Belonging in communion

The first churches

Nicholas Sagovsky

Introduction: the Church, the churches and communion

TO BE A MEMBER OF THE CHURCH is to belong in communion. For each Christian, the primary experience of such belonging is normally within the local church. The story of the spread of Christianity is the story of the creation of new, local churches, each one of them a cell in a larger body. The New Testament bears witness to the variety of local churches, beginning with that in Jerusalem, with its remarkable initial common life, giving glimpses of Christians gathering for worship and teaching in Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, Rome and many other places. So diverse were these local churches that holding them together, holding them in communion, was always a major concern of church leaders. Paul was concerned both for the unity of local churches like that in Corinth and for unity between churches, especially as major debates erupted, like that over whether it was necessary to impose on Gentile converts the full observance of the Jewish Law. In this article we shall examine the way the New Testament bears witness to what it meant for Christians to belong in the communion of certain local churches, and ways in which the communion of those churches was bonded together within the one communion of the emergent Catholic Church. We shall examine the way in which at least three New Testament writers speak of the *koinonia* (communion) in some of the churches that they knew.

The church of Jerusalem and the communion of the churches

The stories of Jesus' appearances to his disciples after the resurrection were told and retold in communities of faith that looked to the risen Christ as a living Lord. These communities were characterized by the way in which members relate to one another, according to a pattern exemplified by Jesus. Rowan Williams has argued that the appearances of the risen Christ to the disciples after the crucifixion are not 'fleeting manifestations of a normally absent being, but

events which establish Jesus' *presence*, the interweaving of his life with the life of his community'.[1] In the little churches of early Christianity something radically new was taking place: those who belonged to the community of Jesus were learning what it meant to relate to God and to each other in *communion* – or, to use the New Testament word, in *koinonia*.

It was in and for one such community that Luke told the story of the call of Peter, James and John. In his narrative (Lk 5:1–11) Jesus gets into Simon's boat, asks him to put out a little way from the land, and teaches from the boat. Then he tells Simon to put out into the deep for a catch, but Simon protests that he and the others have worked all night and caught nothing. Nevertheless, at Jesus' command he lets down the net and catches a great shoal of fish. The nets are so full that they are breaking, so he calls to his partners (*metochoi/koinonoi*) in the other boat to help him. Peter and James and John are partners in fishing. Jesus tells them they will be partners in a new enterprise: fishing for people. It is in this new enterprise – shared with him and with each other – that they will find a new sense of belonging.[2]

The Acts of the Apostles sets the experience of *koinonia* in the earliest Christian communities within a history of witness to Christ 'in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). The new (or renewed) community is formed in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, brought into being when the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit. The first 'fishing' follows immediately. Peter preaches in the power of the Holy Spirit, newly given to the Twelve. Those who hear him are:

> devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem . . . Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs. (Acts 2:5–11)

They hear in their own language of 'the mighty works of God'. Those who hear at Pentecost are the 'first-fruits' of the diaspora, gathered in to Jerusalem, but they are also a pointer to the spread of the gospel into all the regions of the known world where new communities will be formed. The first such eschatological community springs up in Jerusalem, where the three thousand who 'receive the word' and are

baptized devote themselves 'to the apostles' teaching and (the) *koinonia*, to the breaking of bread and the prayers' (Acts 2:42).

The meaning of 'the *koinonia*' in Acts 2:42 has been much discussed: whether it refers to the actual community, visible and present in Jerusalem, or to the bond that binds that community together, or both. There is a consensus that in the New Testament *koinonia* is not used concretely as a synonym for *ecclesia*, church. An English translation of Acts 2:42 might be either 'community' or 'fellowship', with an emphasis on the participative common life, or 'communion' where communion is realized in actual community. Thornton puts the emphasis in the right place, when he writes in his classic study, *The common life in the Body of Christ*, 'The whole of this section of the Acts is occupied with showing that "the *koinonia*" was something altogether new, originated by an act of God'.[3] Luke speaks powerfully of this experience of unity and of belonging: 'The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common' (Acts 4:32).[4]

Acts goes on to show how 'the *koinonia*' spreads through Judaea and Samaria to Antioch, through Asia Minor and Greece, through Cyprus and Crete to Rome. Despite his initial opposition, Peter is converted by a vision and Cornelius, a Gentile, is baptized into *koinonia*; despite his hostility, Saul also is converted by a vision, and is appointed by the Holy Spirit and the church at Antioch as an apostle to the Gentiles, travelling first to Cyprus and Asia Minor. Faced with the success of his mission, the apostles and elders at Jerusalem have then to consider whether the keeping of the Jewish law, including circumcision, is a precondition for incorporation into Christian *koinonia*. Their decision to set minimal conditions for belonging in communion is vital for the continued founding by Paul of new, mixed communities in which 'there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all' (Col 3:11). Acts takes the story of the spread of the gospel to Rome itself, leaving Paul, though a prisoner, in the capital of Empire, 'proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance' (Acts 28:31).

The church of Corinth

In Paul's letters to the Corinthians we come close to the life of one early Christian community.[5] According to Acts, Paul probably visited Corinth twice, spending eighteen months on his first visit (Acts 18:11), and later returning for three months (Acts 20:2–3). Trade, for which Corinth was remarkably well placed, had made the city prosperous and there may well have been tensions between the wealthy Corinthian Christians (cf 2 Cor 8:14) and those who were poorer.[6]

It is not necessary here to go into the extensive debates about the nature of the divisions in the church in Corinth,[7] the persistence of which is attested not only by Paul's Corinthian correspondence but by the letter of Clement of Rome, written shortly before the end of the first century.[8] What is clear is that Paul's continuing concern throughout the Corinthian correspondence is for unity, for maintaining the *koinonia*. The Corinthians experience *koinonia* because of their participation in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit. At the beginning of 1 Corinthians Paul writes, 'God is faithful, by whom you were called into the *koinonia* of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord' (1 Cor 1:9). This could mean either 'the fellowship engendered by Christ', or 'fellowship with Christ'. Both resonances are probably there. The same applies to the well-known words of 2 Corinthians 13:14: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and love of God and the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit be with you all'. James Dunn stresses that 'the *koinonia* of the Spirit' does not in the New Testament denote a congregation or confessional community but rather 'participation in the Spirit', or 'the shared experience of Spirit'. He links this with the *koinonia* engendered by the coming of the Spirit at the Day of Pentecost.[9] We may compare Philippians 2:1:

> If there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any *koinonia* in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

What Paul wants for the Christians of Corinth is at the centre of what Acts 4:32 describes: unity of heart and mind.

Central to Paul's concern for unity in the church of Corinth is his teaching about the body of Christ. For Paul, belonging in the church

means sharing in the bread and the wine of the eucharist. He calls them 'a *koinonia*':

> The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a *koinonia* in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a *koinonia* 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)

In the eucharistic action, the bread and the wine are the instruments of *koinonia.* It is by actually sharing bread and wine that those who participate share in the *koinonia.* So the bread and the wine are, by metonymy, themselves called a *koinonia.* Paul pursues the thought in terms of the *koinonia* brought about in sacrifice and the definition of the sacrificial community:

> Consider the practice of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices *koinonoi* in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be *koinonous* with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. (1 Cor 10:18–21)

The issue is one of belonging. 'You cannot belong to the table of the Lord and the table of demons'; you must belong to one or the other. One clear sign that you belong to Christ is your effectual (cf 1 Cor 11:27ff) participation in the bread and the wine that makes the living memorial of Christ's sacrificial death. When you obey Christ by so participating, you show at the same time that you belong to the body of Christ and that the body of Christ (both bread and community) is for all those who, in the limited time before the Lord's coming, accept the invitation to belong:

> For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Cor 11:23–26)

This enacted proclaiming is vitiated by disorderly conduct at the Lord's supper, by some eating well and getting drunk and others being humiliated because they have nothing. Paul wishes to draw the Corinthians into an appreciation of what it is to participate in Christ and to see others as members of Christ's body, and also what it is to participate in the Spirit and to see spiritual gifts as given for the edification of the whole body (1 Cor 12:4–6).

Paul sees that the complex tissue of participation holding together the Corinthian community has been severely strained by the strife among various parties in the church. His concern for unity is grounded in his understanding of the present Lordship of Christ and of the Spirit, of God working in the community. This is the context in which he calls the Corinthian Christians to love:

> Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Cor 13:4–7)

This, we might say, gives 'flesh and blood' to Paul's notion of belonging in communion. This is how in their day-to-day relations the Corinthians are to treat one another: as *koinonoi*, as those who belong to one another in Christ.

There is, however, another dimension of participation in Christ to which Paul returns several times: participation in his sufferings. This is made plain at the beginning of 2 Corinthians:

> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you are *koinonoi* in our sufferings, you will also (share) in our comfort. (2 Cor 1:3–7)

What this passage shows so clearly is the interwovenness of suffering and comfort within the Christian community, between the

Corinthians and Paul, and between the Christian and Christ. Suffering and comfort are in this context not individualized experience, but dimensions of shared experience.[10] Both suffering and comfort, affliction and blessing, flow between Christ and the believer, between one believer and another. Writing to the Philippians, Paul talks of his longing 'that I may know [Christ] and the power of his resurrection, and the sharing (*koinonia*) of his sufferings' (Phil 3:10). There is a tissue of shared experience that binds together Christian believers and binds believers to Christ. It is the tissue of *koinonia.*

The same goes for giving and receiving. Paul frequently returned to his concern for the poor saints at Jerusalem and the collection for them. Thus he commended the Philippians for being the only church that participated in a pattern of giving and receiving with him after he left Macedonia (Phil 4:5). When he pleads with the Corinthians to be generous, he takes the example of the Macedonians, saying,

> Going to the limits of their resources, as I can testify, and even beyond that limit, they begged us most insistently and on their own initiative, to be allowed to share [the word is *koinonia*] in this generous service to their fellow-Christians. (2 Cor 8:3–4, NEB)

A little later he anticipates the generosity of the Corinthians by saying,

> For through the proof which this affords, many will give honour to God when they see how humbly you obey him and how faithfully you confess the gospel of Christ; and will thank him for your liberal contribution [*koinonia*] to their need and to the general good. (2 Cor 9:13, NEB)

The Corinthians seem to have joined in as Paul hoped, for he wrote to the Romans, 'At present . . . I am going to Jerusalem with aid for the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution [he uses the word *koinonia*] for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem' (Rom 15:25–26). Just as the sharing of bread and wine in worship is a *koinonia* in the body and blood of Christ, so the giving and receiving of money is a *koinonia* between Christians in distant churches. Such practical charity is a tangible expression of the spiritual bond that holds them together, of their communion. We need to remember those who travelled between the

churches like Paul and his companions carrying gifts (carrying the *koinonia*) along the Roman roads and over the sea from one church to another. These are the people who, in practical terms, made the *koinonia* between the churches a living reality. When Paul moved on from Corinth, he commended to them Titus, who was returning with another brother: 'As for Titus, he is my partner [*koinonos*] and fellow worker in your service; and as for brethren, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ' (2 Cor 8:23). For a moment one glimpses something of the traffic among the churches, the coming and going of those who are *koinonoi* with Paul, agents of *belonging* within and among the churches.

The Johannine churches

In turning to the Johannine writings, we come to another community or communities whose life has left a distinctive record. Raymond Brown[11] paints a vivid picture of the variety of teaching and tradition in adjacent house churches within the early Christian movement:

> The Christian situation in a large city would have involved a number of house churches where 20 or 30 people met together; and so there is no reason why there could not have been in the one city house churches of different traditions – for example, of the Pauline tradition, of the Johannine tradition, of the Petrine or apostolic tradition, and even of the ultraconservative Jewish-Christian tradition. Even though the house churches of one tradition probably had *koinonia* with those of another tradition, Christians may not have transferred easily.[12]

The situation depicted in 1, 2 and 3 John is considerably worse than the situation in Corinth. There have been a split or splits which cause the writer to speak of 'antichrists' and to say 'they went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us' (1 John 2:18–19). It seems the group that had split off denied that 'Jesus Christ has come in the flesh'. It is not clear whether the problem with Diotrephes, who does not acknowledge the authority of the writer of 3 John, is the same, but here also the split is plain: 'He refuses himself to welcome the brethren, and also stops those who want to welcome them and puts them out of the church' (3 John 10).

Faced with a troubled and divided community, the writer of 1 John exhorts them:

> Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he has promised us, eternal life. (1 Jn 2:24)

The language is reminiscent both of the beginning of the epistle and of the Fourth Gospel. *Abiding* is characteristically Johannine language. It comes very close in meaning to 'belonging'. The one who *abides* in Christ (cf John 15:4ff) is the one who remains in *koinonia*, both with Christ and the community. In 1 John the characteristic early Christian concern for faithful witness and the faithful handing on of tradition is used to emphasize both that Jesus was truly present in the flesh, and that *koinonia* with Jesus and with the Father is truly to be found in the community that lives in the light of this treasured memory:

> That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have *koinonia* with us; and our *koinonia* is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have *koinonia* with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and we do not live according to the truth; but 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 1:3–7)

Here is a community that functions with the polarities of the Fourth Gospel: light/darkness; life/death, and which is forced to define itself over against another rival group or groups that have split off from them. John Gager, in discussing 'the positive functions of heresy', has pointed out how conflict serves a group-binding function, how the closer the relationship between competing groups the more intense the conflict, and how conflict serves to define and strengthen group structures.[13] In his argument he does not have the Johannine communities specifically in mind, but they exemplify his thesis precisely.

Brown's suggestion is that the epistles were written after the situation envisaged by the evangelist in the Gospel. He suggests a date of about 90 CE for the gospel and 100 CE for the epistles. His

suggestion is that the first epistle might have been written to a large metropolitan centre, perhaps Ephesus, with many house churches of Johannine Christians, and then 2 and 3 John might have been addressed to provincial towns with Johannine churches. The problem that is now beginning to surface for these Christian churches is that of orthodoxy and heresy, a problem that will become ever more pressing as it becomes clear that there are not just tensions within churches but rival groups claiming to be churches and defining themselves over against each other.

We can see the process at a further stage of development in the Book of Revelation. Late in the first century, the seer writes to the seven churches:

> I John, your brother, and fellow-sharer [*sunkoinonos*] in Jesus in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. (Apoc 1:9)

He is told in a vision to write what he sees in a book and to send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. If these were churches where Johannine Christianity was strong, it makes obvious sense for the writer to have adopted the *persona* of 'John'. In his vision he sees seven golden lamps or lampstands and in the middle 'one like a son of man'. The majestic vision of Christ is set symbolically amongst the lamps, and there are seven stars representing 'the angels' of the seven churches, that is to say 'the churches seen as spiritual entities'.[14] Each of the churches is distinct, each is to shine as a light in a dark and threatening world. It is clear from the letters to the seven churches that the struggle against heresy and against persecution is formidable. The church of Ephesus is commended for testing 'those who call themselves apostles but are not', and for hating the works of the Nicolaitans; the church of Smyrna is threatened by persecution from 'the synagogue of Satan'; the church of Pergamum has witnessed the death of Antipas 'who was killed among you, where Satan dwells', and some of the church have followed the teaching of the Nicolaitans; the church of Thyatira tolerates a false prophetess who is seducing church members to practise immorality and eat food offered to idols; the church of Sardis has the name of being alive and is, with a few exceptions, dead; the church of Philadelphia has suffered from the pseudo-Jews of 'the synagogue of Satan'; the

church of Laodicea is, famously, 'lukewarm'. Each of the churches, then, has problems from within or without, and the Johannine writer acts as a pastor and visionary, urging them to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches, urging them to remain faithful to Christ. The image of 'one like a son of man' (Apoc 1:12–20) holding the 'angels of the seven churches' in his right hand is, quite simply, an image of Christ in all his power and glory *holding the churches together.*

Conclusion: little communities and the Catholic Church

The situation of the little Christian communities, the churches, at the end of the first century was a complex one, where there were threats both from without and within. Robert Wilken has argued that:

> We miss the character of the early Christian movement if we see it primarily as history of diverging traditions, each with its own logic and internal coherence, existing alongside of one another. A 'centre' was being shaped and formed during this period, and it is historically important to understand how and why this sense of communal identity emerged.

Wilken suggests that

> this 'centre' cannot be defined solely in doctrinal terms, i.e. solely in terms of religious ideas, for it included, among other things, behaviour and way of life, liturgical practice, even a sense of 'belonging', of church if you will, and this sense of communal identity was present among the churches long before there were definable standards by which to measure it.[15]

What Wilken is talking about is, precisely, *koinonia.*

We have concentrated on the use of *koinonia* as a term to describe 'belonging in communion'. From the uses we have noted, it is clear that *koinonia* had, as it were, a sharp edge to it. There were those who belonged in the communion of the churches (the baptized who remained faithful, sharing in the eucharist) and those who did not. It is also clear that there could be a whole variety of modes of belonging to the early Christian communities: participation in received tradition, in the gospel, in the eucharist, in suffering, in giving and receiving. These are all dimensions of this loose-knit sense of belonging within and between communities that Wilken is talking

about. What is also clear is that there were tensions amongst those within the *koinonia* over many issues, some of them, like the keeping of the Jewish law or the full humanity of Jesus, vital to the integrity of the emergent Christian faith.

Just what constituted the *koinonia* was constantly being reiterated, challenged, redefined, fought over, sometimes, as in Paul's rebuke to the Galatians, 'O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?' (Gal 3:1), in the most acrimonious terms. Little, it seems, has changed. The persistence amongst leaders of the early churches of a passion for unity, the evident feeling amongst the churches – even though there were stresses within and between them – that they belonged to one another in communion, is something from which Christians today may draw hope and encouragement. We may also glimpse the extent to which we belong in communion with the members of the first Christian churches, and they with us.

Nicholas Sagovsky is William Leech Professorial Research Fellow in Applied Christian Theology at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. In 1996 he gave the Hulsean Lectures in the University of Cambridge on '*Koinonia*: Christian origins, ecumenism and the theology of relation'. These are now being prepared for publication. His article is an edited version of one of the lectures.

NOTES

1 R. D. Williams, *Resurrection* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982), p 101.

2 Aristotle uses the word *koinonia* to describe the human bond when 'travellers, for instance, associate together for some advantage . . . Sailors combine to seek the profits of seafaring in the way of trade or the like, comrades in arms the gains of warfare . . . and similarly the members of a tribe or parish combine to perform sacrifices and hold festivals in connexion with them', *Nic. Eth.* VIII. ix, trans H. Rackham, revised edition (Loeb Classical Library, 1934).

3 L. S. Thornton, *The common life in the Body of Christ*, third edition (London: Dacre Press, 1950), p 6.

4 The extent to which this is an idealized picture is much debated. The 'Jerusalem experiment' did not last either in Jerusalem or in other primitive churches. The sharing of money and property has remained characteristic of many religious orders. As an expectation within the local church, it soon created difficulties (see Acts 5:1–11).

5 Influential recent studies include G. Theissen, *The social setting of Pauline Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), and Wayne A. Meeks, *The first urban Christians* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983).

6 Theissen, pp 99–110, 145–174.

7 See, for example, Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and community in Corinth* (Grand Rapids and Carlisle: Eerdmans and Paternoster, 1995), pp 28–29, 73–74, *passim.*
8 See David G. Horrell, *The social ethos of the Corinthian correspondence: interests and ideology from 1 Corinthians to 1 Clement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp 244–250.
9 J. D. G. Dunn, *The partings of the ways* (London: SCM, 1991), pp 278–279.
10 In a way not unlike the famous perception of the dying Mrs Gradgrind in Charles Dickens, *Hard times* (London: Collins, 1954), p 195, 'I think there's a pain somewhere in the room, but I couldn't positively say that I have got it'.
11 R. E. Brown, *The community of the beloved disciple* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979); *The churches the apostles left behind* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984).
12 R. E. Brown, *The churches*, p 23.
13 John G. Gager, *Kingdom and community* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1975), pp 79–87.
14 J. Sweet, *Revelation* (London: SCM, 1979), p 73.
15 R. L. Wilken, 'Diversity and unity in early Christianity', *The Second Century* 1:2 (1981), pp 109–110. Wilken follows H. E. W. Turner (*The pattern of Christian truth*, London: A. R. Mowbray, 1954), who disputed the influential thesis of W. Bauer in *Orthodoxy and heresy in earliest Christianity* (ET London: SCM, 1972) that there were no clear norms of 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy' in early Christianity and that later (Roman) orthodoxy was projected backward to create an artificial narrative of the dominance of 'orthodoxy' within the early Church.