

Introduction

The word *koinwniva* (*koinônia*) occurs 20 times in the New Testament. It is translated as ‘fellowship,’ 12 times; ‘communion,’ 4 times; and once each as ‘communication,’ ‘distribution,’ ‘contribution,’ and ‘to communicate.’ The basic idea of the term, is best captured with the word ‘participation’ which is probably less vague for modern ears than the words ‘fellowship’ or ‘communion.’ When two parties have *koinônia*, they participate in each other’s experiences, works and offices.

Examining the usage of the word, we find the Scripture teaching us that believers have *koinônia* (1) with the Persons of the Triune God, especially with Christ, and (2) with one another: e.gs.

- 1 John 1:3—“That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have *fellowship* with us: and truly our *fellowship* is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ”;
- 1 Corinthians 10:16-17—“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the *communion* of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the *communion* of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread” (1 Cor 10:17);
- 2 Corinthians 13:14—“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the *communion* of the Holy Ghost, be with you all.”

Notice that these verses express both a vertical and a horizontal dimension of communion. “Communion of the Saints” refer to the horizontal dimension, but it is based on our union and communion with Christ.

But ‘communion of saints’ is seldom emphasised today, I believe, for two reasons: *Firstly*, individualism has so seriously infected the church that the for many modern Christians, being in a church means no more than gathering for worship once a week. The concept of communion in a covenant body has been eroded. *Secondly*, the term ‘fellowship’ has taken a weak modern connotation which clouds the original meaning of *koinônia*. Today when a Christian talks about ‘fellowship,’ he would probably be referring to a fraternal or camaraderie gathering. And so we talk about “fellowship groups” as groups that are gathered based on common interest or for the purpose of supporting one another in the faith. But the original meaning of *koinônia* is much richer, and it is the subject of this chapter of our Confession.

On the Union and Communion of the Body of Christ

26.1 *All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by His Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with Him in His grace, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory:¹ and, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other’s gifts and graces,² and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.³*

¹ 1 Jn 1:3; Eph 3:16–19; Jn 1:16; Eph 2:5–6; Phil. 3:10; Rom 6:5–6; 2 Tim 2:12; ² Eph 4:15–16; 1 Cor 12:7; 3:21–23; Col. 2:19; ³ 1 Thes 5:11, 14; Rom 1:11–12, 14; 1 Jn 3:16–18; Gal 6:10.

26.2 *Saints by profession are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their*

mutual edification;¹ as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offereth opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus.²

¹ Heb 10:24-25; Acts 2:42, 46; Isa 2:3; 1 Cor 11:20; ² Acts 2:44-45; 2Cor 8; 9; 1Jn 3:17; Acts 11:29-30.

These two paragraphs teach us three things, namely: (a) The basis of communion between saints, namely their union with Christ; (b) the benefits of union with Christ; and (c) the obligations arising from our union with Christ and with one another.

- a. Christians are covenantally and mystically united to Christ and so share in His suffering, death, resurrection, and glory.
 - i. We are *covenantally* united with Him as He is our Covenant Representative, and so we are “chosen... in him before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4; cf. Jn 17:2, 6); and so Christ lived on our behalf that His righteousness may be imputed on us so that by His active obedience we are made righteous in the sight of God (Rom 5:19); and Christ died on our behalf as a propitiation for our sins (Eph 5:2; 1 Jn 2:2, 4:10).
 - ii. We are *mystically* united with Christ in that His Spirit indwells and works in us: “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptised into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:12–13; cf. Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 6:11). This union is mystical only in the sense that it may be not be understood by the natural mind, but must be explained by the Scriptures. Scriptures moreover illustrate this union with the vine and the branches (Jn 15:5); the body and the head (Eph 4:15–16; 1 Cor 12:12); and husband and wife (Eph 5:31–32).
- b. The benefits of our union with Christ is that we have communion with Christ in that:
 - i. We receive all the benefits of His passive and active obedience, as our Covenant Head. We are “complete in him” (Col 2:10); we share His offices of prophet, priest and king (1 Jn 2:27; 1 Pet 2:5, 9 and Rev 3:21).
 - ii. We receive the sanctifying benefits of the indwelling of His Spirit: we have the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16; cf. Phil 2:5); and the likeness of Christ (1 Jn 3:2).
 - iii. All our experiences, sufferings and victories are reckoned to be those of Christ. Not only were our sins and guilt imputed on Christ on the Cross (Is 53:5–6; Col 2:14); but our sufferings are reckoned His sufferings, so we are call “partakers of Christ’s sufferings” (1 Pet 4:13); and when we suffer bodily for Christ’s sake, we bear “the marks of the Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal 6:17), and our afflictions may be called “the afflictions of Christ” (Col 1:24). Moreover, “we are more than conquerors through him that loved us” (Rom 8:37).
- c. Since believers are intimately united with Christ, it follows that they themselves are intimately united to one another. Note that we are not saying as Rome does, that individuals are united to the Church through the sacraments, and through the Church to Christ. Rather, individuals are united to Christ by the Holy Spirit, through effectual calling, and are therefore automatically members of the Body of Christ: “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptised into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit...” (1 Cor 12:12–27).

This unity is the basis of the communion of the saints one with another. Our Confession rightly notes that this unity is realised “in love.” We see this over and over again in the Scriptures (cf. 1 Jn 5:2; 1 Pet 1:22). It is most instructive, however, that the Apostle Paul writes:

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: ... [And] speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love (Eph 4:11–16)

What Paul is saying is that it is by divine appointment that the members in the church may be able to show love one to another beyond a superficial, mundane level because each have been given spiritual gifts to edify one another (cf. 1 Cor 3:21). In other words, the members in the body are dependant on one another; or our Confession puts it: “have communion in each other’s gifts and graces.” So intimate is this communion, that no member can suffer without others suffering with him and no member can rejoice, but that others should rejoice with him (1 Cor 12:26).

Such being the case, every member of the church have obligations towards other members in the church. For examples:

- We have the obligation to love one another (1 Jn 3:11, 23);
- to speak the truth to one another in love (Eph 4:15);
- to edify one another (1 Thes 5:11);
- to receive one another (Rom 15:7); to admonish one another (Rom 15:14; Col 3:16);
- to lay down our lives for the brethren (1 Jn 3:16);
- to help one having material needs (1 Jn 3:17);
- to consider one another, to provoke one another unto love and to good works (Heb 10:24);
- to exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest anyone be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin (Heb 3:13);
- to exhort one another pertaining to attendance at worship (Heb 10:25);
- to confess our faults one to another, and pray one for another (Jas 5:16);
- to prefer one another in honour (Rom 12:10);
- to forbear judging one another (Rom 14:13);
- to serve one another (Gal 5:13); to bear one another’s burden (Gal 6:2);
- to forbear one another in love (Eph 4:2; Col 3:13);
- to be kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another (Eph 4:32), etc

Note that these obligations are extended to all members of the Visible Universal Church, i.e., to all credible professing believers. So our Confession asserts: “Which communion, as God offereth opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus.” However, for pragmatic reasons, the exercise of these obligations would mostly be confined within the local assembly simply because that is where the opportunities are most frequently recognised. The Lord does not require us to

do the impossible by attempting to do good to every man at all times. Rather, as Paul puts it: “As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith” (Gal 6:10). In other words, good must be done whenever we have the opportunity or become aware of a need.

On the Errors Pertaining to the Doctrine of Communion

26.3 This communion which the saints have with Christ, doth not make them in any wise partakers of the substance of His Godhead; or to be equal with Christ in any respect: either of which to affirm is impious and blasphemous.¹ Nor doth their communion one with another, as saints, take away, or infringe the title or propriety which each man hath in his goods and possessions.²

¹ Col. 1:18–19; 1 Cor 8:6; Isa 42:8; 1 Tim 6:15–16; Ps 45:7; Heb 1:8–9; ² Ex 20:15; Eph 4:28; Acts 5:4

There are basically two errors pertaining to this doctrine.

- *Firstly*, the Eastern Orthodox Church teaches that the union between Christ and believers involves an inter-penetration of Christ’s being and ours. This concept, known as *theosis*, involves the deification of man. This whole idea is a heresy with no scriptural basis. In our union with Christ, we remain distinct from Christ and do not in any wise partake of His divinity. God alone “is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen.” (1 Tim 6:15–16).
- *Secondly*, the German Anabaptists in the 16th century taught that Christians do not have individual rights or possession of their property. This communistic idea, again, has no basis in Scripture. The “communion one with another, as saints, [do not] take away, or infringe the title or propriety which each man hath in his goods and possessions.” The 8th commandment of the Moral Law: “Thou shalt not steal” teaches us that respect for individual property rights is a perpetual, universal obligation. It may be asserted that in the early church, “all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need” (Acts 2:44–45).

However, to say that this implies that Christians must share their possession with one another in a kind of communistic ownership scheme is reading too much into the passage. Not only must it be noted that the sharing is only with the poor and not with everyone, but that this sharing was entirely voluntary. For, we find in the judgement of Ananias and Sapphira that they were not in fact required to sell their property, nor to distribute to the members of the church. Peter said: “Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God” (Acts 5:4). Peter was telling Ananias that the property belonged to him and when he sold it, the money belonged to him. He had a right to keep the whole sum or to keep what he needed, and give a part of it to the church if he so desired. However, to lie that he had sold the possession and that he was giving the whole amount to the church when in fact he had held back a part of the sum shows his hypocrisy and wickedness.

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