



ONE *Lord*
ONE *Faith*
ONE *Baptism*
ONE *God* AND *Father* OF ALL



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Fellowship Community

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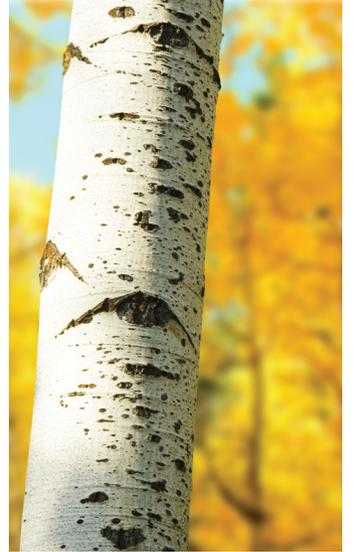
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INTRODUCTION

Community. Contemporary North Americans must be feeling the need of it because everything from a TV sitcom to bank promotions, car dealers, and FaceBook are offering it. We live in a world of gated “communities” for one demographic and the “World’s Biggest Small Group” community for another. It seems that anything and everything remotely religious (including the sponsoring organization for this Bible study) is now touting some form of “community.” But what is it? What do we sense we are missing?

Koinonia (one form of New Testament Greek-speak for what we know as “community”) is a rich and vibrant word that takes us far deeper into a place of holy relationship than any popular catch phrase ever will. *Koinonia* defines our life together in Christ’s church—our relationship to the Triune God and our relationship to one another.

This Bible study is offered by The Fellowship “Community”—a unique group of individuals and congregations who are committed to following Jesus Christ wherever God has called us, beginning within the community of the PC(USA). As evangelicals we are quick to affirm with the Apostle Paul that, “...there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all who is over all, and in all, and through all”—but what does that mean for the way we live? What do we owe each other as members of a community created in the providence of God? What is God’s purpose for our community? How do we maintain, enjoy, and deepen that community?

We invite you to use this study with many different groups in your congregation, your presbytery, your community. Use it to explore dimensions of the holy mystery that is the Church and God’s call upon you to participation in it.

—Paul Detterman for *The Fellowship Community*



SESSION ONE

{*Koinonia* Unpacked}

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:14)

One of the richest biblical insights into the fullness of the gospel is concealed by English translations of the New Testament. One Greek word in the letters of Paul and Peter and in the letter to the Hebrews is variously translated into English as *communion*, *fellowship*, *participation*, *partnership*, *sharing*, *contribution*, and *taking part*. The word may be familiar: *koinonia*. The variety of translations suggests the richness of *koinonia* - no one English word can capture its range and depth. Yet as we read our English Bibles we are unaware that one resonant, vivid word is used

in seemingly unrelated contexts. This may prevent us from noticing the integral relationships among such diverse matters as Trinity, sharing money, the Lord's Supper, and conflict resolution. In fact, what makes the one term so suggestive is the range of contexts in which it is used.

"The Fellowship Community" uses two possible translations of *koinonia* to name itself - "fellowship" and "communion/community." *Fellowship* in The Fellowship Community is intended to describe far more than a congenial relationship among compatible people (much less juice and cookies in "Fellowship Hall"), and *community* is meant to be far more than a cooperative association of similar congregations. In the New Testament, *koinonia* and its verb forms express deep, intimate, abiding relationships between God and us, and deep, intimate, and abiding relationships among us. Engaging in a brief study of ways the New Testament speaks of *koinonia* can both deepen our understanding of Christian faith and life, and suggest broader possibilities for the life of "The Fellowship Community."

Before genuine *koinonia* among us is a possibility, God's creation of *koinonia* with us through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit is our foundational reality.

- The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:14)
- I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind - just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you - so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of the Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the *koinonia* of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:4-9)
- Since, therefore, the children *kekoinonoken* flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. (Hebrews 2:14-15)
- Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him...I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the *koinonia* of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death. (Philippians 3:7-10)
- But rejoice insofar as you *koinoneite* Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. (1 Peter 4:13)

The one God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, creates communion between himself and a human community as an act of sovereign grace. God is God, and the community of faith is human. Yet even though the essential asymmetry of *sovereign Lord* and *mortal human* remains, the distance between God and us is bridged in Jesus Christ, the One who is truly God and truly human. The Creator of heaven and earth graciously establishes *koinonia* with his creatures, a relationship of such intimate depth that it embraces *koinonia* in flesh and blood, suffering and sacrifice, life and death, new life in the Spirit's gifts. English words such as "fellowship" and "sharing" have been so weakened by cultural usage that they may be inadequate to convey the wealth and the gravity

of biblical *koinonia*. *Communion* best conveys the enduring depth of relationship that flows from the love of God through the grace of Christ into the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit.

Communion with the Triune God is grounded in our union with Christ. As God the Son has become one with us in incarnation, life, and death, so we are made one with him in life, death, and new life. “God is faithful,” Paul tells us; “by him you were called into the *koinonia* of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:4-9). Our union with Christ – *communion* with Christ – is so foundational that it has been called “the sum of the gospel.” The foundational Creed of the Christian church gives clear testimony to the significance of our life *in Christ*.

The Nicene Creed is less well known among Presbyterians than the Apostles’ Creed, although it is older and more widely used among churches worldwide. The Creed declares that Jesus Christ is “the only Son of God . . . God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God . . . of one Being with the Father.” It also declares that “he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human.” Between the affirmations “true God” and “truly human” is the Creed’s proclamation that it is all “for us and for our salvation.” It was “for our sake” that “he was crucified, suffered death and was buried, rose again, ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and will come again in glory.” Christ became truly human, one with us, *for our sake, for our salvation*, and our salvation is found in being made one with him.

Union with Christ is depicted in Paul’s use of an evocative family image: “when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son . . . so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Galatians 4:4-6). Because the only Son of God became one with us, we become adopted sons and daughters of God. Our adoption is so all-embracing that because we are *in Christ* we now join with Christ to call God, “Father!” In Christ the Christian community is “the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19), daughters and sons of God who are sisters and brothers to one another.

Communion is a gospel reality before it is a church possibility. That is, communion is a statement about God and God’s way in the world before it is a statement about the church and its way in the world. Our understanding of *koinonia* begins with the mystery of divine-human communion before we can speak about communion’s ecclesial realities and possibilities.

Questions:

1. If we are to avoid reducing 'communion' to a merely general category of ecclesiastical relationships - something more than 'association' but less than 'unity' - it must derive its character from a theological articulation of the biblical witness that is expressed in ecclesial reality. Thus, 'communion' must express ecclesial relationships that embody:

communion with the Triune God

communion in faith, hope, and love

communion in sacraments

communion in the truth of the gospel

communion in faithful living

communion in the reconciliation of differences

communion in patterns of mutual responsibility
and accountability

- a. Where in the biblical narrative do you see this? Where do you see an absence of it?

- b. Where did you first experience this form of communion in your own life? In your church? Among the churches?

- c. What barriers do you see to *koinonia*? What can you do to overcome these?

2. *Koinonia* expresses a relationship that is “deep, intimate, and abiding.”

a. Describe an example of where you have seen or experienced this *koinonia*.

b. Imagine your congregation in this kind of relationship. What would it look like?

3. The Triune God lives in communion and now invites us through Christ to enter that communion with Him. What aspects of that communion do you most need?

4. Paul uses the adoptive family as a metaphor for the Church.

a. What does it mean to you that the “other” was also adopted by God and is your brother or sister?

b. How does your congregation embody this household of God?

5. "Communion is a gospel reality before it is a church possibility."

a. Explain the meaning of this statement.

b. What implications does this have for your own discipleship with others? For your congregation? For your denomination? For The Fellowship Community?



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SESSION TWO

{*Koinonia* in the Triune God}

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any *koinonia* in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 2:1-5)

God is God and we are human. This means, among other things, that while God is ever faithful to us, our lives are a strange mixture of faithful and faithless response to God's loving-kindness. The paradox of living in *communion* with God through Christ in the Spirit is expressed in an early Christian hymn, quoted by Paul in a letter to Timothy:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
If we endure, we will also reign with him;
If we deny him, he will also deny us;
If we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself. (2 Timothy 2:11-13)

Our salvation is not a moment in time but a continuous reality; union with Christ is not an isolated event, but the shape of Christian life. We are the adopted sons and daughters of God, living together in God's household. But we are not perfect children. We are both obedient and rebellious, grateful and indifferent, trusting and willful. We are not left to our own devices, however, needing to pull ourselves up by our spiritual bootstraps.

Each one of us is a hesitant, flawed disciple of Jesus. No congregation ever lives in perfect fidelity to Christ. Every denomination fails to follow its Lord's leading in all things. Yet we can be confident that our Lord and Savior remains the one "who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us" (Romans 8:34). The Lord himself prays for us, and because we are united to Christ, his "power is at work within us" (Ephesians 3:20) – within each one of us, and within every congregation, and within all denominations.

- When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the *koinonia* of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. For I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. (Philemon 4-7)
- So those who welcomed [Peter's] message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and *koinonia*, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. (Acts 2:42-45)
- If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any *koinonia* in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 2:1-5)
- This is the message we have heard from [Christ] and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have *koinonia* with [God] while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have *koinonia* with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:6,7)

Persons, congregations, and denominations are called to grow together in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the *communion* of the Holy Spirit. In Christ, we are all called to a dynamic faith of shared belief, trust, and loyalty. *We believe*, begins the Creed, for what makes Christian faith Christian is shared belief in the gospel, trust in Christ's real presence, and loyalty to God's new way in the world. But what are we to do when belief is not shared by all, trust in Christ's presence is uncertain, and loyalty to God's new Way is tentative?

The church's faith has never been uniform, of course. Appropriate, enriching diversity of spiritual gifts, theological insights, ecclesiastical forms, and missional callings has been present in the church from the very beginning. But Scripture makes it clear that diversity is intended to enrich unity, not detract from it, much less subvert it. However, all too often diversity leads to distance, indifference, and even estrangement. That is why Paul says to us that, "if there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from [God's] love, any *communion* in the Spirit . . . be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." What does it mean to have the same mind? Is it comprehensive doctrinal agreement, identical ecclesiastical forms, or matching missional priorities? "Let the same mind be in you," says Paul, "that was in Christ Jesus." The church's one mind is not making up its own mind, but having the mind of Christ.

It is sobering to recognize that the call to unity within Christian communities is a prominent New Testament theme. Paul urges, pleads, exhorts, and appeals for unity in faith and life precisely because such unity is not present! It is not only in Corinth that "it has been reported that there are quarrels among you" (1 Corinthians 1:11). Paul writes to Christian communities living with disagreements about the shape of faith and life. He pleads and directs the Ephesian Christians (and us) "to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3).

From Thessalonica through Galatia and Corinth to Rome and beyond, the first century churches had to be called to resist the real and present danger of disunity in faith and life between believers, within congregations, and among churches. Within the household of God, the Body of Christ, the *communion* of the Holy Spirit, relationships are permanent; disagreements and divisions are meant to be overcome. Resisting the danger of disunity did not mean casual acceptance of each and every opinion, however. Paul calls all of us to unity *of the Spirit*, to have the same mind that was *in Christ*, to the peace *from God our Father*. Thus, in the midst of disagreement and even conflict we are called to bear faithful witness to the truth of the gospel. It is our calling to seek *koinonia* in faith, hope, and love for the whole community, "For we are God's servants, working together; we are God's field, God's building" (1 Corinthians 3:9).

Questions:

1. These statements about *koinonia* prescribe what our shared faith and life should be. Our current ecclesial (church) realities fall far short, though. The appeal to live life in this way was given at times of disunity in the Church's life. What is our response to the call for unity?

2. What are our responsibilities to each other in this time of "diversity that may lead to distance, indifference, and even estrangement?"

3. What is the shape of our responsibility in such a time:

- a. To speak truth to one another with conviction and courage?

- b. To listen humbly to one another, seeking patterns of faithfulness that may challenge our own?

4. Respond to the following statements:

- a. In this time of disagreement, we should stand strong for one another, and not apart from one another.

- b. Responsibility to bear witness to the truth is not diminished when truth becomes the minority opinion. In these times, the responsibility grows.

5. How do we hold onto both the truth and each other when truth is not shared?

6. The New Testament does not presume shared faith; it pleads for it. How can we respond to Scripture's plea for the unity of the faith in this generation?



SESSION THREE

{*Koinonia* at the Font and Table}

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a *koinonia* in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a *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. (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

It is not mere coincidence that we call one of our two sacraments Communion. Baptism and Communion are two of the principal ways we know the real presence of Christ in our midst, the certainty of our union with Christ, and the reality of our *koinonia* with one another in Christ. The cup of blessing is *communion* in the blood of Christ, our union with Christ in his suffering and

death on our behalf. The bread that we break is *communion* in the body of Christ, our union with Christ in his death and resurrection.

- So those who welcomed [Peter's] message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and *koinonia*, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ... Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of the people. (Acts 2:42,46-47)
- And when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of *koinonia*, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. (Galatians 2:9)
- Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him... I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the *koinonia* of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death. (Philippians 3:7-10)
- The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a *koinonia* in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a *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. (1 Corinthians 10:16,17)

John Calvin identified proclamation of God's Word and celebration of Baptism and Eucharist as marks of the faithful church: "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists." Calvin believed that Word and Sacraments were so crucial that we should embrace any church that has them "even if it otherwise swarms with many faults." Calvin was committed to the purity of preaching and the precision of sacramental practice not for their own sake, but because the word proclaimed and enacted were the primary means of revealing Christ's presence and the strengthening of our union with Christ.

Presbyterians have always stressed "the Word of God purely preached and heard," but we have tended to be sacramental minimalists. Too often, Baptisms are reduced to sentimental celebrations of adorable babies, while the Lord's Supper is confined to a monthly (or quarterly!) ritual. We rely on words alone to present the gospel, veiling powerful sacramental exhibitions of the gospel and diminishing opportunities to nourish union with Christ. We are aware that focus on sacraments apart from proclamation may lead to superstitious excess. We are less aware that concentration on preaching apart from Baptism and Communion may devolve into idiosyncratic ramblings, pop therapy, or institutional promotion. That is why proclamation in Word and Sacrament are meant to be inseparable.

"Do you not know," Paul asks us, "that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" He goes on to proclaim that, "if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:1-11). Baptism marks our welcome into the Christian community only because it first marks our union with the crucified and living Savior and Lord of the church. Moreover, baptism marks our *koinonia* with "all

of us who have been baptized.” In our baptism we are placed in *communion* with all the baptized for, by grace, all are united to Christ.

Koinonia with all the baptized may be difficult when theological, moral, or ecclesial differences exist, but a difficult relationship remains a relationship. Although disagreements between Peter and Paul were real, they did not lead to hostility and estrangement, but to *koinonia* in their different yet complementary callings: “When James, Peter, and John perceived the grace given to me, they gave the right hand of *koinonia* to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the Jews” (Galatians 2:9). *Communion* is not of our own making, dependent on our willingness to maintain it. *Communion* is established by Christ in Christ.

Koinonia in Christ is nourished at the Lord’s Table. Presbyterians understand that bread remains bread and wine remains wine, but we also understand that our crucified and risen Lord is truly present in the Supper that is *his*, and that he gives his body and blood as we receive bread and wine. What was true on the road to Emmaus remains true among us: “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. . . . When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (Luke 24:30-31). In bread and wine, the Word proclaimed is enacted, and we perceive the risen Christ.

In our baptism we are all united to the crucified and living Christ, and so we are all bound to one another. Our baptismal *communion* does not depend on familiarity, camaraderie, or alliance, but on the grace of Christ, the love of God, and the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit. Our baptismal calling is to maintain the unity of the Spirit and to build up the body of Christ “until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Ephesians 4:13).

Separation at the Lord’s Table is a deep tragedy of worldwide church divisions and intra-denominational estrangement. At the very moment that we receive *communion* in the body and blood of Christ, we find ourselves out of communion with other Christians who also receive *communion* in the body and blood of Christ. Even when the Lord’s Table is not fenced off by denominational distinctions, it may be closed by our distance from those with whom we differ. Paul’s critique of the church in Corinth is not confined to a little band of first century Greeks: “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s Supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper” (1 Corinthians 11:20-21).

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper reveal the presence of Christ among us, strengthening us in *communion* with Christ, and placing us in *communion* with one another. Baptized and nourished in Christ, we are called to “*communion* in what we have” (Hebrews 13:16) – sharing faith, hope, and love.

Questions:

1. Preaching and hearing the Word has the effect of strengthening communion. But in different congregations and within our denomination, a different word may be heard. How can we all hear the same Word again and have our communion strengthened?

2. The Scriptures tell us not to approach the Table until we have first resolved disputes with our sisters and brothers.

- a. What are the implications of this command for Church life today?

- b. From whose table are you estranged? Who is estranged from your table? Do you grieve this estrangement?

3. How can our lives demonstrate that we are all baptized into full communion with Christ and in Him we are called to live our lives together in communion?

4. "Proclamation in Word and Sacrament are meant to be inseparable." Most of us understand that there should be no sacraments without preaching. Would you also agree that there should be no preaching without sacraments?

5. Discuss the difference between complementary callings and competing claims for truth. How can both lead to a more profound *koinonia*?



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SESSION FOUR

{*Koinonia* in Relationships}

Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel and by the generosity of your *koinonia* with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. (2 Corinthians 9:13-14)

Koinonia in the New Testament reaches far deeper than the surface of friendship or harmony, and far wider than the boundaries of a congregation. Our *communion* with God the Father Son and Holy Spirit, our *union* with Christ, and our *unity* in Baptism and Holy Communion, are paired

with concrete, practical relationships among Christian congregations. Nowhere is this more evident than in Paul's collection of funds and goods for the poor and beleaguered congregation in Jerusalem.

- At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to *koinonian* their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the gentiles have come to *ekoinonesan* their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things. (Romans 15:25-27)
- For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of *koinonian* in this ministry to the saints – and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us. (2 Corinthians 8:3-4)
- Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel and by the generosity of your *koinonia* with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. (2 Corinthians 9:13,14)
- So those who welcomed [Peter's] message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and *koinonia*, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. (Acts 2:42-45)

Paul's concern for the plight of the Christian community in Jerusalem took tangible form in *koinonia* among churches. His appeal to congregations in Macedonia, Corinth, and beyond, urged them to share their resources with a congregation in need. We sometimes use some memorable phrases from Paul's appeal in our stewardship programs – “they gave according to their means, and even beyond their means,” “God loves a cheerful giver,” and “the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.” It is important to note, however, that Paul was not appealing to the Corinthians to support their own congregation, but to be generous in supporting a sister congregation. Paul also makes it clear that such support is not only a response to the need of others, but more fundamentally a ministry of grateful response to the grace of Christ and the love of God in the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit.

It is also important to note that sharing material resources was one instance of a broader, deeper sharing among Christian communities throughout Judea, Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome. We Presbyterians sometimes speak of “our connectional church,” but the connections are too often bureaucratic and hierarchical, mediated through church agencies. The New Testament portrays *communio* as a range of relationships among churches, encompassing mutuality in faith, hope, and love. Although we may pay scant attention to the multiple “greetings” at the end of Paul's letters to the Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians, they are personal instances of *koinonia*'s broad and deep connections among widely scattered churches.

Paul's appeal for lived *koinonia* in the sharing of material possessions is an expression of the whole church's *communion* with its only Lord, the whole church's *communion* in the faith of the gospel, the whole church's *communion* with Christ in proclamation, Baptism, and Eucharist, and the whole church's *communion* with the God and Father of us all. Paul's appeal for genuine mutuality among Christian communities is not confined to the first century. It is addressed to us as surely as it is addressed to the Corinthians. The character and fidelity of our ministry is measured by our "obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of our *communion* with all others" (2 Corinthians 9:13).

Nowhere in the New Testament is confession of the gospel made more clear than in the opening of the first letter of John (which echoes the opening of John's Gospel):

- We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life – this Life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal Life that was with the Father and was revealed to us – we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you may have *koinonia* with us; and truly our *koinonia* is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. (1 John 1:1-4)

Koinonia – deep, intimate, abiding communion – is not created by missional association, doctrinal uniformity, or formal church structures. *Koinonia* is created by God, through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. But what is to be done when *koinonia* is endangered, or even broken, by disagreement about the shape of Christian faith and life? John's letter draws all, perhaps especially those who disagree, to hear and see and touch the Word made flesh. Unlike John, we have not personally seen and heard and touched the Word of Life. But just like the first recipients of John's letter, we have his testimony. And like everyone in succeeding centuries who have not seen and heard and touched, we have the testimony of Peter, James, Mark, Matthew, Luke, Paul, Jude, and the unknown writer to the Hebrews, as well as the testimony of Torah, prophets, and psalmists.

John invites all to listen to their testimony – not to quarrel about interpretation, but "to speak the truth in love". It is truth we are to speak, bearing faithful witness to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is in love that we are to speak, bearing faithful witness to the love of God. It is with one another that we are to speak the truth in love, bearing faithful witness to the *communion* of the Holy Spirit. In this way, "we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (Ephesians 4:15-16).

The goal toward which John, and Paul, and all of the biblical witnesses invite the church is *koinonia* with the one God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, and *koinonia* with all the saints. John also suggests that, like him, we are called to give our own testimony, to declare the Word of Life to sisters and brothers in the church, so that wounded *koinonia* may be healed, and the whole church's joy may be complete.

Questions:

1. How can we live together with those with whom we are in serious disagreement about important theological matters, and neither be indifferent to the truth nor to *Koinonia*?

2. What is to be done when *Koinonia* is endangered or broken by disagreement about the moral shape of Christian life?

3. What practical, concrete steps can we take to live *Koinonia* among churches that is direct and personal?

4. Sharing of material possessions is an expression of the whole Church's communion. How does your congregation measure up in "obedience to the gospel of Christ and generosity with all others?"

5. How are you - and how will you continue - declaring the Word of Life so that wounded *Koinonia* may be healed and the whole Church's joy may be complete?

6. Write a fifty word plea for the enriched *Koinonia* of the Church.

7. Write a fifty word prayer pleading with God for the healed communion of the Church.



Following Jesus is no easy path—especially in the 21st century. The Fellowship Community is a collective of individuals and congregations based in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), who are devoted to following Jesus and, in so doing, sharing the life and hope of the gospel with a broken and hurting world. Learn more about The Fellowship Community at www.fellowship-pres.org.



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