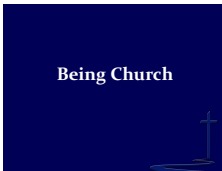


Fellowship Part A

Modified July 2021



What is Church?

This should be a simple question for church people to answer but two millennia of church history has complicated it a bit!

In 1984 the chaplain to the US senate provided this rough outline of the church's Western history from as it moved from Jerusalem to California which sets out what Barbara and I want to cut through. He said:



“In the beginning the church was a fellowship of men and women centering on the living Christ.

Then the church moved to Greece, where it became a philosophy.

Then it moved to Rome, where it became an institution.

Next it moved to Europe (*sic*) where it became a culture,

and, finally, it moved to (North) America - where it became an enterprise.”¹



That is a lot of Church history packed into a few sentences and frames. Like the Book of Acts it only flows west from Jerusalem without mentioning the roads east or south.

As Barbara and I have sought God's direction on what to work on at this time we believe we need to work on our church as a fellowship. So we are going to do that for as long as it takes.

As St Matthews is about making disciples I expect there will be learning, training and unlearning or repenting because that is what disciples do.

So as we begin to devote ourselves to 'fellowship' there are three things we need to get clear on.

¹ Dr. Richard C. Halverson (1916-1995), chaplain to the U.S. Senate, was credited in 1984 for this speech before the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church.

κοινωνία / *koinonia*
=
'Fellowship' ??

The first is the word 'fellowship' which appears often in our English language bibles but has some twists and confusion around it. We need to define it clearly and even rescue it before using it.

An Italian proverb is relevant here: Every translator is a traitor.²

An example of this is how the Greek word '*koinonia*' is translated as 'fellowship' because meaning is lost and meaning is added as cost to what was originally meant.

The first complication is that the English word 'fellowship' is an unnecessary masculine word even though academic research fellows can be male or female.

A second complication is generated by poor use in church culture such as talking about 'having fellowship' to describe social time over a cup of tea or having 'fellowship rooms'. That is not what the Bible is referring to. New Testament '*Koinonia*' is not about social connection or activity.

I have a two-step solution for these two problems:

1. Use a specific term so we know we are talking about what the Bible is talking about and not the popular distortions. That term is '***Koinonia-Fellowship***'. This links 'Fellowship' to its Biblical meaning in the Greek word '*Koinonia*' which is neither exclusively male nor merely social.
2. The second thing to do is clearly explain what *koinonia-fellowship* is and is not.
 - *koinonia-fellowship* is the bond among those that sincerely hold Jesus as Lord and live in his Spirit.
 - It's the connection that leads us to recognize someone as brother or sister in God because we share Jesus.
 - It's the knowing that we stand together in the truth, love and freedom of God – *Knowing that I know that you know that we share something.*
 - It's that sense of freedom and openness between people. We feel that our link with God is bigger than however we are different as people. We may be worldly different in various ways and yet there is a knowing that we are one in Christ transcending Jew and Greek, Male and Female, Slave and Free...³
 - It is the life of God among us that gives a taste of the Trinity's *koinonia-fellowship*.

Koinonia-Fellowship

Koinonia-Fellowship
=
a shared
participation, association
or communion.

This *koinonia-fellowship* is both what makes us to be God's church and it is the source/spring for how we live and what we do, individually and together.

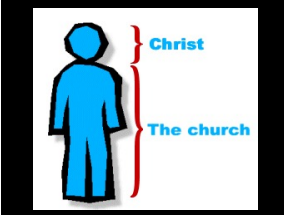
² "Traduttore, traditore"

³ Galatians 3:27–28 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Let me illustrate this Koinonia-fellowship in a few scriptural images:



Jesus described his relationship with his followers as being like branches on the vine. When he is the vine and we are the branches we the branches share a common life drawn from the vine. That is what Jesus calls and holds people to by abiding in him. The result is Jesus-like fruit. – an organic image



Paul describes this mode of being Church as like a human body having diverse members -such as organs and limbs- sharing and nurturing the same common life as governed by the head. This shared life is *Koinonia*-Fellowship which is only possible in unity. Disunity disrupts any sharing of common life. – another organic image



Peter and Paul describe the Church's connectivity in terms of buildings. Paul describes Christ as the foundational cornerstone on which everything relates and rests. Peter goes up a level from the foundations and describes church members as living stones forming a shrine for the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. This is *koinonia*-fellowship. – a technical image



A possible modern technical illustration from beyond the Bible is the World-Wide-Web or 'Internet'. The Internet's life or activity is a function of its connectivity with every point sending and receiving from every point. This is like *koinonia*-fellowship. – a modern technical image



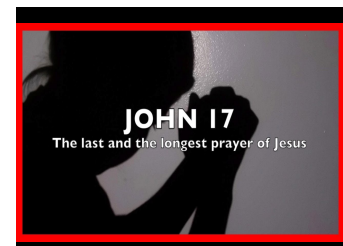
The Maori cultural emphasis on Whakapapa reflects the great value on common ancestry so that there may be peace among people because they share the same life source and heritage. It's about spiritual recognition. This is a feature of *koinonia*-Fellowship. – a local cultural image

Q1 Why is this worth so much attention?

A1 This is what Jesus wants for us. This is what God's Word points us to as important to God thus worthy of our prime attention.

Q2 How do we know this?

A2 Because it's what he prayed for on the night before the cross.



⁸ As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

.....

²⁰ ‘I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Jesus is praying for *koinonia*-fellowship in which his followers share together in the life of God. That is no small prayer!

It’s a prayer with a purpose, namely to provide the world a convincing sign that Jesus did come from God.

Unity born of *koinonia*-fellowship in Jesus is Jesus’ prayer for his church because this is the sign that the world can recognize and pointing to God.

It’s so simple: If the world sees people who can live and love together they will join the dots and recognize that this Jesus really is from God. It’s where we score and where we fail.

*Photographer’s story at Peter and Evelyn’s wedding.
“If the world were like this we would not have problems.”*

Psalm 133 anticipated this.

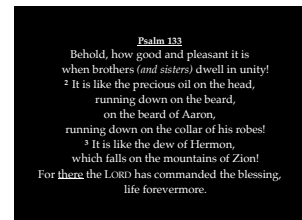
Psalm 133

Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers (*and sisters*) dwell in unity!

² It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down on the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!

³ It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion!

For there the Lord has commanded the blessing,
life forevermore.



When God’s people are together in God -in *koinonia*-fellowship- the blessing of God flows such that the world can see that as well.

God in Jesus Christ was praying that his followers would find their unity in God and live *koinonia*-fellowship.

Or in other words that the Church would be a participation in the spiritual life of God.

That is a long way from just cups of tea and social events!

There is one more very important thing to understand about *koinonia*-fellowship: That is that we cannot make it. *Koinonia*-Fellowship as I have been describing it – a common spiritual life in union with God and each other is a gift from from God given through Jesus by his Holy Spirit. Never think we can fabricate this spiritual unity and *koinonia*-fellowship. This verse of scripture -in today’s lectionary epistle reading (Eph 4:1-16)- tells us what we can and must do:

What can we do about
Koinonia-Fellowship?

with all humility and gentleness, with
patience, bear with one another in
love, making every effort to maintain
the unity of the Spirit in the bond of
peace

Ephesians 2:3

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

We are to preserve and maintain the unity and *koinonia*-fellowship that God establishes. Don't rash it, don't take it for granted, don't damage it. This is not always easy!

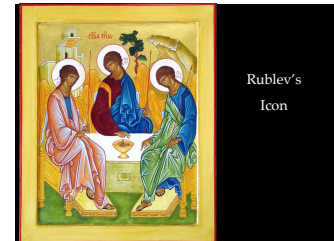
This is what the Church of Pentecost devoted itself to as we have read earlier this year in Acts 2:42

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and *koinonia*-fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Repairing, nurturing, upbuilding and protecting the *koinonia*-fellowship is a top priority and breaking of bread in communion is a powerful spiritual provision for this.

Lead into Communion:

A helpful picture to bring all this into our imaginations is one we have seen before. This is a version of Rublev's Icon which can be variously interpreted. I value it as a depiction of the open *Koinonia*-Fellowship of the Trinity. They are spiritually united around a common table yet open to we who approach them. Much more can be said but for now, this is a picture of God's shared inner life which Jesus prayed for us to participate in so that the world recognized Jesus was sent from God because his people evidenced the *koinonia*-fellowship of God.



Rublev's
Icon

So as we prepare to come to Holy Communion:

- *Koinonia*-Fellowship is what we act out when we share a meal that represents the body and blood of the Lord Jesus offered for us.⁴ God's life in Christ embraced at baptism is now shared and received among us through bread and wine.
- Then beyond the table *koinonia*-fellowship is what we see happening in love between believers who value their bond together over themselves as individuals just as God does as Trinity.
 - If Roman observers did say: "See how the Christians love one another"⁵ they were in effect saying, "See the Christian *koinonia*-fellowship in action." This points to God.

Come to the table.

Come to enact and affirm our *koinonia*-fellowship in God through Jesus Christ.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

⁵ It's not totally clear whether Tertullian was quoting something actually said or imagined within rhetorical debate.