

**Series:** Vision Month 2022

**Title:** Fellowship

**Text:** John 17:21

**Date:** January 23, 2022

The New Testament authors used the Greek word *koinōnía* 17 times in their writings. Maybe you have heard of the word. Maybe you haven't. Knowing the original Greek term isn't what's important. Knowing the concept behind it is. The term is one that was often translated "fellowship" by English translators. It was used to highlight the connection and camaraderie that existed amongst Christ's earliest followers. The word was used in the first century to speak of relationships characterized by a spirit of sharing. *Koinōnía* converted a sense of a partnership, association, and communion. It meant "to have things in common."<sup>1</sup>

Considering the fragmented and polarized nature of our world, it is important to recapture the essence of *koinōnía*. We aren't called to conformity to some sort of unhealthy group think, but we are called to embody unity in the midst of diversity. God gets great glory when a spirit of fellowship is present amongst His people. Jesus Himself prayed for us, saying, "May they 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 you sent me" (John 17:21). In the midst of a divisive world, a loving and unified church can make a powerful impact.

### **1. The Basis of Fellowship**

The question before us is one of "how?" — namely, how can *koinōnía* be actualized. I believe one can discern the source of true fellowship by examining the way in which the term *koinōnía* is used in the New Testament. Let's consider three realities believers share in common. If we will stay focused on them, we will experience more and more *koinōnía*.

**Our Walk with Christ.** I once had a Christian mentor tell me something like this — "Whenever you see strong division in the body of Christ, you can be assured that someone is not walking with Christ." There are likely exceptions to my friend's statement, but the general idea is true. Schisms and relational breakdowns amongst believers are often the result of spiritual problems. On the flip side of that reality, one could say that a solid walk with Christ is the means of building unity. John supported such an idea. When writing his first letter to churches in Asia Minor, he said, "...our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). He also said, "If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). The word rendered "walk" in 1 John 1:7 is one that was famously used in the New Testament to speak of a faithful Christian lifestyle (Ephesians 4:1). According to John, church unity grows when individual members of the church walk with the Lord.

**The Truth of Christ.** Healthy Christian fellowship is intricately related to a healthy affection for God's Word. When we read about the early church, we find this to be true.

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<sup>1</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 405.

The book of Acts speaks of the first believers devoting “themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship” (Acts 2:42). The word rendered “teaching” is one that spoke of instruction or doctrine. Some discount the need for strong instruction from the Bible nowadays. They do so to the peril of the body of Christ. Think about how closely related teaching and fellowship were for the early church. Error and straying from God’s Word is often the biggest threat to Christian unity. If individual believers will retain a humble devotion to the truth of the Bible, corporate fellowship will thrive.

**The Mission of Christ.** A common cause has a way of rallying people together. Thinking about the way in which a compelling Go Fund Me campaign can raise funds from all sorts of people. For Christians, the rallying nature of a cause can be especially powerful. The church is not lacking on purpose. Prior to His ascension into heaven, Jesus provided a simple, succinct, and straightforward mission for His people (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8). When members of Christ’s body stay focused on that mission, unity and oneness are natural byproducts. Paul understood this to be true. When he wrote to the Philippians, he used the word *koinōnía* to speak of the way in which the church had a “partnership” in the gospel (Philippians 1:6). A church will likely stay together if it stays focused on the Great Commission.

## 2. The Behaviors of Fellowship

When I moved away for college, I encountered several new life experiences. One of them involved living with roommates. Previously I had shared a room with my brother for years, but I wasn’t fully prepared for living in one room with three other guys from differing towns, cultures, and personalities. Though things were challenging for me, one of my roommates had an especially tough time. The day he arrived for school was his very first day in the United States. He had moved thousands of miles away from his hometown to get an education.

One particular struggle my foreign friend experienced was related to the social orientation of his new homeland. Because he grew up in a collectivist or communal culture, he was shocked by the individualistic nature of the United States.

In some ways, culture is what it is. It can be good or bad, but much of what we find in culture is arbitrary. Christ transcends culture and intends to infiltrate it with His truth. At the same time, it sometimes threatens biblical virtues and values. It is at this point that my international roommate perhaps had a point regarding the way we live in America.

Though Americans are accustomed to living rather individualistic lives, Scripture calls us to experience a certain level of dependency on others. On numerous occasions, we see the phrase “one another” used to depict the responsibility Christians have toward other believers. Let’s consider the value of Christian fellowship through examining several of these “one another” statements found in the Bible.

**Love** — The most frequent one-another statement in Scripture is the call for believers to “love one another” (John 13:34-35; 15:12, 17; Romans 12:10, 13:8; Ephesians 4:12; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; 1 Peter 3:8, 4:8; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11, 12; 2 John 1:5). The word rendered “love” in passages that gave this instruction was the Greek word

agápē. It was unique in that it referred to a type of love that was different than the type of love expressed amongst family members, friends, or romantic lovers. The term referred to “an attitude of appreciation resulting from a conscious evaluation and choice.”<sup>2</sup> It depicted a kind regard for others driven by a willful decision to place one’s affections on that person. Agápē teaches us that the community of Christ should be a place in which people place greater value on others than self. Is this not what Jesus taught us in the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12)?

**Service** – True love always results in action. In reference to the body of Christ, service toward one another is perhaps the best evidence of agápē. When Jesus was on Earth, He provided a powerful object lesson to promote the importance of service amongst His church. He washed His disciples’ feet! In doing so, He engaged in a menial, yet practical, task that was undoubtedly appreciated by men who had dirty feet from walking through dusty streets with open-toed sandals. After performing the chore, Jesus announced, “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14). Our Lord’s instruction shouldn’t be perceived as a command for Christians to literally engage in foot washing. Instead, it should be regarded as an instruction for members of the community of Christ to serve other members by meeting practical needs as they arise.

**Edification** – In Romans 14:19, Paul told the church at Rome, “let us pursue what promotes peace and what builds up one another.” The word rendered “builds up” was used literally in the world of building construction in the first century. For the early church, it was used to speak of the way in which Christians were to spiritually enrich others. By using their spiritual gifts (Romans 12:6-8), individual believers were to place priority on the spiritual profit and advancement of their brothers and sisters in Christ.<sup>3</sup> May we be quick to put the attention on the soul needs of others.

**Instruct** – In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul expressed an expectation that believers “to instruct one another” (Romans 15:14). He shared a similar concern in his letters to both the Ephesians and Colossians (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). For the apostle, the local gathering of God’s people was to be a place of teaching and learning. The instruction of which Paul spoke was one that involved an element of warning and admonishing. It was the type of teaching that was aimed at human belief and behavior.<sup>4</sup> The name for “nouthetic” counseling has been derived from the Greek term Paul used in Romans 15:14. That branch of counseling aims to provide guidance for living by calling people to align their lives with the precepts of Scripture.<sup>5</sup> All in all, Paul’s words remind us that the local church provides believers with a platform for receiving the practical

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<sup>2</sup> Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 30.

<sup>3</sup> Zodhiates, 1031.

<sup>4</sup> Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 273.

<sup>5</sup> Benner & Hill, *The Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling*. (1999), 249.

admonishment and instruction they need for living a godly life within a dark world. Are you regularly gathering with a group of God's people for such instruction?

**Encourage** – When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, he told them twice to “encourage one another” (1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:11). Considering the nature of that church, the apostle's concern with encouragement is remarkable. By all accounts, the congregation was a good one. In fact, a cursory reading of the New Testament reveals that it was likely the healthiest of all of the recipients of apostolic letters. Consider Paul's commendation in 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10. The fact that encouragement was needed in such a vibrant congregation stands as a hallmark to the need of ongoing encouragement amongst the fellowship of God's people. The Greek word use of the activity in 1 Thessalonians 4:18 and 5:11 spoke of one comforting another. It literally meant “to come alongside.” The world can be a discouraging place. Believers need other believers to come alongside them for purposes of comfort and exhortation. Even when things are good in life, the darkness and depravity of fallen society makes Christian encouragement a dire necessity.

**Provoke** – In Hebrews 10:24, we read the following instruction – “And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works.” The word translated “provoke” was one that had negative connotations in some first-century contexts. It sometimes meant “to irritate” or “to annoy.” Used in a positive sense, it spoke of a positive stimulation toward good behavior, thought, feeling, or action.<sup>6</sup> The word was a compound word that literally meant “to bring to a point.” It was used of the act of one sharpening a tool. In reference to the fellowship of God's people, it conveyed the idea that believers are to sharpen each other spiritually, emotionally, and practically. A consideration of the context of the word in Hebrews 10:24 sheds light on the need for such activity. The author of Hebrews encouraged believers to sharpen one another because of “the day” of judgment that awaited all. The Lord's soon return, along with all of the cataclysmic events in society that will precede that return, should motivate God's people to mutually sharpen one another.

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<sup>6</sup> Zodhiates, 1122.