

Koinonia

Christian Fellowship and the life of the Church

1. The Life of the Church

There are four tasks and responsibilities in the life of the Church which are clearly defined in scripture. They are worship (Greek word *Latria*), fellowship (*Koinonia*), ministry (*Diakonia*), and witness (*Martyria*). We are clearly called to be a worshipping people, committed to giving praise and glory to the Living God. We are clearly called to be a ministering people, committed to a serving role for God's Kingdom and for all humanity. We are clearly called to be a witnessing people, committed to proclaiming the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And we are clearly called to be a fellowship, committed to being a living community bound together by the love of Christ. These four words indicate the key characteristics of the Christian Church.

These characteristics are rooted in the truth that the Church is God's creation. Though it is composed of human beings it is not a human institution, as some suppose. The Greek word used to describe it is *Ekklesia*. This word is used to describe citizens who are summoned together as a sovereign assembly. It is an assembled congregation of God's people. A local church is never a haphazard grouping of people, loosely connected with one another. It is a committed group of people who have responded to God's call and who have a profound covenant relationship and loyalty to God and to one another. The Church is directly related to the eternal purposes of God.

The One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church is found everywhere where Christ and the Holy Spirit are enthroned in the hearts of men and women. The Church is one, because it is united with Christ. The Church is holy, because it is possessed by the Spirit of God. The Church is Catholic, because Christ is proclaimed everywhere and its life does not depend upon culture, place or time. The Church is apostolic, because its life and message are built on the firm foundation of the teaching of the Apostles and the message of God's prophets.

2. A Family and a Community

When the world hears us speak of God as our Father and of His people as a family, they have the right to expect family fellowship to be manifest in the Church which they see. An essential part of the witness of the Church is that the world may see the love of Christ manifest in our relationship with each other as brothers and sisters. Christ said, "*By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*" (Jn. 13.35). We are a family or household of God (Eph. 2.19; 1 Tim. 3.15). Our mutual relationships are an immense privilege.

We are the people of God and the Church is essentially the living community of all who have responded to God's call. When we become part of the Church we are joined together as active members of the living, moving Body of Christ. The relationship of the Church to Christ is very

close. Jesus says *“I am the Vine; you are the branches”* (Jn. 15.5). Just as God became man in Christ, so God’s people must become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit (Eph. 2.22).

The dwelling place of God is with men.

The evidence of a risen, living Saviour is a living, spirit-filled Church, actively expressing His presence and His love within its Koinonia fellowship.

Koinonia is a Greek word which is translated as ‘fellowship’. It is one of the great words of the New Testament and it denotes something that is vital to a Christian’s spiritual health and is central to the church’s true life. It is a fundamental characteristic of the Early Church – *“They devoted themselves to the Apostles’ doctrine and fellowship”* (Acts 2.42).

3. Fellowship with God and each other

Christian fellowship is two-dimensional – firstly vertical and then horizontal. The vertical dimension of fellowship is our close relationship with God – *“Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ”* (1 Jn. 1.3). Our fellowship with God is a spiritual necessity. It involves giving to God and receiving from God and communicating with God. It involves having a right relationship with God (i.e. righteousness). Our relationship with God is as children to the Father – *“As many as received him to them he gave the right to become the children of God”* (Jn. 1.12). We are taught *“Yield yourselves to God”* (Rom. 6.13). Our fellowship with God involves a constant turning to Him in adoration and repentance. Our fellowship with Him involves profound and intimate levels of sharing because He is near to us and speaks with us – we are called by our name – He knew us in our mother’s womb. Our fellowship with God is real and immediate. Because of the Incarnation we are conjoined with Christ. He is the vine; we are the branches. He is the head of the Body; we are the Body. We are His sheep; he is the shepherd.

Following from this vertical relationship with God, we are led by Christ into a horizontal relationship with other believers. With them and through them we find strength, refreshment and instruction. We experience a deep level of sharing in which we give and receive. Christian fellowship involves a sharing of friendship among believers. It involves mutual love and trust. It involves us being brothers and sisters in the same family.

It involves practical sharing (Rom. 15.26; 2 Cor. 8.4; 2 Cor. 9.13; Heb. 13.16). It involves partnership in the work of Christ (Phil. 1.5). It involves being part of a believing company, not being separate or isolated (Eph 3.9). It involves being part of a living fellowship of the Spirit (2 Cor. 13.14; Phil. 2.1). It involves being part of a community which gives mutual encouragement and support. It involves communion. It involves a high level of sharing –sharing of opinion, sharing of goods. It means having companions and partners. It involves the sharing of experience (2 Cor. 1.7; Heb. 10.33).

Clearly, the establishment of a fellowship of believers in the Church is intended to be a sign of hope for the world. The fellowship of the Early Church had a striking vitality. It shared in Christ and His gifts (Phil. 2.1). Tertullian recorded in 197AD that people were saying, *“See... how they [Christians] love one another... and how they are ready to die for each other”* (*Apologeticus*, ch. 39).

Constant emphasis is laid on the importance of preserving unity in the fellowship (Jn. 17.21; Eph. 4.3; Rom. 12.16, 15.5; 2 Cor. 13.11; Phil. 2.2, 4.2; 1 Peter 3.8). Division was regarded as a scandal (1 Cor. 1.10, 3.3,11.18).

Unity between Christians is in the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4.2-6). A tangible expression of unity between individual believers and God is the Eucharist.

Our relationship with other believers through Koinonia is expressed repeatedly by the use of the word 'fellow': fellow prisoner (Rom. 16.7), fellow-servant (Cols. 1.7; 4.7, Rev. 6.11), fellow-worker (Rom. 16.21, Cols. 4.11), fellow citizen (Eph. 2.19), fellow soldier (Phil 2.25). We are called to be fellow-heirs, fellow members of the Body, fellow partakers (Eph. 3.6).

The characteristic of the Early Church was a togetherness which is far deeper than any other human grouping, and which strongly manifested mutual support and generosity of spirit. Prayer was a very significant element of the fellowship, and Paul constantly makes the plea that Christians should pray for him as he prays for them (Rom 15.30; 2 Cor. 1.11; Eph 6.19; Cols. 4.3; 1 Thess. 5.25; 2 Thess. 3.1; Philemon 22).

As well as prayer, mutual confession is urged: "*confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed*" (James 5.16). Fellowship is fundamentally a means of grace and a gift of God. Fellowship is the confirmation of the legitimacy of our faith – "*If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another*" (1 Jn. 1.7).

4. Maintaining Fellowship

Jesus called His followers to be one (John 17), and members of the Early Church were urged to be 'of one accord' (Phil. 2.2).

Sin hinders real fellowship – the devil divides, God unites. There can be no real fellowship if there is confrontation, concealment or pretence. If our individualism makes us believe that we are self-sufficient, this will always be an obstacle to true fellowship. Similarly, if we are self-righteous, our sanctimoniousness will separate us from the fellowship of believers. Other obstacles to fellowship include bitterness, which is manifest in attitudes of sustained hostility. We are warned, "*see to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many*" (Heb. 12.15). This bitterness may stem from a sense of injustice, ill treatment, betrayal or wounded pride, or may take the form of defensive malice. It may be rooted in jealousy generating controversy, cold relationships, gossip and unbridled criticism. Fellowship must be rooted in the limitless and unconditional love of Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, or it will die.

The warmth of good Christian fellowship is incompatible with the rigidity, formality and coldness that are sadly encountered in some churches. Christians need fellowship with one another, and where this is lacking or diminished there are very serious consequences. In an age of rampant individualism and self-centredness we need to seek fellowship. We cannot be Christians in isolation. One of the distinguishing marks of the Early Church was that it experienced real fellowship in worship, particularly in communion by sharing in '*the breaking of bread*' (Acts 2.42). In our Koinonia we share in the very life of God (2 Peter 1.3-4). Our fellowship is with – and is brought about by – the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13.14). Every member of the Church, without exception, has a personal responsibility to maintain and enrich the fellowship of the Church.

5. A Community of Love

The dominant characteristic of Koinonia in the Church is mutual love. Koinonia implies strong, committed and ongoing relationships, beyond mere involvement in a series of undisciplined encounters and events. The Church is not a mutual association. It is the place where unity is

expressed and experienced. It is the place where the healing of God is manifest. It is the place where lives are transformed.

The evidence of the authenticity and integrity of the Church is the presence of the Holy Spirit. He is the witness. The Holy Spirit is love and truth. (See Acts 9.31; 15.8, Jn. 15.26; 16.13-14 and 1 Jn. 5.7, Heb. 2.4, 1. Cor. 12.3.)

The three-fold benediction is a clear guide to the nature of the Church – *“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit”* (2 Cor. 13.14).

People who share together in the love of Christ are bound together. They are bonded in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3.28). Christians in Koinonia relationship love one another, respect one another, help one another, teach one another, confess sins to one another, and encourage one another. The Christian fellowship has a discipline which submits to the authority of Christ.

There is a direct link between the fellowship of the Church and the Church’s act of glorifying God – *“Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God”* (Rom. 15.7). As Christians live and witness together in true fellowship, God is glorified.

Koinonia was a marked feature of the Church from its beginning (2 Thess. 1.3). Koinonia did not extend to those who denied the Apostles’ doctrine (Acts 2.42; Gal. 1.8). Fellowship in the Early Church also involved the practice of hospitality (Heb. 13.2; 1 Peter 4.9), the bearing of each other’s burdens (Gal. 6.2), mutual encouragement (Heb. 10.25) and prayer for each other (Phil. 1.9-11). The major attraction of the Christian faith to the pagans of the ancient world was the richness of believers’ communal life.

The fellowship of the Church is founded on the Lord Jesus Christ and is called into being by the Spirit of Christ. Our fellowship must therefore be the life of Christ, possessing at least some of His characteristics. The Apostle John said *“As he is, so are we in this world”* (1 Jn. 4.17). Jesus prayed that the Church might be characterised by six features, spelt out in John 17: joy (v. 13), holiness (v. 14-16), truth (v. 17), mission (v.18), unity (v.21-23) and love (v.26). His own life was marked by each of these qualities. These should be the visible marks of the Church. The proof of the resurrection of Christ is His living presence in His Church.

Fellowship with God inevitably brings fellowship with other Christians, within the body of the Church. John indicates this in the opening verses of his first letter (1 Jn. 1.3) – *“that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ”*.

Jesus said *“Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them”* (Matt. 18.20).

Secular commentators refer to the absence of God in our culture. The radical nature of Christian fellowship enables frail human beings to experience the real presence of God in our living Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

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