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The New Testament Concept of Fellowship

By F. E. MAYER

This article will suggest three basic principles for a discussion of the term *κοινωνία* as employed in the New Testament. In view of the significance of this term in the present movement toward Lutheran Union and even World Ecumenicity, the Faculty of Concordia Seminary at St. Louis, Mo., devoted several hours to a discussion of the term on the basis of guidelines prepared by a committee. The material offered in this article is to a very large extent the author's attempt to recapture the salient points of the faculty's discussion. The article will discuss, first, the constancy of Biblical terminology and the relativity of ecclesiastical terminology; second, the nature of *κοινωνία* as presented in the New Testament; and third, the manifestation of the New Testament fellowship in accord with *πίστις* and *ἀγάπη*.

I

Ecclesiastical terminology may prove to be not only a blessing, but also a bane. Frequently ecclesiastical terminology is invested with a false halo. It becomes such an intimate part of our ecclesiastical apparatus that we are in danger of equating the Scriptural with the ecclesiastical *usus loquendi* of certain terms, though they have little in common. The dogmatical term "Church Triumphant," for example, has no relation to the Scriptural concept *ἐκκλησία* since this term always denotes only the saints on earth—also in Heb. 12:23. Nevertheless as an ecclesiastical term the phrase "Church Triumphant" expresses beautifully the thoughts which are contained in other terms of the Scriptures. But it will lead to confusion, possibly even to erroneous views, if a Scriptural concept is interpreted in the light of the meaning with which this same word is invested in dogmatical terminology. After all, not the sound or the spelling of a word determines its meaning, but the *usus loquendi*.

It must furthermore be kept in mind that practically all dog-

matical terminology arises in controversy and is therefore so largely antithetical. Take the prepositions "in, with, under" used in connection with the Real Presence. As Luther intimates in the Smalcald Articles, they do not explain the positive aspect of the Real Presence. They were used primarily *against* the Roman transubstantiation and *against* the Reformed charge that the Lutherans teach consubstantiation.

And finally it must be noted that ecclesiastical terminology is always inadequate. No man-made terminology can ever express the mysteries of godliness, such as the doctrine of the Trinity. This term is only a partial statement of Scripture's revelation concerning the mystery of the Triune God. The twofold German ecclesiastical terminology of *Dreieinigkeit* and *Dreifaltigkeit* comes closer than the English term "Trinity." The other problem is that no term retains its original meaning. The term "nature" as used in the Christological controversy of the Early Church no longer conveys to the average person the original idea, and the term requires specific explanation.

Failure to observe these principles may result in making the ecclesiastical terminology the new authority in religion. Because of the loyalty to its historic Confessions the Lutheran Church may fall victim to the tendency which would elevate dogmatical terminology to the position of a second *principium cognoscendi*. Or in opposition to such a trend and in the attempt to retain the Bible as the sole source and norm of Christian doctrine one may be inclined to discard all ecclesiastical terminology. This will lead to doctrinal license and theological anarchy, which ultimately will destroy not only the historical continuity of the Christian Church, but also burden the Church with new and possibly anti-Scriptural ecclesiastical terminology.

One of the great problems confronting the Christian Church is the entire question of fellowship. The Lutherans of America are confronted with the strong desire for union and fellowship. All Lutheran synods have placed the problem of fellowship high on their agendas. World-wide fellowship of Lutherans was the basic *motif* in the meetings at Hannover. It is therefore of utmost significance that the partners in any discussion use the term fellowship in the same sense; otherwise they will constantly talk past each

other. There dare be no equation of the ecclesiastical and the Scriptural meaning of fellowship. The Biblical term expresses spiritual and transcendent truths which are not contained in the ecclesiastical terms pulpit, altar, prayer, synodical fellowship. Indeed it would be a pity if the New Testament concept of fellowship were reduced in its significance to convey no more than is expressed in the ecclesiastical term. The concept "fellowship" quite naturally plays a significant role in the present ecumenical movement, the World Council of Churches. But here the situation seems to be just the reverse from that in Lutheranism, inasmuch as many identify the outward fellowship with the New Testament concept of *κοινωνία*; in other words, they elevate a man-made fellowship to the glorious Spirit-wrought fellowship. Lutheran theology makes a clear distinction between the ecclesiastical and Scriptural significance of the term fellowship. This may at times require such actions as seem to be absolutely contradictory and lead non-Lutherans to speak of the enigmatic character of Lutheranism. It must therefore be the sincere endeavor of Lutherans to be very clear concerning the Biblical term *κοινωνία* in its relation to, and difference from, the dogmatical use of "fellowship." This implies that we must trace the historic origin and current relevance of the terms pulpit, altar, prayer fellowship. This implies especially that we re-study and re-evaluate the New Testament concept of *koinonia*. We must free this New Testament concept from all ecclesiastical encumbrances and carefully distinguish between the Biblical and the ecclesiastical use of the term "fellowship."

This is not a theoretical problem. Every Christian is confronted with it whenever he seriously considers the implication of the words "Our Father" in the Lord's Prayer. These words indicate clearly, as our Catechism points out, that all Christians pray not only for, but also with one another. The New Testament speaks of a prayer fellowship which transcends the prayer fellowship described in the ecclesiastical understanding of this term. Each in its respective sphere speaks of a fellowship, but from a different viewpoint and under different situations. Under given circumstances a Christian not only may, but also must pray with all Christians. And such a prayer is indeed a manifestation of the fellowship which embraces

all Christians in all denominations and even outside a denominational connection. Then, again, the Christian must restrict his prayer fellowship to such as are united with him in the profession of a commonly accepted basis of doctrinal agreement. There is a fellowship in both instances. But the former term has different connotations from the second. Unless this distinction is observed, confusion is bound to arise.

II

The term *κοινωνία* and its cognates may be defined as *Anteil nehmen*, *Anteil geben*, and *Anteil haben*.^{*} In its first use the term denotes that activity in which one shares with others the same blessings; it is a joint participation. The second meaning expresses the activity in which Christians share their blessings with others; it is a bounteous communication of one's gifts to others. The third definition presents *κοινωνία* more as an abstract concept, as a frame of mind in which two or more consider all things common (*κοινός*); where two or more hearts beat as one, Gal. 2:9.

The New Testament presents fellowship as a vertical and as a horizontal activity, i. e., both soteriological and sociological. In its vertical, or soteriological, aspect, *κοινωνία* is the beautiful communion and fellowship between the Christian and the Triune God. We have a fellowship with God the Father, with Christ the Son, and with the Holy Spirit. Keeping in mind the threefold definition of the term as used in the New Testament, the Christian has part in, and shares in, all the treasures which the Triune God has prepared for us. In particular, St. Paul frequently uses the term when he describes the share which the Christian has in Christ, 1 Cor. 1:9. Through faith the believer is *ἐν χριστῷ* and therefore shares in every phase of Christ's soteriological activity. We share in His innocent birth, His holy life, His ignominious death, His glorious resurrection. We share with Him His victory over our enemies. Yes, and we also share His stripes and bonds, "the fellowship of His sufferings" (Phil. 3:10), and therefore also the conformity of His glory. The fellowship of Christ, so beautifully described by

^{*} Hauck in G. Kittel, *Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, s. v., *κοινωνία* — Cf. A. C. Hardt, "Fellowship with God," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XV, 505; XVI, 433; 513.

St. John in his Gospel and Epistle, is the guarantee that we share in the Father's love and the Spirit's comforting work, 2 Cor. 13:14.

The fellowship described in the New Testament is a sharing in the Gospel. This means nothing less than that every Christian shares in all the treasures which the Gospel proclaims and offers to men. There is but one Christ, one love of God, one Gospel. The Christian possesses all, or he would not be a Christian at all. Every Christian, no matter what his denominational affiliation, has fellowship in the "entire Christ," for it is impossible to "parcel Christ" (*Christum stücken*, as Luther puts it). Faith always takes hold of the entire Christ, and the fellowship in its soteriological aspect is always perfect.

The New Testament concept of fellowship is also, and probably particularly so, a horizontal or sociological fellowship. "A deep and vital *koinonia* unites all Christians; for they have in common the *summum bonum* vainly sought by man-made religions . . . : one redemption, one forgiveness, one heritage, one Spirit, one Savior, one Father. 'We are *all* the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus! and, if children of our heavenly *Father*, then brothers and sisters of one another.'" * The intimate fellowship is also clearly portrayed in the Scriptural use of the term *ecclesia*, which denotes the number of believers, either as they are scattered throughout the world or as they are found at a particular place, 1 Cor. 1:2, and emphasizes the solidarity of all Christians as a fellowship, a commonwealth. Eph. 2:14 ff. The rich and meaningful concept *σῶμα τοῦ χριστοῦ* expresses the transcendent unity of the Church in spite of the great diversity. This one body of Christ transcends all earthly, social, racial, cultural, yes, also denominational distinctions. According to the New Testament every Christian shares with every other Christian the blessings which he enjoys. The New Testament fellowship crosses all denominational and all man-made lines of distinction. The middle wall or partition is completely torn down. Every Christian shares his blessings with the Christians in every denomination and in every part of the world. This truth dare not be minimized by the ecclesiastical concept of fellowship, expressed in such ecclesiastical terminology as pulpit, altar, and prayer fel-

* Hardt, *op. cit.*, XVI, 436.

lowship. Both have their very specific place in our Christian life, but in different spheres. The New Testament concept of fellowship places a tremendous responsibility on every Christian. He must be ready to share his treasures with others. The remarkable thing is that whenever we share our blessings, they increase in meaning and value, according to the German adage: *Geteilte Freude ist doppelte Freude*. God distributes His spiritual gifts differently during various historical periods and among various classes of men. We share in the rich hymnody of a previous age and to a large extent not of Lutheran origin. In fact, a great many of the blessings which we enjoy are ecumenical and catholic. Some Christians may excel in theological knowledge, others in such virtues as patience, Christian courage, missionary zeal, outstanding liberality. These gifts are the possession of the entire *Una Sancta*, and every member shares in every testimony of the Gospel, wherever witnessed, in the mission work for Christ in every part of the globe, in every God-pleasing exegetical and dogmatical contribution, no matter by whom offered, in short, in every victory for Christ made by any Christian, regardless of denominational connection. That is implied in the very term "fellowship." It means that all Christians share each other's joys and sorrows. We rejoice with those who gain conquests for Christ. We grieve with those who for the Gospel's sake must endure hardship.

This fellowship is a reality. No doubt the interest of maintaining intact all implications of pulpit, altar, prayer, synodical fellowship may sometimes minimize the significance of the transcendent fellowship described in the New Testament. The glory of the New Testament *κοινωνία* may escape us at times, because this fellowship is perceptible solely by faith (*sola fide percipibilis*). Only the eye of faith can see the nature of this fellowship; can understand that it is a sharing in the glorious work of Christ. Though it is being hidden from the eye of men, it is a tremendous reality.

This fellowship is indeed a precious gift of God. It is a fellowship which places us into the most intimate union with God. It binds people together in a closer fellowship than any social relationship, even the relationship of husband and wife. Therefore we are to treasure it, do everything to deepen it, and avoid everything in doctrine and life which might endanger its continuance.

III

Though the fellowship is perceptible only by faith, it must and does manifest itself. It will do so in accord 1) with faith and 2) with love.

1. The *koinonia* as a fellowship of believers is established solely and only by saving faith (*fides qua*). The fellowship of Christians with one another rests solely on the fellowship with Christ through faith. Every believer is united with Christ, and thus every child of God is also united with every other child of God. 1 John 1:3. The union and fellowship between all Christians is engendered by, and rests upon, the Gospel, the means of grace (*fides quae*). The faith which one believes, commonly known as the "Creed," is always the same intensively, but varies extensively, inasmuch as some appropriate more of the Gospel and reach a fuller understanding of the revealed truth than others. But every Christian, regardless of denominational affiliation, believes and accepts the essential, the fundamental articles of the Christian faith, and thereby is a member of the *ecclesia* and active in the fellowship of faith. (*Trigl.* 227, 58; 499; 691, 51—53.)

Since the spiritual fellowship is engendered only by the Gospel, the *fides quae*, the fellowship must aim to achieve two goals: a) agreement in, and confession of, the Gospel, and b) the rejection of all views, teachings, tendencies, and practices which will jeopardize the *fides qua*.

a) The New Testament fellowship demands that Christians do all in their power to agree in the confession of the Gospel, 1 Cor. 1:10 (*consensus de doctrina evangelii*, Augsb. Conf. VII). What does this imply? It seems quite evident that the Reformers never thought of the Gospel as a summary of isolated doctrinal statements, a series of dogmatical *loci*. Luther, in particular, speaks of the Gospel as an integral unit of the saving faith of which Christ is the center. This he expressed in the well-known preface to his commentary on Galatians:

Denn in meinem Herzen herrscht allein dieser Artikel, naemlich der Glaube an Christum, aus welchem, durch welchen und zu welchem bei Tag und bei Nacht alle meine theologischen Gedanken fließen und zurueckfließen. Dennoch empfinde ich, dass ich von der Weisheit, welche eine so grosse Hoehe, Breite und Tiefe hat,

nur einige schwache, arme Erstlinge und gleichsam Broecklein ergriffen habe. (In my heart one article rules supreme; namely, faith in Christ Jesus. From this article, through this article, and returning to this article, all my theological thoughts by day and night proceed and return. Nevertheless, I feel that I have comprehended only a few small and weak elementary truths, just a few crumbs, of the glorious wisdom which has such height, width, and depth.)

It has often been said that the statement in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession allows for a very broad premise for synodical or denominational fellowship. The historical situation and the context indicate that this is not the point of Article VII. The antithesis is rather this: The Romanists argued that the unity of the Church consists in uniformity of ceremonies; the Lutherans maintained that *consensus de doctrina evangelii* is sufficient for unity. At first glance, this may appear to present a very broad and liberal basis for fellowship. And it is indeed liberal, i. e., evangelical, free from every form of legalism. But it is also very narrow. Intensively all Christians are in perfect unity of doctrine. But extensively the knowledge of the Gospel may and does vary in the individual Christians, within the various congregations, and in the several church bodies. We must constantly exercise care lest we view the Gospel as a summary of ten, fifty, or one hundred *loci*, neatly compartmentalized according to a system. The Gospel is, as Luther points out so beautifully, the message of Jesus Christ. It is impossible to make the *κoinωνία* dependent on an *a priori* fixed organic whole of Christian doctrine, consisting of a maximum or minimum number of dogmatical *loci*. Under a given circumstance, the Apostles' Creed may be sufficient, for it is indeed the entire doctrine of the Gospel. Under other conditions the seventeen doctrinal articles of the Augustana become an adequate summary of the doctrine of the Gospel. Or it may become necessary to formulate specific doctrines of the Gospel in such detail as was done in the Formula of Concord. To achieve agreement in the doctrine of the Gospel requires much more than the formal adoption of confessional statements and agreements in terminology. To achieve *consensus de doctrina evangelii* requires first of all an agreement in the center, heart, and core of the Gospel. Such agreement will strive to reach

out, like the ripples of a pool, until it covers every area of Christian faith and life. In the spirit of *κοινωνία* all will then speak the same language, 1 Cor. 1:10.

b) Because the New Testament *κοινωνία* is engendered solely by faith, and rests only on faith, Christian fellowship must reject all views, trends, or practices which in any way might jeopardize and ultimately destroy the faith of a *κοινωνικός*. Faith is engendered by, and rests solely upon, the Word of God. Any tampering with the Word of God may, and frequently does, destroy faith. Since Christ is the center of all Christian revelation and of all proclamation within the Christian Church, 1 Cor. 2:2-10, therefore any deviation from the Word, though it may appear non-essential, will ultimately strike at the very heart and center of the Gospel. The spiritual fellowship is so delicate that it cannot endure any deviation from Christ's Gospel. With Luther all Christians deplore the schisms and dissensions within the Christian Church. It is no easy matter to be separate from others, and even to be charged with separatism. Nevertheless, Luther is right when he maintains that only one thing counts; namely, to maintain the fellowship of the Spirit and Christ. For then it will do no harm if one is not in agreement with those who pervert the Word of God and thereby cause dissensions. He summarizes:

I would therefore rather that the errorists and the entire world separate from me than I should separate myself from Christ, so that He become my enemy. This would be the case if I would depart from His clear Word and follow vain dreams. The One Christ is more significant to me than untold unities in love. (*Der eine (ihesus) Christus ist mir groesser als unzaehlig viel Einheiten in der Liebe.* St. Louis, IX: 727.)

Commenting on the admonition to fight valiantly in our struggle against our great spiritual enemies (Eph. 6:12), Luther points to the difficulty which this raises in the Christian's life. No one wants to lose his life. But much greater than one's life is the treasure of the Gospel. This we must fight to obtain and retain at all odds. The world and the devil suggest that it is the Christian's highest goal to retain Christian love even if he must yield in matters of doctrine. Luther answers very positively:

No, my dear man, I want no peace and unity on account of which one loses the Word of God; for then eternal life and everything would be lost. Here we dare not yield in the least point. We can yield solely and only to the Word of God. The Word and the Christian doctrine are given in order to effect Christian unity and fellowship. Where this is obtained, everything else will follow in good order; where there is no spiritual unity, there is no other kind of unity either. Please do not talk to me of love and friendship, which will play havoc (*periclitatur*) with the Word of God or faith. For we are no longer concerned with love, but with the Word of God, which brings eternal life, God's grace, and all the heavenly treasures. (Mir nicht des Friedens und der Einigkeit, darueber man Gottes Wort verliert, denn damit waere schon das ewige Leben und alles verloren. IX: 831.)

Luther's attitude toward Zwingli at Marburg has often been criticized as unnecessarily severe and even separatistic or schismatic. True, a person may remain in the fellowship of the Holy Christian Church even if he denies the doctrine of the Real Presence. However, it must be kept in mind that a denial of the Real Presence when predicated on rationalistic arguments or Nestorian aberrations, may ultimately lead, as Luther pointed out, to the loss of Christ's redemptive work. The same is true of every doctrinal deviation, though it may at first appear rather insignificant, for it may ultimately lead to a denial of the heart of the Christian Gospel and actually destroy the faith and fellowship which is predicated on faith. Therefore, Christian fellowship will manifest itself both in stating the Christian faith fully in accord with the Gospel and in rejecting all errors which endanger the faith.

2. All Christians are united in faith, share one and the same Christ, and walk together in a common way to a common goal. It is a glorious soteriological fellowship. But all are also bound together in the most intimate sociological fellowship on earth. Therefore this fellowship will always manifest itself in love. The Christian is constantly confronted with the question: How can my fellowship which, on the one hand, is according to faith and dare not deny any truth of God's Word, manifest itself, on the other hand, in accordance with ἀγάπη? There are three spheres in particular where fellowship becomes active according to love.

In the first place the New Testament encourages us to maintain and to enrich all the existing outward manifestations of fellowships which presuppose and are based on a common confession. For that reason we deeply cherish the fellowship in our local congregations as we regularly join with fellow Christians in a common confession of our faith and in the mutual enterprise of lovingly helping each other. We prize highly the fellowship existing in our synodical affiliations, for there we enjoy the fellowship which unites men in a joint confession and a united endeavor to build Christ's Church. We must do all within our power to maintain and to deepen this fellowship.

Secondly, the New Testament fellowship will manifest itself in every endeavor to expand outward manifestations of the fellowship. It is, of course, deplorable that we frequently restrict the term "fellowship" largely to its ecclesiastical definition, so that we associate the term almost exclusively with synodical fellowship. It must be kept in mind that the synodical fellowship refers to a human organization. To view fellowship only organizationally or to use the term "fellowship" only in its ecclesiastical sense is missing the depth and beauty of the New Testament concept of fellowship. If we would maintain both — the Biblical and the ecclesiastical definition of fellowship — we must observe closely Luther's very fine distinction between the nature of faith and of love. He states that the former is very narrow, the latter, however, very wide. It is love's nature to bear and to forgive, and it can do so even at the risk of being deceived, because it will thereby not lose Christ. In the Letter to the Galatians the Apostle Paul gives us a good pattern how the New Testament *κοινωνία* will manifest itself in a love that goes all out for the brother, even the weak and erring brother — a love which, however, will not yield one inch to the Judaizing teachers. Toward the Bohemians, Luther was extremely charitable and long-suffering, toward Zwingli he was almost adamant. Love is kind toward all, but it will not tolerate any dissimulation (Gal. 2:11 ff.). Love is tolerant and long-suffering, but intolerant of error, since any error may jeopardize someone's faith and become a *σκάνδαλον* to my brother. This deep concern for the brother's faith — and this includes every brother in the fellowship regardless of denominational affiliation — may at times compel

such actions as appear to issue from loveless intolerance. Luther states this paradoxical situation in his comments on Gal. 5:9 as follows:

The doctrine must remain a continuous and unbroken circle in which there can be no fissure or break. As soon as the smallest crack occurs, the circle is no longer whole. What does it benefit the Jews to believe in one God, to believe many other articles, to accept the entire Scriptures, when they deny Christ? Therefore who sins against one is guilty of all. We certainly are ready to keep peace with everybody and to show our love to them. Just so that they will let the doctrine of the Gospel remain whole and entire. If we cannot attain this, then they expect us to love them in vain. Cursed is that love which is maintained to the detriment of the doctrine of the faith, to which everything must yield: love, the Apostles, and even angels from heaven (St. Louis, IX: 645).

It is the very nature of love that it will not countenance a doctrinal situation in which a child of God runs the risk of losing his faith. On the contrary, love toward the fellow Christian demands an unqualified confession of the truth.

The New Testament *κοινωνία* will manifest itself in accord with love, lastly, by a spirit of true humility, "doctrinal" humility. Certainty of the doctrine is a God-required prerequisite of the pastor; in fact, certainty is the very nature of faith. Nevertheless, every Christian teacher in the Church as well as the layman in the pew has the old Adam, who leans toward doctrinal complacency, toward a false doctrinal security, and at times toward doctrinal arrogance. There is always the danger of falling into a *Lebrgerechtigkeit* which is equally as ugly and equally as disastrous as *Werkgerechtigkeit*. True humility will say with Dr. Walther:

"We do not belong to those who believe that their knowledge requires no expansion nor correction." (Wir gehoeren nicht zu denen, welche meinen, dass ihre Erkenntnis keiner Erweiterung und Berichtigung beduerfe. Walther, *Lutheraner*, XIII, 1. Cf. Western Distr., 1867, 31, Cp. Luther: Preface to Galatians, IX: 8, quoted above.)

After all, as great a theologian as Martin Luther had gathered but a few crumbs of the article of Christ, which is so rich, so deep, so all-embracing, that throughout eternity it will be our delight to

study the marvelous depth of God's mysterious being. In the New Testament *κοινωνία* the elder shares the simple faith of the child; the learned theologian in the remarkable insights of the humble peasant; the successful pastor in the victory of the experienced Christian in the pew; yes, and more often than may appear, the orthodox theologian not only gives to, but also receives from, a heterodox teacher some spiritual gift. This is the glory of the New Testament fellowship, that every Christian shares in all humility, but also in deep gratitude the manifold blessings of all.

Christian fellowship will always manifest itself in accord with *πίστις* and *ἀγάπη*; according to faith in "Aengstlichkeit um die reine Lehre" and according to love in "weltumfassender Liebe." In matters of doctrine and faith we must have an extremely narrow and keen conscience. In matters of love we must be broad and wide, in fact so broad that our love will embrace the entire world. This is the difficult but blessed paradox of *κοινωνία*.

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