Cor 10:16).²⁹ This sacramental koinōnia in Christ excludes a participation in demons through pagan rites of table-fellowship (1 Cor 10:20).³⁰ In this passage, as in 1 John, the connection between the Christian's relationship to Christ and his relationship to his fellow-Christians is clearly affirmed: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread"³¹ (v.17).

This passage underlines the truth, so important in the current discussion of intercommunion, that the participation in Christ in the eucharist produces unity among Christians. Hence it is unreasonable to require perfect unity as the presupposition for intercommunion. Just what degree of unity is necessary for Christians to share the one bread is, of course, a question to which the New Testament does not give us an answer. The elaboration of koinōnia ekklesiastikē is a patristic development.³²

From this rapid survey of the use of the koinōn- word-group in the New Testament we see that it would be going too far to claim that koinōnia is the basis for New Testament ecclesiology. The metaphors of "body of Christ," "bride," "temple of God" and "vine" are far more crucial. Even if we restrict our consideration to abstract concepts, we would have to acknowledge that "charity" and "edification" are much more important for Paul's understanding of the church than koinōnia, which is used by Paul in an exclusively "vertical" sense.³³ Nevertheless, Seesemann goes too far when he maintains that koinōnia tells us nothing of Paul's understanding of the Church.³⁴ As we have seen, the Christian's sharing in Christ is related both to the present unity of the Church and to the future consummation in the eschaton, to which the Church, as an eschatological community, tends by its very nature. Furthermore, the ecclesiological

significance of koinon when used in relationship to the collection should not be ignored. Finally, outside the Pauline corpus, the passage in 1 John is of obvious ecclesiological relevance,³⁵ although the use of koinonia in this passage to express the "horizontal" relationship existing among Christians is quite unusual in the New Testament.

The understanding of "communion" which is of the greatest importance for our present ecumenical situation is, of course, communio ecclesiarum. Obviously, we would look in vain in the New Testament for this formulation.³⁶ Nevertheless, there certainly are passages which reveal that the problem of "the Church and the churches" existed in New Testament times. Paul goes up to Jerusalem to lay out his gospel privately before "those who were of repute . . . lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain" (Gal 2:2). What sort of koinonia (cf. v.9) did Paul hope to establish or preserve by this action? There are various possible interpretations, ranging all the way from an acknowledgment by Paul of his inferiority to the Jerusalem authorities in matters of doctrine (at least as far as the Jesus-tradition was concerned) to the suggestion that it was Paul's intention to ask whether "those of repute" would dare to say that he had "run in vain." An intermediate view would be that, without acknowledging any right of the Jerusalem authorities to pass judgment on his gospel, Paul wished to forestall Jewish-Christian opposition to him in Antioch or Jerusalem which could nullify his building of the Gentile churches.³⁷

In the incident at Antioch (Gal 2:11ff) it is surely significant that Paul considered "the truth of the gospel" (v.14) to be endangered by Cephas' dissimulation with regard to table-fellowship with Gentile Christians (v.12), whether specifically eucharistic fellowship was involved here or not.

Paul is deeply concerned about communication between the Christian churches. When he writes in Rom 16:16 "All the churches of Christ greet you," we see behind this friendly greeting the fellowship in which all the individual communities are joined together through Christ. Col 4:15f attests to the early exchange of apostolic letters among neighboring communities.³⁸ Each church, each community is responsible for preserving the fellowship with the other churches (cf. 1 Th 4:9-10), even when great divergences in mentality and customs exist, as was the case with Jerusalem.³⁹

Despite the idealistic representation of church unity which we find in the Book of Acts, the New Testament reveals that the early Christian communities experienced divisions analogous to those of later centuries. "The elder" complains that "Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge my authority" (3 Jn 9) and "refuses himself to welcome the brethren, and also stops those who want to welcome them and puts them out of the church" (v.10). Paul is grieved at those who "preach Christ from envy and rivalry" (Phil 1:15), proclaiming him "out of partisanship, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment" (v.17). But then, in an extraordinary outburst of apostolic magnanimity, he reveals wherein the essential unity of the church consists: "What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in that I rejoice" (v.18). As we would expect in this initial period of the Church's existence, when the work of the mission took precedence over everything else, the fellowship among the missionary preachers and the communities which they founded was expressed primarily through proclaiming the same gospel (cf. 1 Cor 15:11).

I will not develop these suggestions any further, since they go beyond the assigned topic of this paper, which is concerned with the word

koinōnia and its cognates. Nevertheless, it seemed appropriate at least to indicate that our concern over the fellowship between Christian communities and their leaders has clear analogies in the New Testament.

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The theological problem of the Church and the churches arises, of course, quite apart from the ecumenical situation: what is the relationship between the local churches and the universal Church? More closely connected with the ecumenical problem is the question: what is the relationship within the one (Roman Catholic) Church of different typoi of churches, i.e. churches of different rites? Cf. E. Lanne, "Pluralism and Unity: The Possibility of a Variety of Typologies within the Same Ecclesial Allegiance," One in Christ 6 (1970) 430-451.

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The Church is a Communion (London 1964). My summary statement of Father Hamer's thesis is taken from the title of his "Conclusion" (pp. 209-213).

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A. Piolanti, "Gemeinschaft der Heiligen," LThK, vol. 4, col. 652: "The concept of 'the communion of the saints' appears in the West (without being a Gallican formulation) in the creed, and here it can only be in apposition to 'Church.'"

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Cf. F.X. Lawlor, "Communion of Saints," NCE, vol. 4, p. 42.

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According to the "real" interpretation, communio sanctorum or koinōnia tōn hagiōn means "the partaking of holy things," i.e. the second noun is taken as neuter. This appears to be the understanding of the phrase in the Greek Fathers. A "personal" interpretation, in which the second noun is taken to be masculine, yields two additional possibilities: 1) "community of saints," i.e. a community consisting of "the saints," the New Testament designation for living Christians; 2) "fellowship with the saints," i.e. the martyrs and confessors. Here the grammatical question is whether

the genitive is to be taken as subjective or partitive. Cf. the articles of Piolanti and Lawlor cited above.

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On sheerly grammatical grounds it would seem preferable to take sanc-torum communionem in the creed in the second sense, i.e. "a community of saints." For, apart from metaphor, an abstract noun cannot be directly predicated of a concrete noun, and the grammatical relationship of apposition found in the creed is equivalent to direct predication. In later Latin communio is used as the equivalent of communitas (cf. C. Du Cange, Glossarium mediae et infimae Latinitatis (Niort 1883), vol. 2, p. 452). With respect to Father Hamer's predication, "the Church is a communion," the question arises whether the later, concrete use of "communion" (see note 11) may not have exercised some influence.

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"The 'Fellowship,' or Koinōnia," ExpT 35 (1923/24) 567. Cf. Christianity according to St. Paul (Cambridge 1927).

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In "What Happened at Pentecost?" in ed. B.H. Streeter, The Spirit (New York 1919), pp. 115-153, Scott takes a somewhat different position, maintaining that the koinōnia of Acts 2:42 was the result of Pentecost, "a new name for a new thing."

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F. Hauck, koinos ktl, TDNT III 803.

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Cf. J.Y. Campbell, "Koinōnia and its Cognates in the New Testament," JBL 51 (1932) 380. This article underscores the fact that the koinōn-word-group's primary meaning is "participation" and not "association."

11 Although koinōnia is in origin an abstract noun, it can become concrete, with the sense of "community" or "society," derived from the secondary sense of koinōn-, i.e. "association." But there is no evidence that koinōnia in the New Testament is ever used with this concrete meaning. Even in those rare instances where the idea of association seems predominant (Gal 2:9; 1 Jn 1:3.7), the word can best be interpreted as an abstract noun, i.e. "fellowship." Today we use the word "communion" in a concrete sense, meaning "a body of Christians having one common faith and discipline; as the Anglican Communion" (Webster). We must be careful not to read this meaning of "communion" back into koinōnia.

12 A possible exception may be found in Lk 5:10. H. Schürmann (Das Lukas-evangelium (Freiburg 1969), ad loc.) suggests that Luke's characterization of James and John as Simon's "business partners" (koinōnoi) is intended to foreshadow later ecclesiastical relationships.

13 Cf. Father Hamer's legitimate criticism of Seesemann's "extremely categorical assertion" (p. 160).

14 Cf. Mt 23:30, where the Jews protest hypocritically: "If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets."

15 Hauck, 797. This comes out in the use of koinōnia to express "marriage" and "sexual intercourse." See H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon (Oxford 1968), p. 970.

16 The association idea is secondary to the koinōn- word-group (cf. note 10), so that in many instances no attention may be paid to the question "with whom?"

17

1. "the apostles' . . . fellowship" (Spitta).
2. Explained by "the breaking of the bread," which stands in grammatical apposition to koinōnia (Holtzmann). Cf. the Vulgate: communicacione fractionis panis.
3. "an abstract and spiritual term for the fellowship of brotherly concord established and expressed in the life of the community" (Hauck).
4. "table-fellowship and social service" (Stählin).
5. "Christian charity" (Dupont).
6. "common life" (Carr).
7. "contribution of money;" cf. Heb 13:16 (Campbell).
8. common ownership of property; cf. Acts 2:44; 4:32 (Conzelmann).

18

There is a passage in Iamblichus (Vit. Pyth. 30, 168), dealing with communal ownership, which is reminiscent of Acts 2:42.44. Here too we find koina and koinōnia (but in this order, just the reverse of the passage in Acts), and here koinōnia clearly means "communal ownership."

19

1. "complete agreement" (Amiot).
2. "full fellowship established by common faith in Christ" (Hauck).
3. "communion between Jews and pagan converts" (Viard).
4. "going shares in an enterprise" (Campbell).

It is not evident whether the koinōnia in Gal 2:9 comes into existence at the time of the handshake, or whether the handshake is the external recognition of an already existing koinōnia.

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See p. 8.

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See p. 7.

22

The difference between the situation in Phil 4:14 and the one referred to in 2 Cor 1:7 should be noted. The Corinthians shared the sufferings of Paul in the sense that they were enduring sufferings of the same kind on their own account. The Philippians "shared" his affliction only in the sense that they had a lively and active sympathy for him.

23

The fact that the beneficiaries of this koinōnia are said to be not simply "them," i.e. the Jerusalem poor, but also "all others" does not preclude the interpretation of koinōnia in terms of material assistance, since the concluding phrase is simply one of Paul's characteristic sudden afterthoughts, indicating "that a benefit conferred on the brethren at Jerusalem is a benefit to the whole body of Christians" (A. Plummer, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians (New York 1915), ad loc.).

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Cf. K.F. Nickle, The Collection: A Study in Paul's Strategy (London 1966), especially chapter IV, section 2: "The Collection and the Unity of the Church."

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To the Christian's sharing in Christ corresponds, under the Old Covenant, the Israelites' sharing in the altar, i.e. God (1 Cor 10:18). The fact that the Old Testament never uses hbr (= koinōn-) to express the relationship between God and his people is not decisive, since in this text we have to do not with an Old Testament formulation but rather with Paul's interpretation of Old Testament sacrifice, viewed from his Christian perspective.

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J. Gnllka (Der Philipperbrief (Freiburg 1968), ad loc.) sees here

an active sharing in the gospel, i.e. a sharing on the part of the Philippians in Paul's preaching mission. But this, of course, presupposes a sharing in the gospel in the sense of an acceptance of it as the basis for the existence of the community.

27

It is not crucial for our purposes whether the possessive pronoun sou is to be taken with koinōnia, i.e. "your (Philemon's) participation in the faith, or with pisteōs, i.e. "(their, i.e. the saints'; cf. v.5) participation in your (Philemon's) faith." In Rev 1:9 "patience" is the object of sharing.

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H. Lietzmann, An die Korinther I-II (Tübingen 1923), ad loc.

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Cf. also Rev 1:9, where "the kingdom" is the object of sharing.

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We cannot treat here the conflicting interpretations of this difficult passage. Cf. G.V. Jourdan, "Koinōnia in I Corinthians 10:16," JBL 67 (1948) 111-124.

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For the pagan use of koinōn- in connection with sacrificial meals, cf. the inscription, dated A.D. 250: "I, Aurelius Syrus, as a participant (koinōnos) have certified Diogenes as sacrificing along with us." G. Milligan, Selections from the Greek Papyri (Cambridge 1910), p. 116.

31

Besides the sacramental context, which is absent in 1 Jn 1:3.6.7 the two passages differ in that the relationship with Christ is a participation, according to Paul, and an association (meta), according to John. Furthermore, the relationship between Christians is expressed by Paul in terms of his theology of the Body of Christ and by John in terms of koinōnia. Paul does not use koinōnia to express the "horizontal" relationship existing between men. The apparent exception, 2 Cor 6:14, proves the rule, since the passage is probably not by Paul. Cf. H. Seesemann, Der Begriff

Koinōnia in Neuen Testament (Giessen 1933), p. 99.

32 Cf. G.W.H. Lampe, A Patristic Greek Lexicon (Oxford 1961), p. 763.

33 Even the sacramental participation in Christ is a participation in the exalted Lord, whom Paul views as identical with the Christ of flesh (body) and blood.

34 p. 99.

35 Seeseman writes (pp. 97-98): "How closely connected the fellowship of the faithful among themselves is with the fellowship with God and Christ is shown by the transition from v.3a to v.3b. . . . i.e. I manifest to you the fellowship which I have with the Father and the Son, in order that you too may have fellowship with me. In other words, the foundation of the fellowship between the author and his addressees is the fellowship of the author with God and Christ. He does not say here that the readers' fellowship with God and Christ is also the foundation for this fellowship, but this is taken for granted."

36 Once again, as we pointed out in note 11, we must be careful not to read back into koinōnia nuances derived from contemporary usage, as in the phrase "the Anglican fellowship of churches."

37 Cf. R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J. Reumann, Peter in the New Testament (New York 1973), pp. 27-29.

38 Cf. K. Kertelge, Gemeinde und Amt im Neuen Testament (Munich 1972), p. 76. We have already alluded (pp. 4-6) to the ecclesiological significance of the collection for the Jerusalem poor.

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Cf. A. Jaubert, "Le fait communautaire," in Le ministère et les ministères selon le Nouveau Testament (Paris 1974), p. 20.