

Revisiting the Concept of *Koinonia*

Dimensions of Pauline's Theology of Communion

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ABSTRACT: It is the aim of this article to sketch the dimensions of Pauline theology of *koinonia*. The Christian life is lived in the reality of participation in Christ's death, resurrection and suffering. And these are the elements of what could be called the vertical dimension of *koinonia* with Christ, at the individual and communal level. There is also a horizontal dimension of *koinonia* with Christ, namely the communion of believers in the Body of Christ, the Church. Any individual believer is to acknowledge his participation in the community of Christ. This is actually reminded anytime when the believers share the Eucharist. The common element that connects the two dimensions, vertical and horizontal, of *koinonia* with Christ, is His example, expressed powerfully in his *kenosis*. The church mirrors Christ's *kenosis* in every member's attitude towards each other, in the embrace of the other in the same way in which, lovingly and sacrificially, Christ embraced humanity, in his body, transforming it from within.

KEYWORDS: *koinonia*, participation, church, communion, *kenosis*

Introduction

It is well known in the scholarly world that the apostle Paul was one of the main thinkers that connected Christ event with the spiritual life of the individual Christian, and of the Church. Also, there is much written on the way in which Christ changed the entire paradigm of Paul in regard to the relationship of God with Israel and the people around Israel called generically, the Gentiles.

The thesis of this paper is that the concept of *koinonia*, as used in Pauline writings, defines, deeper than the word used, the theology of communion according to the thinking of Paul. His christologically grounded view of the Christian life, starting with the individual, and continuing with the communal level, is expressed in a powerful and still researchable way, by his concept of *koinonia*. The paper will argue that Paul does not limit his view only to the idea of *koinonia* as fellowship but also, he goes deeper, to the dimension of *koinonia* as participation, first at the vertical level, in and with Christ, and second, at the horizontal level, with one another as church, and as church in society.

Methodologically, this study will start with the most important dimension of *koinonia* as participation, namely, the *koinonia* with Christ. It will continue with the discussion about the way in which *koinonia* with Christ, defines and constitutes the koinonial relationships within the Church, and how this koinonial reality of the church is promoted in society as a whole.

***Koinonia* with Christ or the Vertical Dimension of Fellowship**

In one of his great writings, 1 Corinthians, Paul states what seems to be programmatic for his theology of fellowship:

Therefore, you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God who called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord is faithful (1 Cor. 1:7-9).

For Paul, this seems to be the first and determinant dimension of fellowship, the communion (κοινωνία) with Jesus Christ. And this is a reality that encompasses the entire life of the believer, from the beginning, starting with the call of God, to the end, the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. And this happens through the everyday life, while God keeps the believers strong.

Paul develops this concept of vital connection (Pink 1971, 74) of Christ with the entire Christian life, by using the term “in Christ.” The Christian life, says Paul, is to be lived in this reality named Christ. In his epistle to Galatians, Paul states this important identification of the Christian with Christ that actualizes (Neil 1976, 47) the death and resurrection of Christ:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2: 20)

Paul sees his own personal experience as an identification with Christ crucifixion in order to live the Christian life, in Christ resurrection (Witherington, 1994, 177; Johnson 2003, 202). This seems to be an important pattern in which Paul thinks the fellowship of the Christian with Christ, namely, first the action of Christ and then the appropriate answer of man, and the entering in a process of transformation in which we are being conformed with the εἰκὼν of Christ (Kim 2002, 172-173). And this is obvious in the way he continues to develop the idea of man’s identification with Christ event. The condition of the believer being “crucified with Christ” for Christ to “live in me,” is part of a process of participation that has also other coordinates.

Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life (Rom. 6: 3-4)

Paul understood baptism as our identification with Christ, identification in his death and resurrection as the consequence of Christ’s identification with us. Christ died for our sins and his death is the one in which we are baptized, in such a way that his death becomes our death (Bornkamm 1969, 76; Jewett 2003, 96). In order to emphasize this important aspect, Paul contrasts the two ways of living for human beings, namely, “in Adam” and “in Christ.” (Rom. 5: 12-20). Or in Barth’s words: “Adam is the ‘old’ subject, the EGO of the man in the world...Christ is the ‘new’ subject, the EGO of the coming world” (Barth 1933, 181; Strom 2000, 92).

For Paul, being “in Adam” means to live as an old self that is not crucified and therefore to live as a slave of sin (Rom. 6: 6), living according with the sinful nature (κατὰ σάρκα) (Rom. 8: 5a), and being subject to death (Rom. 8: 6a). In contrast, being “in Christ” means to live as an old self crucified with Christ (Rom. 6: 6), living according with the Spirit (κατὰ πνεῦμα) (Rom. 8: 5b), and being subject to life (Rom. 8: 6b).

In this context, Paul develops what was called “the interchange in Christ,” (Hooker 1990, 13) namely that “Christ became what we are in order that *in him*, we might become what he is” (Hooker 1990, 42). In Christ’s identification with what we are, Christ became a curse (Gal. 3: 13) and was made sin (2 Cor. 5: 21) (Hooker 1990, 13).

Another dimension of a believer's participation in Christ is the participation in Christ’s suffering. The model for the way of participating in Christ’s suffering is set in Philippians chapter 2, where Paul argues the deep identification of Christ in humanity by the way of *kenosis*.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on the cross (Phil. 2: 5-8).

For Christ, *kenosis* is not a renunciation to the divine prerogatives (Barth 1962, 62), rather is the embrace of human nature without renouncing the divine nature. And this meant for Him the acceptance of the plan of God (Dunn 1989, 117; Wright 1991, 84, 97), even though this plan means taking the image of a servant. This is the model, according to Paul's theology (Ladd 1974, 516). Like Christ, who was ontologically in the form (*μορφή*) of God and emptied himself and took the form of a slave and suffered, even the death on the cross, the Christian, who is now in Christ, is to enter this *kenotic* dimension, that means participation in Christ suffering (Phil. 3: 10-11).

For Paul to know God includes sharing Christ's suffering, next to participating in Christ's death and suffering (Fee 1999, 149; Bruce 1983, 116). This share in Christ's suffering is the mirroring of Christ's *kenosis* in Christian attitude. And this attitude is to be acknowledged as necessary and to be cultivated. Or in the words of Morna D. Hooker:

Yet it is also clearer than elsewhere that this idea of our participation is far from being automatic. Christ shares our humiliation, but if we are to share his glory, then we must share his humiliation (Hooker 1990, 47).

Speaking of this parallel between Christ and us we can conclude that, the *kenosis* of the Christian is to be oriented not only to his internal attitude towards God, rather also to his attitude towards the others. That means to participate in Christ suffering as part of the individual identification with Christ. To participate in Christ, according to Paul, to embrace a *kenotic* way of living (Ziesler 1983, 45), that will encompass not only the relationship with God but also, the relationships with the others in the Body of Christ (Banks 1994, 26). These considerations lead to the second section in which we will discuss the communal aspects of *koinonia* in Pauline theology.

***Koinonia* in the Body of Christ or the Horizontal Dimension of Fellowship**

In the first section, we discussed the way Paul sees the fellowship with Christ in its vertical dimension as participation in the death, resurrection and sufferings of Christ. In the next section, we will discuss the fellowship with Christ in its horizontal dimension, namely, the Body of Christ.

Paul sees the Church (*ἐκκλησία*) as being at the same time the body of Christ and also, one body in Christ (Ziesler 1983 57; Witherington 2003, 260). And this is so, because for Paul the corporeal dimension of Christian life, grounded in the individual's status of being in Christ, is important. Christ himself, in Paul thought, guarantees the balance between the individual and corporeal dimension of being in Christ (1 Cor. 12: 12-13, 27).

In Pauline's perspective, the unity of the Church is circumscribed by the experience of identification with Christ (in his death, resurrection and suffering), which has as consequence the integration in the community of those that experienced the same identification with Christ. The manifestation of the Body of Christ is the proclamation of Christ lordship upon the individuals, as "the Body of Christ is the real concretion before the Parousia of the universal sovereignty of Christ" (Kassemann, 1982, 68; Kummel 1974, 210). Being one in the Body of Christ is expressed in the very practice of Eucharist in the Church, an act that emphasizes the corporeality of being in Christ (Hooker 1993, 22).

Moreover, if identification with Christ's sufferings, for the individual was by the way of a *kenotic* attitude, this seems to be the case also in the horizontal interpersonal relationships in

the Body of Christ, the Church. In his epistle to Romans, Paul shows one of the elements of the *kenotic* attitude in regard with each other (Rom. 12: 3). Further, Paul own example is the illustration of this *kenotic* attitude that circumscribes the participation in Christ death, resurrection and suffering in regard to the other. In 2 Corinthians, Paul speaks of his suffering as being the way in which he became able to comfort others by the comfort he received from God (2 Cor. 1: 3-6).

The importance of the clarification regarding the precedence of suffering to glory, is underlined by the efforts and struggles of the first Christian communities to understand and to manage the apparent contradiction between the fact that they knew that are called to a life of victory in Christ, and still they were facing sufferings, defeats and failures provoked from outside (persecutions) and from inside (personal sins, church problems). And this could be seen also in other non-Pauline writings of the New Testament (Gundry 1993, 2-3).

Paul acknowledged, too, the social implications of *koinonia* with Christ and in Christ. Not only that Paul tried “to free *ekklesiai* from enslaving social patterns” (Strom 2000, 160), but for him, the new identity, of the individual Christian and of the church as community, circumscribed by Christ’s death and resurrection, constitute the new paradigm that challenges the societal ethos. As Christ was God and became human, was holy and became sin, was death and was resurrected, so, the church is formed by people that were dead and were resurrected with Christ (Eph. 2). Still, this is not the entire picture.

The new creation in Christ whose first fruits are the believers of the Body of Christ, is, in the world, a presence that brings a new alternative way of living, illustrating to the people of society the two kinds of people in the world, belonging to two ways of living, in “bondage and liberation, guilt and justification, estrangement and reconciliation, deformity and transformation” (Meeks 1983, 184). Even if the church was viewed in Paul’s times as a “religious club” (Ellis 1989, 148), the social impact of the church, was nevertheless not in the domain of recreation, but rather, in the moral and political realm. Still, for Paul the power, in the church, unlike in political Rome, is shared. In the words of Bruno Blumenfeld:

There is really the feeling that there is no substitute for Rome. Paul loves Rome. He falls within a compelling tradition of apologetics for Roman power. His interests are not revolutionary. Yet, his ends are different from those of other apologists of empire. Paul both concentrates and diffuses power. In Paul’s system, sharing does not dilute power. Everyone who participates in it actually *adds* to Christ; the more of them are the more absolute God’s rule (Blumenfeld 2001, 282).

Paul’s way of using the images coming from the societal structure and reinterpreting them according to the new paradigm is a positive way of critique of societal political structures and institutions (dictatorship, slavery, familial disorganization, citizenship). Paul deliberately and purposefully uses three terms in regard with Church’s relationship with God: city, household and people of God (Meeks 1993, 37). This was meant to draw the attention of the new model of society the Church exhibits in its internal relationships, having cosmic importance (Wink 1984, 89-96). Instead of oppression, in the church are mutual love and support, and even the release of slaves, instead of bitterness, there is a spirit of mutual forgiveness and acceptance, instead of egocentrism, and there is christocentrism, materialized in self-renunciation and sacrifice for the others.

Conclusion

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Yet, the *kenotic* attitude of the Church regards not only the internal relationships between its members, rather, it is expressed in the way in which the church embraces the society, being Christ body in the world, participating actively in Christ's own present ministry, through the Holy Spirit, of revealing the Father's heart and bringing many sons to glory. Only as such, the Church is that community through which the manifold wisdom of God is made known in the entire universe (Eph. 3: 10).

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