

Koinonia

Christopher Alton

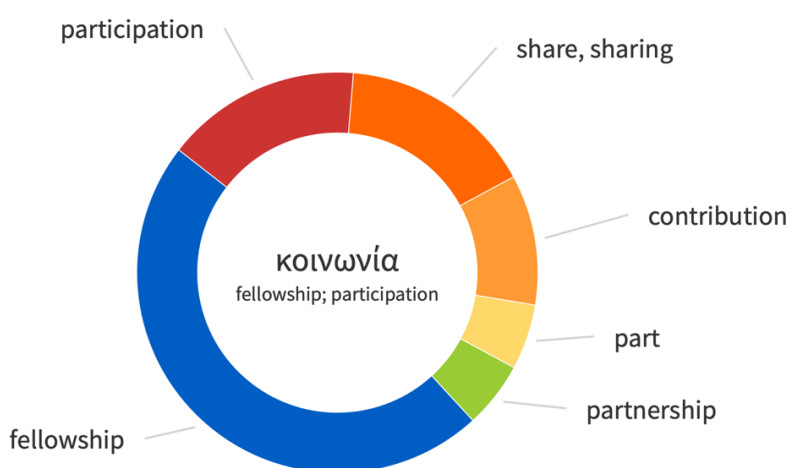
Purpose of this Paper

To sow seeds for a growing devotion to *koinonia* amongst us and through us to others - what does it look like in our modern context and how can we exemplify something authentic and highly attractive?

What does Koinonia mean?

In the NT the basic term, translated variously as 'communion', 'fellowship', 'communicate', 'partake', 'contribution', 'common' (in the sense of the Latin *communis*), stems from the Greek root *koin-*, which involves **sharing in something with someone**. Words stemming from this root usually refer to participation in something, rather than just association with others. There are two adjectives, *koinōnos* (x 10) and *synkoinōnos* (x 4), which are used as nouns also; and two verbs *koinōneō* (x 8) and *synkoimōneo* (x 3); and the noun *koinōnia* (x 19).¹

- Koinōnia (pronounced "koy-nohn-ee-ah")
- Strong's number 2842
- Fellowship, association, community, communion, joint participation, intercourse
- Most common renderings (ESV):



¹ Martin, R. P. (1996). Communion. In D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, & D. J. Wiseman (Eds.), *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed., p. 217). InterVarsity Press.

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Cultural Background

The Greek cultural background of this word group took two different forms. In secular life, Kittel² tells us that it was applied to everything from business and legal enterprises to close life partnerships, including marriage. The idea of citizenship was underpinned by a fellowship of equals in a city or nation.

In sacrificial language³ it was employed in the idea of a union between deity and humans, especially in the act of eating and drinking, based on a primitive idea of receiving divine power through the act; developed in the Hellenistic period as the idea of sacrificial meals, where men were invited as companions (*koinōnos*) to the table of the gods.

This idea of the divine-human fellowship in this word group (and its Hebrew equivalent) is largely absent from the OT⁴, with the focus usually on the relation of man with man and occasionally a union with false gods. This is surprising, because Israel shared the Semitic idea of the common meal implying a close relationship which binds the participants to one another, and they also regarded the sacrificial meal as fellowship between God and man. However, this perhaps reflects the sense of distance which the Israelites felt from God, as distinct from the Greeks.

The Hellenistic Jew, Philo of Alexandria (c. 20BC - 50AD) had brought the divine proximity of the Greek world into Israelite theology, by the time of Jesus.⁵ To some extent this lay some of the groundwork, in Jewish thinking, for Christ to reveal the true meaning of the Passover, and for the Apostle Paul to develop this further in NT literature.⁶

² Kittel, G. (1965), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume III, page 798. © Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Michigan.

³ Relating to sacred rites or symbols.

⁴ Even the word group is rarely found in the LXX. *Koinōnos* (partner) being found only in 2 Ki 17:11, Pr 28:24, Isa 1:23 and Mal 2:14; *Koinōnia* in Lev 6:2.

⁵ Kittel (1965) p.803.

⁶ It is an interesting thought to consider the likely impact of other cultures upon Judaism (including during the intertestamental period), in shaping thought and imagery. They point to God not only using the history of His people to point toward the new creation realities to come.

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New Testament Usage

The noun *koinonia* (Str.2842) occurs 19 times (in 17 verses) in the NT, which coalesce around three progressive themes, which we can explore.

1. Communion

Koinonia is used to describe the unique union between God and us, made possible by the coming of Jesus, Immanuel (Isa 7:14, Mt 1:23). Each of us have been invited (called) into this blessed union.

*God is faithful, by whom you were called into the **fellowship** [koinonia] of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

1 Co 1:9

The Apostle Paul delivered to the church what he had received from the Lord, concerning the significant and heightened experience of this union, which takes place at the Lord's supper.

*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?*

1Co 10:16

Our participation in Christ, involves the different phases of His life, including His sufferings, if we want to be partakers (koinōnos) in His divine nature (2 Pe 1:4) and see Him fully formed in us (Ga 4:19). Paul regarded this as fundamental in his Spiritual growth toward maturity.

*... that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may **share** [koinonia] his sufferings⁷, becoming like him in his death,*

Php 3:10

Paul's benediction over the Corinthians speaks of those things we receive from the Son (grace, Jn 1:14), and the Father (love, Jn 3:16), but of a fellowship

⁷ Literally 'the fellowship [koinonia] of His sufferings'.

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(koinonia) of the Spirit. This is not a gift from the Spirit (as grace and love), but the effect of His presence amongst us.

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the **fellowship** [koinonia] of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

2 Co 13:14

This *koinonia* of the Spirit, Paul regarded as the foundation for the self-sacrificial love, which would characterise our own koinonia together, as believers.

*So, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any **participation** [koinonia] in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ...*

Php 2:1

Without this foundational *koinonia* in our own lives, there can be no lasting koinonia of any other kind amongst us.

*If we say we have **fellowship** [koinonia] with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.*

1 Jn 1:6

2. Community

From this divine communion, a community was born on the day of Pentecost, with the birth of the church, which Luke describes in its infancy and essence.

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and **the fellowship** [koinonia], to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

Acts 2:42

The more literal translations include the definite article ('the') here, indicating their devotion to something new. Luke isn't referring to the act of fellowshiping, but that a new 'koinonia' (community) had formed amongst them, with the coming of the koinonia (communion) of the Spirit, and that



“while it had not separated itself legally and cultically from the Jewish community, it already represented a circle of closest fellowship.”⁸

The Apostles knew that it was a fellowship, which would expand not through association, or aligned goals, but through the divine union (koinonia) of the Spirit.

*- that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have **fellowship** [koinonia] with us; and indeed our **fellowship** [koinonia] is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.*

1 Jn 1:3

They also recognised the precious quality of this koinonia (community) and safeguarded it, such that they exercised great care before later accepting the Apostle Paul into this circle.

*... 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.*

Ga 2:9

Moreover, they discovered special bonds that could form *within* this community, as a special harnessing together of gifts and ministries. The seeds for this mode of operation could already be seen just before Pentecost, as the Apostles prayed for a replacement for Judas. They asked God for one who would *“take the place in this ministry and apostleship, which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.”* (Ac 1:25).

As they waited for the day of the coming of the Spirit, there was already a growing sense amongst them, that they were part of something much bigger than all of them. They knew it was a place of mutual submission, because Jesus had shown them, where the ministry mission (not any personal agenda) comes first.

⁸ Kittel (1965, page 809).



Out of this special ministry *koinonia* bond, came the sense of partnership (*koinonia*) with those amongst whom they ministered. This was exemplified by Paul's enduring partnership with the early churches and formed the basis for so much rich NT Scripture.

*because of your **partnership** [koinonia] in the gospel from the first day until now.*

Php 1:5

Paul and John both warned the believers of the indispensable foundation of the divine communion (*koinonia*), which would always underpin their community (*koinonia*).

*Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what **partnership** [koinonia] has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?*

2 Co 6:14

*But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have **fellowship** [koinonia] with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.*

1 Jn 1:7

3. Contribution

The partnership of community, inevitably bore the fruit of contribution. In other words, those who experienced *koinonia* in the early church not only knew what it meant to be joined by having a share in something (the essence of *koin*), but it went further than this - it also became about giving a share ('what I have a give you' - Ac 3:6).

They knew that in the midst of their community, each of them had something from their personal communion (*koinonia*) with Him, to bring as their contribution (*koinonia*) for the benefit of all (1 Co 14:26), and indispensable for their community (*koinonia*) to reach its fullness.



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

Phm 1:6

Do not neglect to do good and to **share** what you have [koinonia⁹], for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Heb 13:16

They also recognised that the partnership of community required more than mere words. As they shared the suffering of Christ (communion), they would also share and support one another in times of suffering (2 Co 1:7), affliction (2 Co 8:2) and need (2 Co 8:4).

For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some **contribution** [koinonia] for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.

Rom 15:26

... begging us earnestly for the favour of **taking part** [koinonia] in the relief of the saints—

2Co 8:4

By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your **contribution** [koinonia] for them and for all others,

2 Co 9:13

God's people enjoyed the partnership (*koinónēō*¹⁰) of giving and receiving with Paul (Php 4:15) and the other churches. In some cases, they had nothing in common with those to whom they were giving, except their union in Christ and His Apostles. But Paul had taught them the koinonia principle of reciprocity (Ga 6:6).

Whether they shared their faith or their wealth, the motivation remained the same the same – a recognition that every member of God's koinonia has a uniquely beautiful and necessary contribution to make.

⁹ Literally, 'the sharing'.

¹⁰ Strong's 2841 - to become a sharer, be made a partner.

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Viewed together, these three themes can be seen as progressive, building upon each other. Our own communion (koinonia) with God forms the foundation, upon which we can build our community (koinonia), which is the nurturing environment for our gifting to flourish, enabling each of us to make our personal contribution (koinonia).

How Do We Nurture Authentic Koinonia Amongst Us?

Authentic koinonia is attractive, at least to those seeking the real thing. So, our attention must be focussed on nurturing it, understanding it, maintaining it, and zealously guarding it. There will be many ways to do this, but for now we can consider two key ingredients for authentic koinonia.

Fellowship of the Son

Koinonia is all about relationship, and it begins with 'the fellowship of the Son' (1 Co 1:9). This is a union at the level of the spirit, rather than mere association, which runs deeper than any other relationship in our lives. The Apostle Paul described his experience of this union.

"It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

Ga 2:20

The extent of our fellowship with Son, will be determined by how closely our lives align with this statement.

We saw earlier that when describing the importance of the Lord's Supper to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of the participation in the life of Christ, through His blood and His body, which takes place at the table. These things were not just for the moment. So important were these things that Paul received his instruction directly from the Lord (1 Co 11:23). And Paul's words were carefully chosen to show us two fundamental aspects of how we nurture our relationship with Christ.

- **Participation in Christ's blood (1 Co 10:16a)**

The blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin (1 Jo 1:7) continually¹¹, and completely. It makes us holy as He is holy (1 Co 1:30, 1 Pe 1:16). Our union with Him can be strengthened, or undermined, by the extent of our reliance

¹¹ In the original Greek text, the tense for the word "cleanses" denotes a present continuous action.

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upon His blood. Obviously, this means avoiding sin, which gives a foothold to the enemy, and keeping short account with God. But it also means that we give no place for striving, which is when we start to rely upon our own works (i.e., 'dead works' – Heb 9:14) in our relationship with Jesus. In practice, this means we should be increasingly resting on the blood of Christ, as we grow into maturity, letting go of our hang ups (insecurities), about ourselves and others (competition).

- **Participation in Christ's body (1 Co 10:16b)**

This is the extent to which we personally draw from Jesus, as the bread of life (Jo 6:35). Jesus also described Himself as the true vine (Jo 15:1) and us as the branches, drawing nourishment from Him (Jo 15:5). Jesus makes it very simple for us ('Abide in me, and I in you' v.4). 'Abide' simply means to stay, reside, stay close. Abiding is sometimes easy, but difficult at other times. It means being willing to share every aspect of His life, including in His sufferings, in order that we may also share in His glory (Ro 8:17, 1 Pe 4:13). The more fully we're willing to do so, the more fully formed Christ will become in us. Paul lived this out so demonstrably for us (Phil 3:10).

Our participation in Christ's blood and body are both dynamic aspects of our relationship with Him. Our maturity in both these things will nurture a growing and deepening foundation of koinonia in our lives and will set an excellent example for others in the body of Christ to follow.

Participation in the Spirit

The second aspect of koinonia is our relationship with each other, 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit' (2 Co 14:13). We have already observed that in his benediction over the saints, Paul speaks of the 'fellowship (koinonia) of the Spirit' as something which brings the grace of Christ and the love of God the Father to us.

Paul's letter to the Philippians makes most mention of koinonia, covering all three themes above (Communion – 3:10; Community 2:1-4; and Contribution 4:15). In the second of these passages (Php 2:1-4), Paul describes what koinonia (community) amongst God's people looks like. A community of people whose lives reflect that of Jesus – devoted to the wellbeing of each other.

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Paul begins the second chapter with the same triadic formula as his benediction, and in doing so, shows us how we can nurture the fulness of koinonia amongst ourselves, by highlighting these two key things we have received from the Father and the Son.

2 Co 14:13	Php 2:1
Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ	Encouragement in Christ
Love of God (the Father ¹²)	Comfort from love
Fellowship of the Holy Spirit	Participation in the Spirit

Paul is saying that an authentic participation (koinonia) in the Spirit will display these two characteristics - **grace** and **love**. Our koinonia must model these two elements, and we can do so in two simple ways.

- **Validation**

The grace of God brings us the righteousness of God (Ro 1:17), which we can never deserve (Ro 3:23). Our validation (i.e., value and worth¹³) comes from Him, and never from anyone or anything else. Relationships in the koinonia of the saints can be affected by the tendency of God's people, to sometimes seek this validation elsewhere. Sometimes this is from other people, or from activity, both of which nurtures underlying insecurities in God's people.

If we look to others for validation this will put a strain on relationships across the body, and will inevitably lead to disappointment, because others can never provide such validation for us. If we seek validation in the activity of the Kingdom of God, no matter how legitimate and fruitful it may be, our sense of value and purpose will always be driven by those things, rising and falling with their apparent success or failure.

Instead, we can model grace in our koinonia, by living secure in the validation that only God can provide. We don't need to present an image of perfect saints, but of those who demonstrably live in the peace and security of the approval of God. All decisions and motivations come from place. This

¹² Although the Father is not specifically named by Paul here (2 Co 14:13), the inference is clear, given the repeated biblical formula of the Godhead working together in all situations.

¹³ This is not to be confused with the legitimate recognition from others, of our gifting and role within the body of Christ. The two can often become conflated in the minds of believers.

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is the true liberty of the children of God, which all creation is longing to see (Ro 8:19). And it is very attractive to those seeking authentic koinonia.

- **Vulnerability**

The freedom which grace brings, provides the appropriate environment for vulnerability amongst the saints. We are freed from the fear of not meeting the expectations of others. Such freedom enables us to be ourselves with each other - comfortable and secure in the heart (not head) knowledge that we no longer fall short in God's eyes, and we therefore live free from *any* condemnation (Ro 1:1-2); be it from other people, or from the accuser of the saints.

Being vulnerable means letting others in, which can *only* happen where the love of God has humbled our hearts (Php 2:3). This is because a growing revelation of God's love *is* humbling. The more we understand the richness of His grace toward us, the greater our revelation of the extravagance of His love. According to Paul, grace is the *only* seedbed for the love of others (Ep 4:32), which is why he prayed for an ever-increasing revelation of it amongst God's people (Ep 3:17-19). He knew that it would enable God's people to live a lifestyle of treating each other as more important than ourselves (Php 2:3).

This combination of **grace** and **love** ensures two very important things. Firstly, that we give ourselves completely to seeing the full stature of gift and calling of those around us (Col 1:28-29), leaving no room for insecurities about our own role. Secondly, in doing so we appreciably discern what God has put in others, that we ourselves need for our own calling (the koinonia/partnership of giving and receiving).

Being vulnerable with others, provides an opportunity for them to sow into our lives. Self-sufficiency (from others), which has often been confused with maturity, allows no room for others to meet our need, and therefore robs them of the opportunity to grow. There is no room for such selfishness in the koinonia of the Spirit. A koinonia of self-sufficient superstars will only attract those looking to become the same.



Conclusion

By considering the use of the word koinonia, we have seen just how broad it was for the early church.

- They understood their new creation reality (2 Co 5:17) to be a **communion** (koinonia), which transformed their lives, and gave birth to a new **community** (koinonia).
- They learned that this new **community** is underpinned by healthy and growing relationships with Jesus.
- They learned that this new **community** is characterised by a culture of servant-hearted saints, who care far more about the extension of God's Kingdom, than any recognition for their **contribution** (koinonia) to it.
- Such a culture sees God's people laying down their lives, and attracting others to do the same.

