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WHAT IS COMMUNION AND WHEN IS IT FULL?

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The problem in 'full communion' has been present from the beginning. The World Council of Churches' 1991 statement, *The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling*, observes that the ecumenical movement has enabled churches to walk together in ways that allow them 'to recognize a certain degree of communion already existing between them.'¹ The 'certain degree' of communion is doubly indeterminate, for the Canberra statement goes on to note that 'churches have failed to draw the consequences for their life from the degree of communion they have already experienced and the agreements already achieved. They have remained satisfied to co-exist in division.'² If communion is present only to a certain degree, and if even this limited measure is lived out in divided co-existence, the significance of 'communion' remains elusive.

The Canberra statement identifies the elements of communion as the common confession of apostolic faith, a common sacramental life, a common recognition and reconciliation of members and ministries, and a common mission of witness to the gospel. *Full* communion is realized, says Canberra, when 'all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness. This full communion will be expressed on the local and universal levels through conciliar forms of life and action.'³ If *full* communion is realized when *all* the churches are in communion, and if the 'certain degree' of communion is lived out in forms of divided co-existence, the propriety of 'full communion' as a term to describe some formal relationships among some churches is problematic.

Little wonder, then, that O.C. Edwards relates how a U.S. National Council of Churches Faith and Order study of 'full communion' soon realized that 'we were not dealing with a clear term that had a simple meaning which only needed to be observed in its various manifestations.'⁴ The study group became aware that some ecclesial traditions are comfortable with communion terminology while others do not use it at all. Those traditions and churches that do use the terminology understand it differently. Churches that have formal full

¹ World Council of Churches, *The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling* (Canberra 1991) in Thomas F. Best and Günther Gassmann, ed. *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*, Faith and Order Paper no. 166. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994) p. 269.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ O.C. Edwards, Jr. "Meanings of Full Communion: The Essence of Life in the Body." Unpublished manuscript, p. 1.

communion agreements specify them differently. Some churches have entered into full communion agreements with several churches, each arrangement differing from the others. This wide range of understandings leads John Reumann to characterize *koinōnia* as ‘a cinderella term in ecclesiology and beyond, both beloved and under assault.’⁵

In the United States, formal full communion agreements include the ‘Formula of Agreement’ (Evangelical Lutheran Church, Presbyterian Church U.S.A., Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ), ‘Called to Common Mission’ (ELCA and Episcopal Church in the United States of America), ‘Following our Shepherd’ (ELCA, Moravian Church in the United States), ‘Ecumenical Partnership’ (UCC and the Christian Church [Disciples of Christ]), and the ‘*Kirchengemeinschaft*’ (UCC and the Union of Evangelical Churches in Germany). Other agreements are in various stages of negotiation, including ‘Churches United in Christ,’ a plan to join nine churches in a relationship of full communion.

There is no universal definition of ‘full communion’ that can be applied to these disparate instances of ecclesial relationship. Understandings of full communion and formal relationships of full communion differ from church to church and agreement to agreement. This patchwork quilt of meanings and arrangements may be an appropriate means for churches to take steps ‘on the way to fuller *koinōnia*,’ yet the term is in danger of becoming a generic idiom to describe comfortable arrangements of mutual forbearance, permitting churches to remain self-contained while feeling better about their continuing separation.

Orthodox and Catholic Challenges

Orthodox and Catholic understandings of communion are salutary challenges to proliferating declarations of ‘full communion’ among a broad range of Protestant churches. It is not necessary to agree with Orthodox or Catholic views in order to appreciate the questions they pose to ecumenical notions that may be applied too easily to a wide range of relationships, most of which fail to bring about fundamental ecclesial transformation.

Orthodox ecclesiology rejects the odd qualifier in ‘*full* communion.’ Churches are either in communion or they are not, and communion entails the unity of the church in each place. The church *is koinōnia* among persons in a local Eucharistic community and the church *is koinōnia* among such local communities. Mutual recognition, fraternal relations, and even reconciled confessional and ministerial relationships among churches that remain distinct from one another in a particular place are not communion at all. John Zizioulas’s much-admired *Being as Communion* concludes with the pointed question, ‘Can a local Church be regarded as truly local and truly Church if it is in a state of confessional division?’ Zizioulas acknowledges that this is a difficult question, but the answer is clear, for ‘if . . . the Church is a true Church only if it is an event incarnating Christ and manifesting the Kingdom in a particular place – we must be prepared to question the ecclesial status of *confessional* churches as such, and begin to work on the basis of the nature of the local church.’⁶

The Orthodox position often strikes Protestants as rigid and exclusivist, but it is a direct challenge to the prevalent Protestant belief that full communion can be achieved by conceptual changes that do little to alter the actual faith, worship, governance, and institutional structures of the particular churches, and do nothing to effect

⁵ John Reumann, “Koinonia in Scripture: Survey of Biblical Texts” in Best and Gassman, *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*, p. 39.

⁶ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993), p. 260.

the lived unity of the church in each place. Taking the Orthodox understanding seriously presents the question: Do declarations of ‘full communion’ between churches that remain distinct from each other, and separated from other churches, not only fail to be *full*, but also fail to be *communion*?

The Catholic Church’s understanding of communion may be the genesis of the qualifier *full* attached to ecumenical understandings of communion. The Second Vatican Council’s Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, applies the category of ‘real yet imperfect communion’ to separated brethren, churches and ecclesial communities that are not in communion with the Bishop of Rome.

For men who believe in Christ and have been truly baptized are in communion with the Catholic Church even though this communion is imperfect. The differences that exist to varying degrees between them and the Catholic Church – whether in doctrine and sometimes in discipline, or concerning the structures of the church – do indeed create many obstacles, sometimes serious ones, to full ecclesial communion. The ecumenical movement is striving to overcome these obstacles.⁷

The relationship of the Catholic Church to separated brethren, communities, and churches can be called *communion* because of the reality of common baptism, yet this real communion remains *imperfect* because of a range of deficiencies, not least of which is the absence of communion with the bishop of Rome. Since *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the trajectory of ‘real yet imperfect communion’ has broadened, while the baptismal basis of communion has remained consistent.⁸ Significantly, John Paul II’s encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* stresses that ‘acknowledging our brotherhood is not the consequence of a large-hearted philanthropy or a vague family spirit. It is rooted in the recognition of the oneness of Baptism and the subsequent duty to glorify God in his work.’ The Pope goes on to express the hope that baptisms will be mutually recognized: ‘This is something much more than an act of ecumenical courtesy; it constitutes a basic ecclesiological statement.’⁹

A summary of the Catholic Church’s position may be discerned in the statement of the Ecumenical Commission of the Holy See’s Jubilee 2000 Committee:

This Church, constituted as a society in the present world, subsists and continues to exist in the Catholic Church, governed by Peter’s successor and by the bishops in communion with him. At the same time, the Catholic Church fully recognizes that other Christians are justified by faith in baptism, are incorporated in Christ and are to be regarded as brothers and sisters in the Lord (cf. *LG* 8; *UR* 3). Indeed, beyond the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church there are elements and endowments, such as the written Word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope, and charity; as well as interior gifts of the Holy Spirit and visible elements (cf. *UR* 3; *LG* 15). In his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope John Paul II underlined the fact that there are ecclesial values among other Christians . . . These riches are such that it must be said that a true communion already exists between the Catholic Church and the other churches

⁷ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, No. 4.

⁸ As one who stands in the Reformed tradition, I am intrigued by a parallel in John Calvin. Albeit in language characteristic of sixteenth century polemic, Calvin states that “we do not deprive the papists of those traces of the church which the Lord willed should among them survive the destruction. . . . First, he maintained baptism there, a witness to the covenant. . . . Secondly, by his own providence he caused other vestiges to remain, that the church might not utterly die” (*Institutes*, 4.2.11). Even at the height of Reformation controversy, the trace of baptismal communion remained.

⁹ *Ut Unum Sint*, No. 42.

and ecclesial Communities. This real but imperfect communion has to lead to reconciliation and full communion.¹⁰

Catholic generosity in both tone and substance does not veil the church's insistence that communion is grounded solely in common baptism into Christ's death: 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life' (Rom. 6:3-4). This *positive baptismal* basis of communion challenges the *instrumental* tendency in some Protestant and conciliar expositions of communion and the call to unity. Representative of the inclination towards understanding communion as a proximate good in service of another end is the Canberra Assembly's 'call to move towards koinonia in faith, life and witness' because '... the churches are painfully divided within themselves and among each other. The scandalous divisions damage the credibility of their witness to the world in worship and service.'¹¹

In addition to maintaining communion's baptismal basis, the Catholic Church is adamant that acknowledgment of the presence of 'elements, endowments, and ecclesial values' in other churches and ecclesial communities is not sufficient to constitute full communion nor does it lead the Catholic Church to take precipitate steps toward full communion. 'Imperfections' remain real, and communion remains imperfect. These imperfections require the careful process of dialogue in which differences are explicated in such a way that commonality is never assumed or too quickly claimed.

The Catholic position strikes Protestants as overly exclusive, in spite of its recognition of the reality of baptismal communion. Beyond the obvious issue of communion with the Bishop of Rome, the apparent requirements for overcoming communion's imperfections are many and complex. However, taking the Catholic position seriously presents the question: Do declarations of 'full communion' between churches that remain distinct from each other and separated from other churches, gloss over continuing differences and abiding distances, and thus settle for *communion* that fails to be *full*?

Communion in Scripture

Communion – *koinōnia* – may enjoy ecumenical favor because it is a term that is both rich and vague, and thus suggestive rather than restrictive. Nevertheless, the term is not a Rorschach card that can mean whatever particular churches see in it. The word is biblical, of course, and so ecumenical usage should be consonant with the ways *koinōnia* is used in Scripture. A survey of some New Testament texts may give depth and texture that can enrich current ecumenical language. The purpose of a survey is not to engage in simple word study, applying etymological findings to both texts and ecumenical theology, much less to provide a chain of proof texts. A survey merely provides an opportunity to observe the contexts and manner in which *κοινωνία* is employed. The survey's only intention is illustrative.¹²

Koinōnia and its family of words occur with moderate frequency in the New Testament. It is variously translated into English as *communion*, *fellowship*, *participation*, *partnership*, *sharing*, *contribution*, and *taking part*. The variety of translations suggests the richness of the term – no one English word can capture the range

¹⁰ Accessed at www.nccbuscc.org/jubilee/publications/readings/ecumen.htm p.5.

¹¹ "The Search for Communion in a Time of Change" in Best and Gassmann, *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*.

¹² For a more comprehensive, but differently ordered survey, see Reumann, "Koinonia in Scripture: Survey of Biblical Texts."

of meanings – yet readers who are confined to English translations of the New Testament are unaware that one Greek term underlies seemingly disparate terminology. This, in turn, prevents readers from noticing the relationships among such seemingly disparate matters as Trinity, sharing money, and conflict resolution. In fact, what makes the one term so suggestive is the range of contexts in which it used. At the risk of constricting and abstracting the biblical witness, it may be helpful to note broad categories of usage.

◆ The term is used as a means of expressing the deep communion of believers with the triune God, a communion that reveals the very being of the one God – Father Son and Holy Spirit.

- The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the *koinōnia* of the Holy Spirit be with all of you (2 Cor 13:13).
- I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind – just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of the Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the *koinōnia* of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Cor 1:4-9).
- The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a *koinōnia* in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a *koinōnia* in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread (1 Cor 10:16,17).
- Since, therefore, the children *kekoinōnēken* flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared [*metesxen*] the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death (Heb 2:14-15)
- Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and *koinōnias* what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. (Heb 13:16)
- Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him . . . I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the *koinōnia* of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death (Philippians 3:7-10)
- But rejoice insofar as you *koinōneite* Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed (1 Peter 4:13).

Some theologians take *koinōnia* to be an appropriate portrayal of the perichoretic trinitarian relations of God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, and thus an anticipatory portrayal of the church's participation in the divine life. In Robert Jenson's view, 'The patristic concept of *'theosis'* rightly describes our end as participation . . . in the life which Father, Son, and Spirit have among themselves. . . . All *koinonia* is founded and defined in the *koinonia* which is the life of the triune God.'¹³ In similar fashion, J.-M.R. Tillard speaks of the church's '*Communion with God*' who is 'himself Trinitarian *communion*.'¹⁴ However, the texts themselves do not use *koinōnia* to express the Trinity *in se*. Thus, they picture human *koinōnia with*, rather than *koinōnia in* the triune God. The triune God creates communion between himself and a human community as an act of sovereign grace. God is God, and the community of faith is human; the essential asymmetry remains while essential distance is overcome. The Creator graciously establishes *koinōnia* with his creatures, a relationship of such intimate depth that it embraces *koinōnia* in flesh and blood, suffering and sacrifice, life and death, new life in

¹³ Robert W. Jenson, "The Church as Communion." *Pro Ecclesia*, IV.1., Winter, 1995.

¹⁴ J.-M.R. Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion* (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992 (p. 319).

the Spirit's gifts. Of the English words used to translate *κοινωνία*, only *communion* adequately conveys the intimate, enduring depth of relationship in the Spirit that comes from the love of God through the grace of Christ.

Communion is a theological reality before it is an ecclesiological possibility. That is, communion is a statement about God and God's way in the world before it is a statement about the church and its way in the world. Ecumenical understandings of communion and full communion can do more to contemplate the mystery of divine-human communion before moving too quickly to communion's ecclesial and ecclesiastical implications.

◆ The communion of believers with God takes shape in a communion among believers that bears the marks of communion with Father Son and Holy Spirit.

- We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us – we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have *koinōnia* with us; and truly our *koinōnia* is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:1-3).
- The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a *koinōnia* in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a *koinōnia* in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread (1 Cor 10:16,17).
- I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your *koinōnia* in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you *sugkoinōnous* in God's grace with me . . . For God is my witness how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus (Phil 1:3-8).
- If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any *koinōnia* in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus (Phil 2:1-5).
- So those who welcomed [Peter's] message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and *koinōnia* to the breaking of bread and the prayers. . . . Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of the people (Acts 2:42,46-47).

Communion's theological foundation is the basis of communion among the men and women who have been drawn into communion with the one God, Father Son and Holy Spirit. The *koinōnia* of the community of faith is not established by our association with one another. Human affinities and human efforts of whatever kind do not create *koinōnia*, for relationships within the community grow from our *koinōnia* with God through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Because God draws us in communion with himself, we are in *koinōnia* with one another.

The texts display the depth of relationship that is our *koinōnia*. *Koinōnia* in Christ's body and blood is *koinōnia* in the ecclesial body, characterized by joyous faith, hope, and love. This deep, intimate, abiding *koinōnia* cannot be expressed by the weak English word 'fellowship,' a term better suited to church halls and social groups. Once again, *communion* conveys the character of the Christian community's intense, enduring

relationships that emerge from the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

It is not mere coincidence that *communion* is a word commonly used for the Eucharist, particularly for the act of sharing of bread and wine. St. John of Damascus sets out clearly the church's understanding of ecclesial communion that is grounded in eucharistic communion that is grounded, in turn, in the gracious communion generated by God through Christ in the Spirit.

It [the Eucharist] is called *koinōnia* because through it we *koinōnein* in the divinity of Jesus. It is also called *koinōnia*, and truly is, because of our having *koinōnia* through it with Christ and partaking both of His flesh and His divinity, and because through it we have *koinōnia* with and are united to one another. For because we all eat one loaf we become one body and one blood of Christ and members of one another; we may be said to be embodied with Christ.¹⁵

◆Communion within the community is more than a vague expression of togetherness, for it entails shared fidelity to the truth and to truthful living.

- Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace, and the God of peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the *koinōnia* of the Holy Spirit be with all of you (2 Cor 13:13).
- This is the message we have heard from [Christ] and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say we that we have *koinōnia* with [God] while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have *koinōnia* with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:6,7).
- My friends, if anyone is caught in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. . . . Those who are taught the word must *koinōneitō* in all good things with their teacher (Gal 6:1-2,6)
- Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what *koinōnia* is there between light and darkness? What agreement does Christ have with Beliar? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God (2 Cor 6:14-16).
- When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the *koinōnia* of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. For I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother (Philem 4-7).
- If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any *koinōnia* in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus (Phil 2:1-5).

¹⁵ John of Damascus, *Orthodox Faith*, IV.13 in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 37, trans. Frederick Chase, Jr. (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958) p. 361.

Koinōnia within the community is not characterized by indeterminate affections, indistinct convictions, or indifferent actions. Our *koinōnia* is in the gospel, the good news of the Father's sending of the Son in the power of the Spirit, and so we are called to live our *koinōnia* in fidelity to *this way, this truth, this life*. Our communion in the truth is not only communion in faithful belief, although it certainly includes integrity of shared Christian conviction. *Koinōnia* in truth is also *koinōnia* in truthful living characterized by peace, light, love, forbearance, doing good.

Koinōnia in the community entails a deep, intimate, abiding mutuality in the truth of the gospel. *Koinōnia* in the truth of the gospel is far more than celebrating the diversity of personal perspectives. Agreeing, living in peace, and having the same mind are characteristics of *koinōnia* that enable the community to resist mistaken belief and misguided action. Once again, English words such as fellowship and sharing have been so weakened by cultural usage that they are inadequate to convey the wealth and the gravity of the texts' intentions. Once again, *communion* connotes what is at stake, and communicates the relationship of true faith and faithfulness to other New Testament uses of *koinōnia*.

◆ Communion expresses reconciled agreement between diverse forms of fidelity to the gospel and differing forms of communal life, as well as reconciliation of sinners.

- and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of *koinōnia*, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised (Gal. 2:9).

- If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any *koinōnia* in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus (Phil 2:1-5).

- My friends, if anyone is caught in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. . . . Those who are taught the word must *koinōneitō* in all good things with their teacher (Gal 6:1-2,6)

Just as *koinōnia* expresses the good news that God has reconciled us to himself in Christ, establishing communion with us, so also *koinōnia* expresses the ministry of reconciliation that is central to the life of the community, establishing communion among us. The reconciliation that is a central feature of communion's actuality is not confined to dramatic instances of real or threatened division; it also encompasses the daily search for generosity of spirit, harmony, and love. In both cases, reconciliation within the community is not the result of bourgeois tolerance or the simple confirmation of diversity. Reconciliation is generated by the *koinōnia* of the Spirit.

Clearly, 'the right hand of fellowship,' so casually offered in Protestant church circles, does not convey the depth of communion (re)established in the resolution of conflict brought about by the Spirit. The deep, intimate, enduring relationship of reconciled life is better expressed as *communion*.

◆ Communion among various local communities is characterized by mutual responsibility that finds expression in sharing resources.

- So those who welcomed [Peter's] message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and *koinōnia*, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon

everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. (Acts 2:42-45).

- For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of *koinōnian* in this ministry to the saints – and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us (2 Cor 8:3-4).

- Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel and by the generosity of your *koinōnia* with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you (2 Cor 9:13,14).

- At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to *koinōnian* their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the gentiles have come to *ekoinōnēsan* their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things (Romans 15:25-27).

Communion is a reality among communities of faith as well as within them. Communion among churches goes far beyond thinking well of each other, or establishing diplomatic relationships, or even joining together in conciliar relationships. Deep patterns of mutual responsibility and accountability find material expression in the generous sharing of resources. Distributing money was the issue at hand in the early church, and may be a mark of communion's actuality, but communion in material resources is only one tangible verification of genuine *koinōnia* in the communities' full resources of energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.

'Sharing' is too weak a word for the commonality of resources among churches. Even at its best, it implies charity between haves and have-nots rather than communion that has its origin in 'the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty [we] might become rich' (2 Cor. 8:9). *Communion* better expresses the quality of relationships that are to characterize the *koinōnia* among communities of faith.

Communion Beyond Κοινωνία

A partial survey of *κοινωνία* and other terms in the *koinōn*- family of words is only suggestive. Restricting the biblical witness to *koinōnia* neglects related words such as *metexō*, and omits key texts such as Romans 6:3-11, Ephesians 2:11-22, and Galatians 4:3-7. However, even a limited survey displays a *koinōnia* that is deep, intimate, and abiding . . . a *koinōnia* of the Triune God with his people, a *koinōnia* among God's people, and a *koinōnia* among communities of God's people that cannot be reduced to formal, limited arrangements between some churches.

Notably absent from the *koinōnia* texts is the prominent ecumenical concern for episcopé in general and historic episcopacy in particular. This may be surprising in light of the centrality of episcopé in many full communion agreements, but perhaps less surprising in light of the fluid understandings of ministry in the New Testament. Yet episcopé, however its personal and collegial expressions are understood, is not incidental to *koinōnia*. Communion is lived out in patterns of life that embody the communion of believers with the triune God, the communion among believers that bears the marks of communion with Father Son and Holy Spirit, communion in shared fidelity to the truth and to truthful living, communion in reconciled agreement, and

communion in the sharing of life's resources. Episcopé, whether expressed personally or synodically, must be ordered both to represent and to nurture God's gift of communion.

This understanding of episcopé in service of communion, although linked to a particular understanding of historic episcopal succession, is articulated in the 1990 statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, 'Church as Communion':

Succession in the episcopal ministry is intended to assure each community that its faith is indeed the apostolic faith, received and transmitted from apostolic times. Further, by means of the communion among those entrusted with the episcopal ministry the whole church is made aware of the perceptions and concerns of the local churches: at the same time the local churches are enabled to maintain their place and particular character within the communion of all the churches.¹⁶

Ecclesial Communion

If we are to avoid reducing 'communion' to a merely general category of ecclesiastical relationships – something more than 'association' but less than 'unity' – it must derive its character from a theological articulation of the biblical witness that is expressed in ecclesial reality. Thus, 'communion' must express ecclesial relationships that embody:

communion with the Triune God

 communion in faith, hope, and love

 communion in sacraments

 communion in the truth of the gospel

 communion in faithful living

 communion in the reconciliation of differences

 communion in patterns of mutual responsibility and accountability

Clearly, this is not a mechanical check list; communion requires full explication, mutual judgments about fidelity, mutual commitment to live out a new relationship, and ordered patterns of mutuality. Communion is also multi-layered. The local, particular community of faith is a *koinōnia* of persons, born in the waters of baptism and nurtured at the eucharistic table. Each communion of persons is called to ecclesial *koinōnia* with other communions of persons in each place. Each ecclesial communion is called to ecumenical *koinōnia* in the church catholic. In every instance, *koinōnia* is more than a shared pattern of institutional arrangements, for *koinōnia*'s actuality is found in deep, intimate, abiding mutuality that has its source in the limitless grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the overflowing love of God, and the all-embracing communion of the Holy Spirit.

The problem, of course, is the division of the church into traditions, families, churches, denominations, and independent congregations. This division has a particular character that masks the fundamental infidelity of separation. Over fifty years ago, Charles Clayton Morrison named the issue with a bold economy of words: 'A denomination is a part of the Church of Christ existing in a structure of its own and exercising by itself those

¹⁶ "Church as Communion" 33, in Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer, and William G. Rusch, eds., *Growth in Agreement II* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000), p. 336.

functions which belong to the unity of the whole church of Christ.’¹⁷ Each separated church understands itself as living out the fullness of the triune God’s love, grace, and communion. Moreover, each church has shaped a structure that expresses its understanding of fullness. Therefore, ‘full communion’ with the other churches is seen as an option, not a necessity. Exercising the option depends upon negotiated agreements that do not discard cherished elements of particular structures and particular ways of ‘exercising those functions that belong to the whole church.’

Perhaps Morrison’s formulation explains why Canberra’s list of *koinōnia*’s commonalities seems to assume the continuing divided co-existence of separated churches. O.C. Edwards notes that in defining full communion and outlining a strategy for achieving it, the Canberra statement oversimplifies the profound nature of ecclesial *koinōnia*. Thus, ‘many churches can achieve full communion that way without distorting the essence of the life of the body of Christ as they perceive it.’¹⁸ Edwards goes on to note, ‘This can be seen in some of the full communion agreements that have already been reached.’ Indeed.

The declaration of ‘full communion’ between and among churches is deceptive. While so-called full communion agreements establish ‘pulpit and altar fellowship’ (no small thing), recognition and/or reconciliation of ministries, and various patterns of theological, missional, and institutional relationships, they maintain the separate, independent identity of each church. Maintenance of autonomy may even be key to their approval. [The continuing lack of agreement between the Episcopal Church U.S.A. and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) within ‘Churches Uniting in Christ’ is due, in part, to the reality that agreement in communion would require real change in the internal life of one or both of the churches.]

The point is not that ‘full communion’ agreements lack ecclesial significance. They represent significant, faithful movement toward the unity of the church. But they are not *full* communion. They fall far short of the *koinōnia* expressed in Scripture, and they maintain the autonomous existence of participating churches. In spite of elements in the agreements that call for continued theological dialogue, exchange of ministers, missional cooperation, and institutional consultation, communion is not *full* between Lutheran and Reformed, Disciples and the United Church of Christ, Episcopal and Lutheran, and more. Churches ‘in full communion’ continue to frame theological statements, take moral positions, order ministries, and amend polities without consultation, let alone the concurrence of their sister churches. Mutual responsibility and accountability, so fundamental to *koinōnia*, falls away as churches order much of their faith and life apart from one another. To be sure, a ‘certain degree’ of diversity among the churches may be beneficial to the whole, but independence is not consonant with full communion.

Genuinely full communion does not require ‘organic union,’ the institutional merger of ecclesiastical structures. It does necessitate rejection of divided co-existence, however, and abandonment of autonomous ecclesial life that independently exercises functions belonging to the unity of the whole church. Communion assumes patterns of deeply mutual responsibility and accountability that encompass ever fuller circles of faith and faithfulness.

‘Full communion’ is an issue *within* the churches as well. Many of the North American churches that enter into full communion agreements face significant strains on *koinōnia* in their own ecclesial lives. The

¹⁷ Charles Clayton Morrison, *The Unfinished Reformation* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953) p. 56.

¹⁸ Edwards, “Meanings of Full Communion” p. 6.

problem is twofold. First, full communion agreements reached at the denominational level may not penetrate regional and congregational levels of the churches. The problem of ‘reception’ is endemic to the whole ecumenical enterprise, of course, but it is particularly poignant when the issue is *koinōnia* – deep, intimate, abiding communion in faith, hope, and love. Surely the fullness of communion is uncertain if it fails to engage local eucharistic communities in abiding patterns of mutuality.

The second aspect of the problem is acute in the current North American context. Full communion agreements among the churches are established while communion within some of the same churches is threatened. Deep fissures – occasioned by theological and moral issues – mark the ecclesial landscape. Disagreement over these issues is not the problem, for every church always lives with differences on a range of central as well as peripheral matters. The problem is that disagreements threaten to become intractable, as factions within the churches engage in political maneuvering in order to achieve ‘victory.’ Breaks in communion and actual schism are continuing possibilities. It is a sad irony that two churches unable to be in full communion with each other, the Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), now experience real and present threats to communion within their own ecclesial lives.

As at the beginning, the problem is with the presumption of *full* communion. ‘Full communion’ is the sure and certain hope of the whole people of God, while the present reality of communion is only seen ‘in a mirror, dimly.’ Eschatological hope is not at odds with the present possibility and reality of communion, however, even when that communion is flawed. If the presence of all the elements of communion – lived deeply, intimately, and enduringly – constitutes the fullness of communion, is it not possible to say that communion is actual even in the absence or superficial embodiment of one or more elements of communion? Cannot real communion – however imperfect, incomplete, flawed, and unfinished – be understood and lived as genuine communion that impels churches toward ever fuller communion?

It is not only the Orthodox who oppose the notion of ‘imperfect’ communion. Ecumenical ecclesiology and the separated churches themselves resist incremental approaches, holding out the goal of visible unity. Yet recognition of incomplete communion need not lead to satisfaction with the partial achievement of unity. (In fact, it is the declaration of ‘full communion’ that is more likely to result in contented inaction, precisely because *full* communion has been ‘achieved.’) Separated churches can begin by recognizing the reality of communion that is, after all, generated by action of the one God, Father Son and Holy Spirit. They can then discern honestly the elements of communion that are deeply mutual and can be lived out in ever fuller ways. They can also discern elements of communion that are deficient or even absent, thus enabling and encouraging a committed, sustained search for the genuine mutuality of communion.

Particular agreements between and among churches might use distinctive language and might specify particular elements of their deepening relationship. Yet these established relationships could embody central elements of communion while recognizing that the relationship falls short of the fullness of the communion that is pictured in the range of New Testament texts. Communion relationships that embody foundational elements of *koinōnia*, lived out in deep and abiding patterns of faith and life, are established by the mutual affirmation of each other as churches that share the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Other elements – faith, hope and love, sacraments, the truth of the gospel, faithful living, patterns of reconciliation, and mutual responsibility become elements of *communion*. This communion remains *unfinished*, however. Such *real yet incomplete, unfinished communion* presses toward *full communion* when it leads toward the abandonment of autonomous institutional structures that live out for themselves those callings

that belong to the whole people of God, developing instead forms of ecclesial life that embody intimate relationships of mutual responsibility and accountability.

that which we have seen and heard
we proclaim also to you
so that you may have communion with us;
and our communion is with the Father
and with his Son Jesus Christ.
And we are writing this that our joy may be complete.