

BACK TO THE BASICS: COMMUNITY

INTRODUCTION

It is appropriate to speak of the local church as a “community.”

- This word denotes a group of people who have something in common.
- Used among believers, it is a helpful corrective to our tendency toward an individualistic approach to the Christian life, especially in Western culture (e.g., Sunday/Wednesday-only involvement, come late/leave early, foyer Christianity).

Key Greek word — *koinonia*, which is usually translated one of four ways in our Bible, based on its usage in the passage:

- *Participation*
- *Partnership*
- *Sharing*
- *Fellowship* — Today, this term has come to mean little more than Christian social activity, but that is not the meaning of “fellowship” in the New Testament.

Doing a word study of *koinonia* is a fascinating exercise that enhances our understanding of how God intends for the local church community to function together. We can organize this word study into two main headings.

SHARING TOGETHER

This is objective *koinonia* — that is, this is actually true and fundamentally real (i.e., *New Oxford American Dictionary*: “not influenced by personal feelings or opinions in considering and representing facts: ‘historians try to be objective and impartial’.

Contrasted with subjective. Not dependent on the mind for existence; actual: ‘a matter of objective fact’.”). Whether we feel it or not, practice it or not, we do enjoy this *koinonia* with all believers in our local church and worldwide.

The New Testament conveys two different sub-categories of “sharing together” in *koinonia*.

1. *Community relationship*

Acts 2:42 — “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the *fellowship*, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

- “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” (JB), since social activity usually happens anyways. Furthermore, the verse literally translates as “*the fellowship*,” denoting a definite and specific reference, a fundamentally binding reality—a relationship.
- “This relationship consisted of sharing together the very life of God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit....They had entered this relationship by faith in Jesus Christ, not by joining an organization....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” (JB).

1 John 1:3 — “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have *fellowship* with us; and indeed our *fellowship* is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

- Here and in *Acts 2:42*, the NEB translates *koinonia* 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” (JB).
- “It is [primarily] a relationship, not an activity” (JB).

Application: “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 [or personalities or methodologies] that makes us a community. Rather, it is the fact that we share a common life in Christ...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” (JB).

Key Passages:

- *1 Corinthians 12:13* — “We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body.” → The New Testament teaching about *koinonia* reminds us that while “God saves us as individuals, He immediately incorporates us into the body of Christ” (JB). We don’t get to pick our body/family — it’s all of grace that we even get to be in it in the first place; so we must graciously welcome, include, and assist every member around us!
- *Romans 12:5* — “Each member [of the body] belongs to all the others” (NIV). → “There is a mutual ownership of one another: I belong to you and you belong to me.” (JB) The concepts of “having each other’s back,” “leaving no one behind,” and “being the big brother/sister” find ready acceptance in a biblically informed idea of the church.
- *Romans 12:10* — “Be devoted to one another in love” (NIV). “Outdo one another in showing honor” (ESV). → Because of verse 5 (truth), therefore verse 10 (action).

Key Pictures:

- *A Body* — *1 Corinthians 12:25-26* — “The members [should] have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together.” → *Illustration:* When you stub your toe, your whole body responds!
- *A Family* — “Parents tend to so identify with our children that their hurts become our hurts. Often we feel that we would rather experience pain ourselves instead of having to watch our children suffer because we so identify with them. This

feeling is a natural response to the fact that they are a part of us...Paul would say that this identity with the hurts and pains of others should be just as true in the body of Christ as it is in our family relationships. In fact, he said it should be just as strong as is the empathy among the various parts of the physical body...The reason we don’t experience this family-like empathy with our suffering brothers and sisters in Christ is that we have not yet been fully gripped by the truth that we are in a community relationship with them” (JB).

Think About It:

- How does this foundational understanding of true community (cf. “Application” paragraph above) confront division and enhance unity?
- With this foundational understanding in mind, what sources of division would be appropriate, and what sources would violate such *koinonia*?
- According to this understanding of *koinonia*, what would inappropriate reasons be for leaving a church?
- How does disagreement actually highlight our “common life in Christ”?

2. Partnership

Socially — NT and classical Greek writers use *koinonia* to refer to a business partnership.

- Plato used this word to speak of the dissolution of a business partnership.
- Luke uses it to refer to the partnership of Peter, James, and John in the fishing business

Spiritually — partnership in Christian mission:

- Philemon 17 — Paul and Philemon
- Philippians 1:5 — Paul and the Philippians
- Galatians 2:9 — Paul and Peter, James, and John (against the legalists)

SHARING WITH

The added concept here is *mission* — “Whereas relationship describes believers as a community, partnership describes them as a community in action” (JB).

- “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.” (JB)
- “Likewise, the concept of a spiritual partnership implies that it is created with the objective of glorifying God....[How?] God is glorified when Christians grow in Christlikeness and when unbelievers are brought into His kingdom” (JB)—this is known as discipleship!

Application: “Biblical community, then, incorporates this idea of an active partnership in the promotion of the gospel and the building up of believers” (JB).

Think About It:

- How does this confront “formal” Christianity or “services-only” Christianity?
- Philemon, the Philippians, and the apostles would not have been Paul’s “partners” if they weren’t actively engaged in the church’s mission to glory God. What do modern day “partners” look like in the Christian community? Or, how can you and I “partner” with each other in Christian community this week?

Summary: Not only is “fellowship” NOT mere conversation in the lobby, but it is also not mere attendance at a local church’s service. Instead, *koinonia* “fellowship” begins (1) by recognizing and enjoying the reality of our real familial relationships with one another, and (2) by partnering with one another to accomplish the mission of our Father in pushing each other toward Jesus.

This is subjective *koinonia* — that is, it exists only inasmuch as we practice it (i.e., *New Oxford American Dictionary*: “based on or influenced by personal feelings, tastes, or opinions: ‘his views are highly subjective’ ... ‘there is always the danger of making a subjective judgment’. Contrasted with objective. Dependent on the mind or on an individual's perception for its existence.”). Whether we feel it or not, practice it or not, we do enjoy this *koinonia* with all believers in our local church and worldwide.

As with “sharing together,” the New Testament teaches two different sub-categories of “sharing with” in *koinonia*.

1. Communion

This “means communicating intimately, or sharing with one another on a close personal and spiritual level” (JB).

- “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” (JB) (cf. Isaiah 50:4).
- “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’” (JB).
- **Subject** — God’s Word → This is all we have to offer one another. Nothing else is supernatural and wise like God’s Word. Our words are not enough, but they can be used to “minister grace” (cf. Ephesians 4:29) when they reference the “Word of grace” (cf. Acts 20:32; 1 Peter 2:1-3)!
- **Object** — one another → We owe this to one another, because we are related! We cannot be stingy with grace—to do so would reveal ingratitude, arrogance, hypocrisy, and selfishness. The New Testament commands such “one another” ministry over 50 times, and its understanding of “one another” ministry is unfiltered—that is, it is not

qualified by personality, background, hygiene, appearance, emotional makeup, interests, etc. We must not play favorites (James 2:1-13)!

Acts 2:42 — People who had come from “every nation under heaven” (2:5) were no longer ignoring one another, divided against each other, or considering themselves above the other; instead, they were “devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the *fellowship*.” “They couldn’t get enough teaching, fellowship, and prayer. ... And as they individually learned from the apostles’ teaching, they shared with one another what they were learning” (JB).

Application: Within the church, several activities allow this communion to be enjoyed.

- Spiritual conversation (Romans 1:11-15; Colossians 1:28; 3:16; Ephesians 3:29)
- Openness/transparency/honesty [humility] (James 5:16; 4:6-10, 11-12 [confidentiality])
- Exhortation/confrontation (Hebrews 3:13; 10:24-25)
- Accountability (Galatians 6:1-2; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)

Think About It:

- How will our conversations with one another need to change if we want to mirror what God intended “true community” to look like?
- How can we create opportunities to enjoy Christian communion.

2. Sharing material possessions

This is one of the most common usages of *koinonia*, but also one of the most overlooked. It is also one of the clearest indicators of how well we have understood the objective nature of our community.

- Acts 2:44-45 — “And all who believed were together and had all things *in common*. And they were selling their

possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.” And, notice the result (v. 47)!

- Paul urges us to “*share* with God’s people who are in need” (Romans 12:13).
- 2 Corinthians 8:13-14 — “For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness.”
- In 2 Corinthians 9:13, he speaks of “your generosity in *sharing* with [others].”
- Philippians 4:14-17 — “Yet it was kind of you to *share* my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into *partnership* with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.”
- The writer of Hebrews urges us to “not forget to do good and to *share* with others” (13:16).

Application: “Sharing our possessions with others should be a natural consequence of our...[mutual] relationship and partnership” (JB).

Think About It:

- How does a view of community as primarily a mutual relationship in Christ among members of the same organism/family enable us to demonstrate concern for the needs of others in the body?¹ What truths about our “common relationship” are vital for us to keep in mind, in order to help us share?
- What Biblical passages specifically address this tangible concern as authenticating true Christian life?
- How does a local church practice this?

CONCLUSION

It is because we “share together” that we should “share with,” both spiritually and materially. We do share a common life; let us then share in that life! Is this not how our God works (Romans 8:32)?

RESOURCE

Jerry Bridges, *True Community* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2012).

“True Community” Midweek Connection series in Single Focus — singlefocusindy.org/true-community.

Lesson 14 in our Single Focus Sunday Morning Bible Study series through Philippians, “The Joy of Christian Benevolence” — singlefocusindy.org/philippians.

ENDNOTES

¹ **Explanation:** “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.

[Illustration:] 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.

[Illustration:] 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.

[Explanation:] 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” (Bridges, Jerry [2012-09-14]. *True Community: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia* [Kindle Locations 161-169]. Navpress. Kindle Edition).