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TRUE COMMUNITY

The Biblical Practice of Koinonia

JERRY BRIDGES

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Preface

Almost thirty years ago, I did a word study of the Greek word *koinōnia*, as it occurs in various grammatical forms in the New Testament. Though it is translated into several English words and has a rich and varied meaning, *koinōnia* is most often understood as meaning fellowship. But in the mid-1980s, fellowship had come to mean little more than various forms of Christian social activity.

I was so impressed with the wide divergence between our concept of fellowship and the biblical meaning of it that I felt constrained to write a book on the subject, which was titled *True Fellowship*, to explain what *koinonia*, as it is referred to in the New Testament, is all about.

Later, in an effort to attract greater readership, the book was retitled *The Crisis of Caring* in order to relate the message of the book to the all-too-often superficial friendliness and empty relationships characteristic of our Christian community at the time. The book was available under that title for a number of years.

More recently, there has been an increasing interest in the subject of Christian community, and some felt that my book in many ways spoke to that subject. So my publisher, NavPress, asked that I update and revise the book where needed to show more clearly how the whole concept of New Testament *koinonia* is necessary to our understanding of

biblical community. As I worked on the revision, I was pleasantly surprised at how often I had used not only the word but also the concept of *community* almost thirty years ago. So there truly is a close relationship between community and fellowship, provided we give a biblical meaning to both words.

I am aware that others have written some excellent work on the subject of community, so this book is not intended to say all there is to say on the subject. Rather, I have attempted to show that an understanding and application of biblical *koinonia* will help all of us practice true community.

The work of revision has been both joyous and challenging. Joyous as I again focused on the rich and varied meaning of *koinonia*. Challenging because I was confronted by how much growing I still need to do in applying it to my life. So I do not submit this book as one who has mastered its teaching but rather as a fellow pilgrim inviting you to pursue true community with me.

Sharing a Common Life

What we have seen and heard we declare to you, so that you and we together may share in a common life, that life which we share with the father and his son Jesus Christ.

1 JOHN 1:3 (NEB)

The word *community* is used for a variety of purposes to denote groups of people who have something in common. For example, we may speak of a farming community or of the academic community at a university or of an ethnic group, such as the Italian community in a large city.

In recent years, many Christian leaders and pastors have begun to emphasize the importance of community among believers. This is a much-needed corrective to our tendency toward an individualistic approach to the Christian life, but it does raise the question *What is biblical community?* And is there a biblical basis for using the word *community* in our Christian context?

To answer that question, we need to explore the meaning of the Greek word *koinōnia* and its most common English translation, the word *fellowship*. *Koinōnia*, in its different grammatical forms, is actually translated several ways in the

New Testament: for example, *participation*, *partnership*, *sharing*, and of course *fellowship*. In our Christian circles, the word *fellowship* has come to mean little more than Christian social activity. It may mean the exchange of pleasantries over coffee and cookies at church, or the social functions of our high school or campus ministry groups. This is not the meaning of fellowship in the New Testament.

The first occurrence of the word *fellowship* in the New Testament occurs in Luke’s account of the beginning of the New Testament church on the Day of Pentecost. As a result of Peter’s sermon, about three thousand people believed in Christ. Luke says of them that “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42).

We’re not surprised that these new believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to prayer. But to fellowship? It would seem strange to include fellowship along with teaching and prayer if fellowship meant no more than Christian social activity. Or consider the words of the apostle John in 1 John 1:3: “What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ” (NASB). In both Acts 2:42 and 1 John 1:3, the New English Bible translates *koinōnia* as “sharing a common life.” This is the most basic meaning of *koinonia*, or fellowship. It is sharing a common life with other believers — a life that, as John says, we share with God the Father and God the Son. It is a relationship, not an activity.

RELATIONSHIP

Those first Christians of Acts 2 were not devoting themselves to social activities but to a relationship — a relationship that

consisted of sharing together the very life of God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They understood that they had entered this relationship by faith in Jesus Christ, not by joining an organization. And they realized that their fellowship with God logically brought them into fellowship with one another. Through their union with Christ, they were formed into a spiritually organic community. They were living stones being built into a spiritual house (see 1 Peter 2:5), fellow members of the body of Christ. As William Hendriksen said, “Koinonia, then, is basically a community-relationship.”¹ It is not primarily an activity; it is a relationship.

It is this spiritually organic relationship that forms the basis of true Christian community. It is not the fact that we are united in common goals or purposes that makes us a community. Rather, it is the fact that we share a common life in Christ. There are many organizations, both secular and Christian, whose members work together to pursue common goals. Some of these groups may call themselves communities. But biblical community goes much deeper than sharing common goals, though it ultimately involves that. Biblical community is first of all the sharing of a common life in Christ. It is when we grasp this truth that we are in a position to begin to understand true community.

PARTNERSHIP

Koinonia also means sharing together in the sense of partnership. Both classical Greek writers and New Testament writers used *koinōnia* to refer to a business partnership. Plato spoke of the dissolution of a *koinōnia* — a business partnership.² Luke used a form of *koinōnia* to refer to the partnership of Peter with James and John in the fishing business (see Luke 5:10).

In the spiritual realm, Paul regarded himself as a partner with his dear friend Philemon, and he thanked God for the

Philippian believers' partnership in the gospel (see Philemon 17; Philippians 1:5). And when Paul went to Jerusalem to dispute with the legalists over the necessity of circumcision, he said, "James, Cephas, and John . . . accepted Barnabas and myself as partners" (Galatians 2:9, NEB). The concept of fellowship as a spiritual partnership is firmly embedded in the New Testament use of *koinonia*.

Whereas relationship describes believers as a community, partnership describes them as a community in action. A business partnership is always formed in order to attain an objective, such as providing a service to the public at a profit for the partners. In the same way, the concept of a spiritual partnership implies that it is created with the objective of glorifying God. Just as all believers are united together in a community relationship, so we are all united together in a partnership formed to glorify God. God is glorified when Christians grow in Christlikeness and when unbelievers are brought into His kingdom. Biblical community, then, incorporates this idea of an active partnership in the promotion of the gospel and the building up of believers.

COMMUNION WITH OTHERS

A second primary meaning of New Testament *koinonia* is sharing with others what we have. Just as *sharing together* has two sub-meanings (relationship and partnership), so *sharing with* has two sub-meanings. The first of these can be called *communion* with one another. Although we usually use the word *communion* as a term for the Lord's Supper, it is here used to mean communicating intimately, or sharing with one another on a close personal and spiritual level. It may be the mutual sharing among believers of what God has taught them from the Scriptures, or it may be a word of encouragement from one believer to another. The key element is that the subject matter

is focused on God as well as on His Word and His works. As J. I. Packer said, “It is, first, a sharing with our fellow-believers the things that God has made known to us about himself, in hope that we may thus help them to know him better and so enrich their fellowship with him.”³

According to Acts 2:5, the first believers who were gathered into the church on the Day of Pentecost came from “every nation under heaven.” Prior to their conversion, they would have related to one another like billiard balls, constantly colliding and bouncing off one another. But immediately after coming into the community relationship of the body of Christ, they began to experience *koinonia* and to value its effect in their lives. As we have already seen, the New English Bible says in Acts 2:42, “They met constantly to hear the apostles teach, and to share the common life.” The New International Version says, “They devoted themselves . . . to the fellowship.” They couldn’t get enough teaching, fellowship, and prayer.

Those first Christians from the Day of Pentecost were all Jews. They were steeped in the Old Testament Scriptures, but as they listened to the apostles’ teaching and were enlightened by the Holy Spirit, they began to see those Scriptures in a new way. They were daily gaining a new understanding of them. And as they individually learned from the apostles’ teaching, they shared with one another what they were learning. This is fellowship: sharing with one another what God is teaching through the Scriptures, and this is an important part of true community.

How different is our present-day concept of fellowship? Take those typical times of “coffee fellowship.” We discuss everything else *except* the Scriptures. We talk about our jobs, our studies, our favorite sports teams, the weather — almost anything except what God is teaching us from His Word and through His workings in our lives. If we are to regain the New

Testament concept of fellowship within the community, we must learn to get beyond the temporal issues of the day and begin to share with each other on a level that will enhance our spiritual relationships with one another and with God.

SHARING MATERIAL POSSESSIONS

As we examine the account of these early believers' attitudes, however, we see that they did not limit their concept of *koinonia* to *sharing with* one another only spiritual things. They also shared their material possessions with those in need (see Acts 2:44-45).

One of the most common usages of *koinonia* in the New Testament is this sense of sharing material resources with others. For example, Paul urges us to "share with God's people who are in need" (Romans 12:13). In 2 Corinthians 9:13, he speaks of "your generosity in sharing with [others]." The writer of Hebrews urges us to "not forget to do good and to share with others" (13:16). The word *share* in these passages is a translation of *koinōnia* in either its noun or verb form. A willingness to share our possessions with one another is a very important aspect of true biblical community.

Sharing our possessions with others should be a natural consequence of our realization that biblical fellowship denotes both a relationship *and* a partnership. Paul said that all parts of the body should have concern for one another (see 1 Corinthians 12:25-26). We will be concerned for the needs of others in the body only to the extent that we see community as primarily a mutual relationship in Christ among members of the same spiritual organism. The fellowship of sharing with those in need is more than just showing compassion or benevolence to them. Even unbelievers do that. The fellowship of sharing possessions within the body is a tangible recognition that we are in a community relationship with one another and

that when one member of the community suffers, we all suffer together. When a parent meets a need of one of his children, we do not think of that act as an expression of benevolence but as an expression of relationship. It is both his privilege and his duty to meet that need because he is the parent. In the same manner, believers have both a privilege and a duty to share with each other as fellow members of the same body.

Similarly, in a partnership, the partners share in both the income and the expenses, both the assets and the liabilities of the partnership. No one ever establishes a business partnership where one partner takes all the income and another pays all the bills. They share alike in both the positive and the negative. It should be the same way in the community of the church. Because we are partners in the gospel, we need to *share* with one another, realizing that we are not owners but only stewards of the possessions God has entrusted (not given, but entrusted) to us.

We see the application of this principle of partnership in 2 Corinthians 8:13-14: “Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need.” Paul envisioned a continual flow of believers’ possessions toward those who have needs. This is an outworking of *koinonia*, an important expression of true community.

Paul was urging the Corinthian believers to have *fellowship* with Christians they had never even met and never would meet: the poor among the believers in Jerusalem. They were not going to have coffee and doughnuts together with these people in need; they were going to dig down into their pockets to help meet the needs of these believers who shared together with them a common life in Christ.

We can see, then, that the concepts of *community* and *fellowship* are so closely linked that we cannot have true community

unless we practice true fellowship. In fact, the concepts of biblical community and biblical fellowship are so closely tied that I may sometimes use the words *community* and *fellowship* interchangeably. That is because what the community does in terms of fellowship determines the character and face of the community. So, in this first chapter, we have seen that koinonia is used in the New Testament to express four different but related dimensions of fellowship:

- Community relationship
- Partnership
- Communion
- Sharing material possessions

The first two are dimensions of koinonia as *sharing together*, the second two as *sharing with one another*. It is because we share together a common life in Christ that we are called on to share with one another whatever we have, both spiritual and material resources.

We will explore the implications of these four expressions of koinonia in subsequent chapters. Before we do, however, we will look at the foundation for our koinonia with one another: fellowship with God. It is important that we take time to lay this foundation because we cannot have meaningful fellowship with one another unless we are individually experiencing vital fellowship with God.

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- I. What does it mean to you to “share in a common life” concerning your relationships with God and other believers?

2. How does New Testament koinonia differ from the way it is often represented today? What does it mean that koinonia is a relationship, not an activity?
3. How realistic is it to share in a common life in our culture? Does sharing material possessions seem too radical? Is it biblical?