

Can You Spell Koinonia?

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Philippians 2:1-4

Are any of you Spelling Bee fans? Every spring ESPN televises the Scripps-Howard national Spelling Bee. I'm sure some of you have seen it. We watch it at our place. It's an amazing spectacle. Brilliant middle school students from all over the country stand in front of a national audience and, one after another, they spell some of the hardest words you'll ever see. Words like: Haecceitas (heck-see-uh-tass, noun, Medieval Latin) Miarolitic (mee-uh-roe-litic, adjective, Italian-derived) Bewusstseinslage (buh-voos-tines-lahga, noun, German) Can you spell any of those words? I can't. These children get up and rattle them off. This year the winner of the Spelling Bee was an eighth grader from Texas named Karthik Nemmani. He faced one last word for the national championship, and that word was...koinonia, koinonia!?! That's not a hard word! I can spell that word! And you probably can too! If you grew up in the church that word was everywhere! You couldn't miss it! In a churchy town like Grand Rapids there is even a condo development up by 5 mile and the Beltline called Koinonia Woods. We Christians know this word, and we know it because it's one of Paul's favorites. He uses it in our passage "*Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any koinonia from the Spirit...then make my joy complete by being like-minded.*" It's a word Paul uses to describe Christian community. Here it's translated as 'common sharing.' In other places it's translated differently, but whenever Paul says koinonia he's talking about us. He's talking about the character of Christian community.

I think I first heard the word back in my youth group days, so back in the 80's. As I remember it being used back then, it was a word that leaders and speakers used to describe a kind of 'kum bah yah' closeness that was the youth group ideal. So the picture I got in my mind when someone said koinonia was a group of young people sitting arm in arm around a campfire, all of them swaying gently back and forth while they sang "It Only Takes a Spark." Koinonia evoked images of a group hug lines at Youth Unlimited conventions, where covenant children who were used to the ways of the frozen chosen would line up and embrace each other. It was a word that connoted the warm, fuzzy side of fellowship. So much so that I remember one of my seminary professors complaining about *koinonitis*. That was a word he used to describe that 'kum bah yah' closeness which he thought was too sentimental and not tough minded enough. He would have rather had us discussing Predestination and the Canons of Dort. I didn't mind a little sentimentality. In this cynical world a little sentimentality may be just what we need. Nevertheless, after studying Paul's use of the word this week, I have come to see that my old 1983 view of koinonia was insufficient. When Paul talks about koinonia in our passage and when he talks about it in the rest of his letters he means much more than kum bah yah closeness; he is describing a kind of community that is much more disciplined and intentional than a youth group hug line.

Last year the theologian David Bentley Hart wrote an article on koinonia. Bentley Hart had just published his own a translation of the New Testament. He talked about how the work of translation made him wrestle with the meaning of words in a deep way and one of the words that surprised him was koinonia. After studying its New Testament use, he concludes that when the early Christians talk about koinonia, they were not

talking about a warm, fuzzy feeling that Christian people have for each other, they were describing an intentional, disciplined community. To call a church to koinonia was to call them to a specific set of disciplines, habits and practices. To call a church to koinonia was to invoke a rule of life. Here's how Bentley Hart says it: *"I came to the conclusion that koinonia often refers to a precise set of practices within the early Christian communities, a special social arrangement that was integral to the new life in Christ. When, for instance, the Letter to the Hebrews instructs believers not to neglect koinonia, or the First Letter to Timothy exhorts them to become koinonikoi, this is no mere recommendation of personal generosity, but an invocation of a very specific form of communal life."*

I think Hart is right. When Paul mentions the koinonia of the Holy Spirit in verse 1, it is an intentional, disciplined communal life Paul has in mind. You can see that when you look at the kind of community practices that Paul describes in the verses we read, and you can see that when you look at the whole flow of Philippians up to this point. Paul opens this letter with a standard greeting and then gives thanks to God for the church in Philippi. What is he thankful about in particular? *"I thank God every time I remember you...because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now."* "I'm so thankful for your partnership!" says Paul. In the Greek, that word partnership is, you guessed it, koinonia. So Paul starts the letter off by saying, "Philippians, I am so thankful that you are a koinonia community!" Why? Because they are facing opposition. Paul describes the opposition he is facing in prison. Paul says that they will face opposition too.

And Paul says there is one tool that is the best when you are facing opposition from the world around you. Koinonia. When they are facing pressure from the people around them, it is their strong, disciplined, koinonia community that will help them to shine like stars in the universe. *"Stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith." (1:27) "Be like minded! Have the same love, being of one Spirit and one mind! Practice radical humility that considers others above yourselves (not equal, above!) Don't look to your own interests but look to the interests of others. Let your mindset be the servant mindset of Jesus who was willing to go to the cross for you!"* This is not 'kum bah yah' closeness. Koinonia community is an ordered, disciplined, intentional way of being together, and every time the New Testament used this word, the early church knew they were being called to an intentional, disciplined communal life.

Can we be specific about the kinds of disciplines and practices that went into a koinonia community? If you go through the rest of the New Testament and look at how the word is used, a picture emerges. I went through all the New Testament uses of koinonia this week and this picture emerges.

Three things. A koinonia community is a community of financial sharing. In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul talks about how the Macedonian churches have made a generous donation to the churches of Jerusalem in their time of need. Paul says that the Macedonian church "urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of *sharing* in this service to the Lord's people." That word for sharing is koinonia. When the Macedonians gave money they were practicing koinonia. In Romans 15:26 Paul tells the Roman church about how some of the churches were "pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem." In the Greek the word contribution is koinonian. And probably best known of all, in Acts 2:32, when Luke describes the Spirit of the early church, he says that they devoted themselves to koinonia community. And when he breaks out what their koinonia looked like he says that they "shared all things in common." The New Testament does not promote communism. It never denied the rights of private ownership, but there is no question that it was a community of radical sharing. The David

Bentley Hart article I mentioned earlier outlines that in some detail and I can share that with you if you're interested. But here's the bottom line, when Paul called them to be a koinonia community, the early church knew that had strong financial implications. I'm not trying to launch a giving campaign here. I have no specific fundraising agenda. I'm just telling you what this book says.

Second, a koinonia community is a community of shared suffering. I think that's an aspect of koinonia that's pretty clear in our passage. Paul describes the koinonia of the Spirit as having tenderness and compassion. Then when he wants to give a picture of the kind of tenderness and compassion he's talking about, he points to Jesus suffering on the cross. "Your mindset for each other should be like his, says Paul. The sacrificial part of koinonia shows up in Hebrews 13:16, "Do not forget to do good and to koinonia with others for with such sacrifices God is pleased." Koinonia is a sacrifice. It suffers for the community. Koinonia community is a community where people get close enough to each other to share their sufferings. There are all sorts of communities in this world where people get to know each other, but never close enough to know their sufferings. You know your neighbor pretty well. You know where she works. And you know her husband works at Steelcase. You know her son lives in Indianapolis. You know her well enough to give her a hug when you run into each other at the mall. But you don't know that her husband struggles with anxiety. You don't know that her son lost his job last year because of addiction. You don't know how lonely she is because she's been trying to keep up the appearance that everything is fine when it is not. Koinonia community gets close enough not only to know these things, but to share them. You are close enough so that when a person unloads her baggage on you, you can catch the baggage and help her carry it for a while. This kind of closeness doesn't just happen, especially in a larger church. This kind of closeness takes intention and practice.

Third, koinonia community is a participation in Christ. The power of this community does not come from the will and the skill of the participants. The power for koinonia comes from the love of God, in Jesus Christ our Lord that is poured into our midst by the power of the Holy Spirit. To be in a koinonia community is to be united together 'in Christ'. To be in a koinonia community is to partake in the life of the Holy Trinity. To live in a koinonia community is not like any other community the world can offer. That too is something you see in our passage. In verse one Paul parallels being part of the koinonia of the Holy Spirit with being united with Christ. *"If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ... If you have koinonia in the Spirit."* We are community because in love God picked up all of us loose branches and grafted us into the true vine, into Jesus. Now his sap flows through us. So it's more than human kindness that animates us! Another passage that really helps to see this side of koinonia: 1 Corinthians 10:16. Paul is talking about the Lord's Supper, and this is what he says: "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ. And is not the bread that break a participation in the body of Christ?" The word participation is koinonia. The bread is a koinonia in the body of Jesus. The wine is a koinonia in the blood of Jesus. The power of this community, the life of this community, the love of this community flows from Jesus.

We know this. On our own we do not have the resources to care for each other. But when we are united with Jesus at that font, when we are fed by Jesus at that table, when we meet Jesus in the preaching from this book, the koinonia of Christ flows into us and we become fruitful and productive in a way that goes far beyond us. Have any of you heard of Koinonia Farms? Koinonia Farms is a Christian community founded by Clarence Jordan in Americus, Georgia

way back in 1942. As the name suggests, it was an intentional community that tried to embody the New Testament idea of koinonia. They had Christ at the center, they worshipped together, they shared all things in common, and they suffered for one another. The suffering was real. Early on Jordan was determined that this would be a multi-racial community. Black and white and all shades in between worshipped and worked in their midst. Not everyone in Georgia liked that. This was the 40's and 50's in the south and the Klu Klux Klan actively came against Koinonia Farms. In 1957 a convoy of cars showed up at the farm demanding that they leave the area. When they refused, they began to experience real consequences. Their roadside produce market was bombed. People would drive by and fire shotguns at the house. The members of the community were excommunicated from the local Baptist church. The children of the community were harassed in the public schools. There was a boycott; the local community refused to buy any of the produce of their farm. Throughout this time the group kept partaking of their Lord through worship, they kept sharing all things in common, and they endured the suffering together – men and women, young and old, black white and brown, all one in Christ. Today the work of Koinonia Farms is remembered as a witness to the truth of the gospel. It is remembered as one of the places where the gospel of the Lord confronted the sin of racism. And it is remembered as the place where Habitat for Humanity started. Did you know that? From this disciplined, intentional community came a ministry that God has used to bless the poor all over the world. Such is the power and the joy of koinonia.

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