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Ekklesia and Koinonia¹

AN ESSAY IN UNDERSTANDING

"BEING a Christian," it has been said by Dr. John Baillie, "means both believing and belonging." By this I understand Dr. Baillie to mean, "belonging" not only to Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Saviour, but also to one another as fellow-members of His Body—the Church. The idea is one of those commonplaces which we can never afford to allow to lie "bedridden in the dormitory of the soul" (to use Coleridge's phrase). This truth is the indispensable corrective to every form of unchristian individualism which claims to follow Christ and yet wilfully sits loose to church connections. Yet even if we accept the truth that as Christians we belong to one another, it is doubtful whether we are always alive to the variety of the ways in which it is possible for men to belong to one another in Christ. No doubt there are many grounds for this; but one reason at least, in my judgment, was anticipated by William James in his famous *Talks to Teachers*, when he called attention to the importance of language. "When people are at loggerheads about the interpretation of a fact, it usually shows that they have too few heads of classification to apperceive by; for, as a general thing, the fact of such a dispute is enough to show that neither one of their rival interpretations is a perfect fit." Is there any important fact about whose interpretation Christian men of equal conscientiousness are more at loggerheads today than the fact of the Church? Certainly there can hardly be any which so perplexes the average Christian as he contemplates the bewildering variety of churchmanship which he sees around him. It might be argued with some plausibility that this very variety points to the infinite wealth of meaning hidden in the word "Church"—that word which Thomas Carlyle described as "richer than Golconda and the treasures of the world." Yet this argument would be more convincing if we were able to go on to show how it is that Christian bodies which are in many cases almost completely out of relation with one another seem to find little difficulty in according to one another—in some sense at least—the name of "Church." And, as the growth both of world-communications and of the Ecumenical Movement extends the range of the problem, so it lends urgency to the question whether there may not be something lacking in our terminology which needs attention. Have we—to use James's phrase

¹ Presidential Address to the Oxford Society of Historical Theology, 1954.

—in dealing with the Church, “too few heads of classification to apperceive by”? I am not sure. But I confess I have been sufficiently intrigued by the question to want to follow it up a little, and to enquire whether it might not be possible by a development in our terminology to seize the essential facts about the Church in a fresh and more fruitful way. Admittedly the prospect is not particularly hopeful. Can anybody today say anything fresh about the Church? The topic seems already to have been flogged to death. Yet the need is so pressing that, in the interests of mutual understanding, there may be room for some remarks which will, I trust, focus attention upon it from a new angle, and perhaps provoke a more searching examination of the subject by others.

To begin with, it is rather remarkable how modern this concern about the meaning of the word “church” seems to be. Our English term gives us no help, for its most likely derivation, according to the *O.E.D.*, is simply the adjective *kuriakon*, first found about the third century as applied to a building for Christian worship. I have seen it suggested by (I think) an Orthodox scholar that neither the Fathers nor the Schoolmen—not even St. Thomas Aquinas—have supplied us with any formal definition of the word “Church.” If that be true, one may perhaps conclude that in both East and West the fact of the Church was plain for all to see, and its meaning lay in its life. All the same, the circumstance is not a little surprising.

The name traditionally and universally used for the Christian Society is, of course, *Ekklesia*, in its Greek or Latin form. As to that, it is to be noted that in secular Hellenistic usage in early times an *ekklesia* was an *ad hoc* assembly of citizens summoned by a herald—in short, a kind of public meeting. The religious use of the term derives from the Septuagint where, from Deuteronomy onwards, it is invariably used to translate the Hebrew *Quahal*, meaning “the assembly of the congregation of Israel.” The alternative word “*Sunagoge*,” of approximately the same meaning as *ekklesia*, was generally used by the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew *Chedahh* (congregation or assembly); but *sunagoge* tended to be restricted in meaning to the local group, or the building in which it met for worship. *Ekklesia*, on the other hand, carried no such implied limitation, and this fact may well have been one of the reasons why this word (and not *sunagoge*) was normally used by Christians to describe the New Israel of God—the Christian Church. Moreover, *ekklesia* was already a familiar scriptural word for the congregation or people of God, and the fact that the term was not exclusively Jewish obviously enlarged its potential usefulness in the opening years of the Christian era.

In the New Testament the word *ekklesia* exhibits the same ambiguity which characterised the Hebrew term with which it was originally linked. That is to say, its application oscillates between the local congregation and the larger society to which it belongs. It

is true that, judged statistically, the narrower meaning largely predominates. Yet that is not the whole story, for some of the most important instances of its use are those which have a universal rather than a local reference. To quote T. M. Lindsay: "Out of the 110 times in which the word (*ekklesia*) occurs, no less than 100 do not contain this note of a widespread unity. In the overwhelming majority of cases the word 'church' denotes a local Christian society. St. Paul alone, if we can except the one instance in Matt. 16 ('upon this rock . . .'), uses the word in its universal application; and he does it in two Epistles only . . . both of them dating from his Roman captivity." "Nevertheless," adds Dr. Lindsay, "though it is true that we cannot point to a single use of the word 'church' in the earlier epistles which can undoubtedly be said to mean a universal Christian society, the thought of this unity of all believers run through them all."²

It is clear from this that the scriptural word *ekklesia*, as a name for the growing Christian community, had considerable advantages, in as much as it anchored the Church firmly to its Hebrew antecedents, while at the same time it permitted easy contact with the usage of the Hellenistic world. But it had one great disadvantage. It did not, and could not, single out, as another term might conceivably have done, the distinctive nature of the Church's life and work. The word was neutral in meaning; and this is important. For the outstanding fact about the Christian Church to which the New Testament bears witness is, that it was anything but neutral, and that it emerged at a definite point in history as a quite new and challenging kind of corporate entity. Dr. L. S. Thornton uses different terms but describes the same phenomenon when he says: "The Pauline descriptions of the Church as the body of Christ postulate the entrance into history of a new sociological principle, for which we can find no parallel."³ I say that the Church "emerged" in history, but it would be more accurate to say that it was thrust into history, for the picture given to us by the Book of Acts is that of a group of people who were initially very far from seeking to establish themselves as a distinctive community. In fact, they became such only through a series of significant events which finally made apparent both to the world at large and to Christians themselves that they *were* a new society, and not simply a modified form of an old one. In so far, therefore, as the traditional term *ekklesia* tended to disguise this new fact, and to veil the issues involved in the rise of the Christian Church as a distinct entity, it can hardly be judged to have been wholly satisfactory as a name for the new community, however useful it may have been in the special circumstances of the ancient world. In saying this, I am not wishing in the least to beg the question how far the Christian Church as

² *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries*, pp. 10-12.

³ *The Incarnate Lord*, p. 276.

the New Israel served itself heir to the privileges and responsibilities of the Old Covenant. That is a major issue whose importance everyone recognizes. But the action taken by official Judaism in violently repudiating the mission and claims of Jesus, and the forcible way in which it extruded His disciples from their place in the national church, established once and for all the fact that the *Christian ekklesia* was adjudged to have no reason for its existence unless it could claim a character and a mission of its own, however intimately it might be related to the Old Testament *ekklesia* of which it was the offspring. Judaism at any rate had no use for it. To that extent Marcion's insistence upon the essential newness of Christianity was valid, even although the Fathers rightly decided that his way of asserting that truth was erroneous. Perhaps we shall get nearest to the truth of the matter if we recognize the distinction which Dr. Rowley draws between Judaism as an official body, and the Scriptures of which Judaism was the trustee: "For"—to quote Rowley—"if the New Testament looks back to the Old which preceded it, the Old looks forward to something which should follow it, and that something is not post-biblical Judaism."⁴ The element of newness in the Christian Church is actually implicit in the sovereign claim made by Jesus during his earthly life upon the undivided loyalty and obedience of his followers. The explicit meaning of this new allegiance in terms of the life of the Church has recently been expounded by Emil Brunner, who enumerates three main points at which the difference between Israel and the Christian *ekklesia* is revealed. First, the ceremonial and cultic laws of Judaism (such as circumcision and the regulations regarding food) were no longer authoritative for the Christian *ekklesia*; secondly, a clear distinction was now drawn between citizenship in a nation or race, and membership of a society based upon personal conviction; and thirdly, the *ekklesia* no longer regarded the civil legislation of the Old Testament as relevant to its life. In short, the Christian Church manifested what Brunner calls "a new dimension of life in the Holy Spirit,"⁵ and because of that it was committed to the task of working out its destiny along lines which were essentially new, and in the strictest sense unprecedented. It is important to notice, moreover, that the freedom from its Jewish matrix which the Christian Church claimed for itself was one not merely of fact but also of principle. As Bishop Newbigin has recently reminded us, St. Paul's antagonism to the acceptance of circumcision in the Christian Church was rooted in his conviction that such a step would have been a return to a former Jewish legalism from which Christ had set his people free. To quote Newbigin's words: "The tremendous struggle about circumcision was not a struggle about two alternative rites of initiation into the people of God. It was a struggle

⁴ *The Unity of the Bible*, p. 94.

⁵ *The Misunderstanding of the Church*, pp. 20f.

about the fundamental principles upon which that people is constituted."⁶

It is at this point, I suggest, that the question of terminology becomes important, for the New Testament makes use of another word to describe the early Christian community, which, unlike *ekklesia*, does tell us something about what the Church was aspiring to be: I mean, the term *koinonia*. Friedrich Hauck's essay on this word shows that the fundamental meaning of *koinonos* and its cognates in Greek writers generally was that of *sharing*, in the sense both of "having a share in" and, more rarely, of "giving a share to."⁷ In particular, *koinonia* was used to describe an intimate personal relationship such as that realized in friendship, or, deeper still, in marriage. It was characteristic of the Greeks that they did not hesitate to carry over this idea of a sharing of life into the sphere of religion, and to postulate a *koinonia* between the deity and men through various media such as sacramental meals and the like. The Septuagint usage, on the other hand, differed from this in two significant respects. First, the root meaning of the corresponding Hebrew word *Chabar* is not to share, but to unite or bind, as, for example, when Jehoshaphat of Judah and Ahaziah of Israel united in a joint undertaking to send ships to Spain (2 Chron. xx. 35). The notion apparently approximated to that of a covenant or binding agreement. Secondly, it seems that neither of the terms *Chabar* and *Koinonia* was ever used in the Old Testament of the religious relationship. In contrast to the Greeks, the pious Israelite thought of himself in relation to God not as an associate (*Chaber*), but as a servant (*Hebed*). Even though the sacrificial use of blood was thought to restore God's people to fellowship with Him, yet the word *koinonia* was not used in that context. To quote Hauck: "The theological consciousness shrank from defining what was experimentally apprehended." At first sight, this attitude might seem to conflict with the evidence which the Old Testament provides of the close and friendly relationship which God extends to His people. Nevertheless, the contradiction is more apparent than real, for the Old Testament uniformly views the relation of men to God against the background of the Divine holiness, which imparts to it a feeling-tone of a very special kind. It insistently rebukes any want of humility, or any disposition to presume, on the part of sinful man in the presence of his Maker. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him, and He will show them His covenant" (Ps. xxv. 14).

With this in mind, it is the more suggestive that, in the New Testament, there is a notable change of temper, so that both the idea of fellowship with God, and the corresponding term *koinonia* acquire a fresh depth of meaning. We owe this development largely

⁶ *The Household of God*, p. 36.

⁷ *Theologisches Wörterbuch des Neuen Testaments*.

to the Apostle Paul, for it is one of the main characteristics of his teaching and work; but there is reason to think that he seized upon and interpreted more deeply than others a feature of the life of the early Christian community which distinguished it from the very beginning. It was, of course, implicit in the whole ministry of Jesus, and was clearly expressed in the words to His disciples which are recorded in the fourth Gospel: "Henceforth I call you not servants . . . but I have called you friends" (*John* xv. 15). St. Luke tells us that the earliest converts "continued stedfastly in the Apostles' teaching and fellowship (*koinonia*), in the breaking of bread and the prayers" (*Acts* ii. 42). Armitage Robinson points out that this is the first description given us of the newly-baptized converts as a body after Pentecost, and he deprecates the assumption that the phrase "the breaking of bread and the prayers" is an exhaustive explanation of the meaning of the word *koinonia*. "The fellowship was exemplified no doubt in these acts; but it was wider than any of its special manifestations: it was the unity and membership in which the whole Body was constituted and maintained."⁸ That this is a true reading of the situation is confirmed by the remarkable exhibition of practical generosity which the members of the Early Church gave to their poorer brethren. This has sometimes been crudely described as an early experiment in Christian Communism; but it was actually a spontaneous exhibition of the sense of brotherhood which animated the Christian *koinonia* in its earliest days. This consciousness of sharing in a common life is, as I have said, powerfully present in St. Paul, who imports a very rich content into the verb *koinonein* in its various forms. To him, also, the giving of help to the poor brethren at Jerusalem is a form of *koinonia* (*Rom.* xii. 13). But in his view the term represents supremely the religious fellowship of believers with their Lord, and so, by derivation from Him, with one another—a fellowship which expresses itself in many and varied forms, but which does not exhaust itself in any or all of them. Having in mind the characteristic Old Testament attitude to which I have already referred, it is instructive to note—as Hauck says—that St. Paul runs true to form in not speaking of a direct and unmediated fellowship with God. For him, the fellowship which Christians enjoy with God is one which is created and sustained for them by Jesus Christ. It is a holy fellowship, not in the sense that its members were morally superior persons, but that they were publicly committed to give unqualified allegiance to Jesus Christ. The *koinonia* is the fruit of His work on their behalf, and of His alone. This is expressed with particular force in the many words which St. Paul uses to describe the believer's relationship to Christ which are compounded with the preposition "with" (*sun*). The Christian lives *with* Christ (*Rom.* vi. 8) and suffers *with* him (*Rom.* viii. 17); he is crucified, dies and

⁸ *H.D.B.*, I.460.

is buried *with Christ* (*Rom. vi. 6*, and *Col. ii. 12*); he is raised *with Christ* (*Col. ii. 12*), and is made alive *with him* (*Col. ii. 13*). Nor is this a relationship which is peculiar to specially distinguished souls. It is the gift of the gospel to all who will accept it by faith. They are "called into the *koinonia*" of the Son of God (*1 Cor. i. 9*). Being so called, they are made members one of another, as equally deriving their life from their one Lord, whose "Body" they are. Paul's summary title for this new life is (you will remember) life "in Christ" (*'En Christo*)—as to which Anderson Scott says: "The Church in fact is his (Christ's) body in the sense that in and through it he is continuously realizing himself. . . . When we see how St. Paul equated the community and its Head, we can see how being 'in Christ,' 'baptized into Christ' and 'putting on Christ' were intelligible forms of expressing the deepest meaning of incorporation into the community."⁹

This sharing of life with Christ and with one another is realized by Christians in its intensest form at the Lord's Table. "The cup of blessing which we bless" (says St. Paul, *1 Cor. x.*) "is it not a participation (*koinonia*) in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break is it not a participation (*koinonia*) in the body of Christ"? The material elements become in some unexplained way the instrument of a relationship with the Living Christ which is at once individual and corporate. For, as St. Paul's next words show, it is an essential part of the significance of the rite that its action binds those who participate not only to Christ but, through Him also to one another. (Cp. *R.S.V.* "because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the same loaf" (*1 Cor. x. 17*). We may note in passing that a similar thought, though differently expressed, occurs in *1 John* when, in speaking about the gift of eternal life which is the theme of the Gospel, the writer says: "Our *koinonia* is with the Father and with his son Jesus Christ . . . if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have *koinonia* with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (*1 John i. 3, 7*).

To go more deeply into this would require an exposition of New Testament theology beyond my present purpose. It is enough to state simply that this "life-in-community," as we may call it, was for St. Paul and the rest essentially a supernatural fact. As such it is necessarily invisible, for it is "hid with Christ in God." But its reality was evidenced by the rapidly increasing spread of the Christian Movement in the world. The Christian groups springing up here and there in Asia Minor and elsewhere are (says St. Paul) living epistles, which are eloquent of Christ's continuing presence and the power of his Spirit at work in them. Thus the *Koinonia of the Holy Spirit* ranks in St. Paul's eyes with the *Charis of the Lord Jesus Christ* and the *Agape of God* as unitedly constituting

⁹ *Christianity According to St. Paul*, p. 157.

the supreme blessing which the apostle desires for his converts (2 Cor. xiii. 14). It matters little for our present purpose whether the phrase "*koinonia of the Holy Spirit*" in this benediction is taken as an objective or as a subjective genitive for, as Winstanley says, "the source behind, the efficient cause of the manifestation, corporate or otherwise, is always the Spirit of God in the last resort : the Spirit that interacts with the human spirit, making realizable both communion with God and fellow-membership with man."¹⁰

I have been bound to dwell at some length on this aspect of New Testament teaching at the risk of boring you, not because I suppose that these facts are new to you, but because their recall is necessary in order to illustrate the main point which I am trying to make. Here was a society which began its career in the world as a Fellowship—a *koinonia*—in fact as well as in name. It was not a perfect fellowship by any means, as may be easily seen from the pages of the New Testament. Yet it is not for nothing that love (*agape*) is set forth as the first of the "Fruits of the Spirit" (Gal. v. 22). *Koinonia* was not a merely superficial or accidental attribute of the new Christian Society. It was something in which the life of the community revealed its innermost essence; and its fundamental importance was proclaimed every time Christian believers engaged together in the central act of their worship. They were a *koinonia*, not in the sense of a voluntary association of like-minded individuals, but by virtue of the creative influence of the Holy Spirit continuously at work, uniting them as persons to the Living Christ and to one another in Him. This activity was essentially something new. It pointed to the working of the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ in a new dimension; and therefore, if we describe the Church of the New Testament as the "*Ekklesia of God*" in the sense of a society which inherited and carried forward elements from the ancient People of God in the Old Testament, must we not also recognize it as the "*Koinonia of the Spirit*," that is to say, a society whose essential relationship with God is both new in itself, and creative of a new relationship between its own members? In other words, the Christian Church was from the outset both an *ekklesia* and a *koinonia*; indeed, I would make bold to say that there is a sense in which it was originally a *koinonia* before it was an *ekklesia*. It had to find itself as a corporate entity of a distinctive kind before it could safely take up and use the heritage of the past which, in its own way, was equally necessary to its life.

I have not the knowledge to carry this argument further, and to enquire how far the life of the post-apostolic church continued to exhibit the pattern not only of an *ekklesia* but also of a *koinonia*. I think it would be very instructive if such an enquiry could be made, although I fear the data would probably be scanty. It has often been remarked that the early Church Fathers showed com-

¹⁰ *Spirit in the New Testament*, p. 82.

paratively little interest in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit until at any rate the latter half of the fourth century, and that even then the subject was treated rather as an after-thought. The usual explanation offered for this fact is that the Church had necessarily to give priority to the working out of the doctrines of God, and of the Person of Christ, before it could grasp and expound the special place of the Holy Spirit in the Christian Faith. No doubt that is true. Yet I have sometimes wondered whether another reason may not have been that the Early Church failed adequately to realize that it was called into being as the "*Koinonia of the Spirit*," and that its very life depended upon recognizing and implementing that fact. When I have said this, I confess to some misgivings, for was it not the warmth of the early Christian brotherhood which—in spite of ecclesiastical controversies—made the deepest impression upon the hard Roman world? Perhaps this is another case where Christian experience outran the Church's theological apprehension of it. I have not, as I say, enough knowledge of patristic literature to test the point; but such scanty enquiries as I have been able to make rather suggest that, as far as the word *koinonia* went, the term became fairly soon a technical label for the Eucharist,¹¹ and its more fundamental meaning as a description of the Church itself was not in the forefront of people's minds. If that was the case, then it would be only what one might expect if, in failing to grasp firmly the essential character of its own life as the *Koinonia of the Spirit*, the Church found difficulty in arriving at a satisfactory theological exposition of the Holy Spirit. Be that as it may, the divided Church of our day is in no position to pass judgment upon the Martyr Church of the first three centuries in the matter of *koinonia*. What we can, I think, say with truth is, that it cannot have been an accident that the age which subsequently witnessed the break-up of the old ecclesiastical order under the impact of the Reformation, was also the age in which many new forms of Christian *Koinonia* came into being, and when, as Dr. G. F. Nuttall has shown, men began once more to think freely and fully about the nature of the Holy Spirit, and His significance for the life of the Church.¹²

You will perceive that I have raised more questions than I find myself able to answer, and probably the best thing I can do, therefore, is to sit down. But before I do so, may I suggest two further points which are relevant to our situation today? First, I would ask: How far are we satisfied that Jesus entrusted Baptism and the Breaking of Bread to His disciples considered as an *ekklesia*, and how far may we suppose on the contrary that it was the *koinonia* which he had specially in mind? We are all exercised today about the conditions under which these rites shall be observed by the *ekklesia*. I sometimes wonder whether we are not morbidly

¹¹ Just as is the case with the word "Communion" today.

¹² *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience*.

exercised on the matter. It seems to me that the Church of the New Testament enjoyed an enviable freedom in its use of the sacraments which is in refreshing contrast to our modern anxiety about them. Are we right in treating these observances as if they needed as it were our protection? Ought we not to think of them rather as being themselves instrumental to the *koinonia* of the Spirit—that is, helping to create and nurture that fellowship between Christ and His people which is the very essence of the Church? Do they not belong to the growing-edge of the Church—if I may so put it—as well as to its fully-established life? No doubt there will be a certain risk attached to this view. But ought we not to take it? I have seen the late Principal Oman quoted for the remark that Plato concerned himself mainly with safeguards, but Jesus wholly with venture. It is altogether right that the *Ekklesia* of God should concern itself with safeguards. But if the *Koinonia* of the Spirit does indeed stand for what is distinctively new in the Society created by Jesus, it will be an ill day for the Church if it allows the adventurous element to drop out of its life altogether; for it is largely by the adventurous element that the world is won for Christ. Mons. Ronald Knox has made the significant comment: “Christianity is a balance of doctrines, and not merely of doctrines but of emphases. You must not exaggerate in either direction or the balance is disturbed.”¹³ Is it possible that some of our difficulties today originate in the fact that the balance between *ekklesia* and *koinonia* has been too heavily weighted on the side of *ekklesia*, and that what we need now is a recovery of emphasis upon the *Koinonia* as a Spirit-guided community exercising its prescriptive freedom in all things under the Living Christ as its Head?

My second question would carry the same issue a little further. What kind of relationship do we envisage as existing between the Church as the *Ekklesia* of God and the Church as the *Koinonia* of the Spirit? Some kind of relationship there must be, since the essence of both lies in their prior relationship to Christ as both the Head of the Church, and the Presence in the midst of the two or three gathered in His Name. The evidence of the New Testament obliges us, as I have said, to see the Christian community emerging in history as a new kind of society brought into being through the creative action of God in the crucified and risen Christ. - Its distinctive character lay in its being a *koinonia* of believers united in Christ, and charged by Him with the duty of living as His witnesses in the spirit of obedience and brotherly love. But that was not all. From the very beginning the *koinonia* drew upon the heritage of the *ecclesia*, using it under the Spirit's guidance to develop the structure and the instruments necessary for its own life, and for carrying out its special commission in the world. Thus *koinonia* and *ekklesia* were, and are, twin aspects of the Church's life. Yet how

¹³ *Enthusiasm*, p. 580.

are they related to one another? What happens when their claims conflict? Is it permissible to consider the Church in its *ekklesia* aspect as ultimately a Koinonia of the Spirit which has been *organised* adequately for the service of its Lord? And if so, may not the character or pattern of its life *qua ekklesia* be variously and freely recognized without thereby denying the reality of that same life *qua koinonia*, wherever and however it may be found? I do not know. But, for myself, I desire no better expression of their mutual relationship than that unconsciously suggested in the words of the Bidding Prayer used in our own University Church of St. Mary's: "Ye shall pray for the Holy Catholic Church, that is, the whole congregation of Christian people dispersed throughout the world."

R. L. CHILD