

Fellowship in the Gospel

A Study of the Greek Word *Koinonia*

The word “fellowship” describes the beautiful relationship of faith that connects true Christians to God and to all other true believers.

Yet, in the religious world it is often used merely of social interaction. Not only among denominationalists but even our own brethren sometimes use this word in reference to everything from recreation halls built onto church buildings, to casual social interaction between Christians or non-Christians. In this study we will examine the words used in the New Testament in connection with the concept of fellowship.

The word generally translated fellowship is the Greek noun *koinonia* (κοινωνία). Henry Thayer defines the word—“*fellowship, association, community, communion, joint participation, intercourse*” (*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 352). It describes the state of “association” or “joint participation” enjoyed by Christians. *Koinonia* belongs to a family of words used in the New Testament to describe this joint participation. Other words in this family are *koinoneo* (κοινωνέω), the verb meaning “*to fellowship*”; *koinonos* (κοινωνός), a noun describing “*One who fellowships*”; *koinonikos* (κοινωνικός), an

adjective describing “*the willingness to fellowship*,” and *koinos* (κοινός), an adjective meaning simply “*common*.”

Koinonia is essentially a bond for a united purpose. The nature of the bond varies depending upon the nature of the purpose. In Luke 5:10, for example, the Holy Spirit describes James and John as “**partners** (*koinonos*)” with Simon in the fishing business. Here their bond was not spiritual, but it was the bond of a common occupation. Their shared purpose was literally to catch fish. In Matthew 23:30, Jesus offers another example. Jesus rebukes the scribes and Pharisees for claiming they would not have been “**partakers** (*koinonos*) **with them** [i.e. their ancestors] **in the blood of the prophets**” (NKJV). The bond in this case was a common spirit and the purpose was shared opposition to God’s prophets.

The two examples above concern “joint participation” yet, the first involves fellowship in the fishing business and the second fellowship in carrying out persecution. The focus of the New Testament is on a very specific bond of fellowship. Philippians 1:5 describes this as “**fellowship** (*koinonia*) **in the gospel.**” In John’s first epistle the Holy Spirit tells us how this bond comes about. He writes—“**That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship** (*koinonia*) **with us; and truly our fellowship** (*koinonia*) **is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.**” (1 John 1:3). This shows that “fellowship in the gospel” is a spiritual bond. This bond comes about when one accepts the gospel. When the gospel was

first preached on the day of Pentecost, those who accepted it—“...continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship (*koinonia*), in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42).

This is not talking about social functions as a work of the church.

The connection of the word fellowship with the phrase “the apostles’ doctrine,” infers that fellowship in Christ involves joint participation in the entire system of faith, towards the shared purpose of “**common (*koinos*) salvation**” (Jude 3).

We might notice some things about this “fellowship in the gospel” from other texts where these words are used: 1.) *Koinonia* must not exist with those who “**walk in darkness**” (1 John 1:6), or who practice “**lawlessness**” (2 Corinthians 10:20). 2.) The Christian must not have “**fellowship (*koinonia*) with demons**” (1 Corinthians 10:20) nor “**share (*koinoneo*) in other people’s sins**” (1 Timothy 5:22). In fact we are told that someone who greets the one who transgresses the doctrine of Christ “**shares (*koinoneo*) in his evil deeds**” (2 John 11).

Koinoneo (i.e. fellowship) involves a person’s relationship with God. The one who is in fellowship with God, is in fellowship with all others who are truly in fellowship with Him (1 John 1:3). First Corinthians 1:9 refers to this as “**the fellowship (*koinonia*) of His Son**” and Second Corinthians 13:14

speaks of it as **“the communion (*koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit.”** Those in Christ are said to be **“partakers (*koinonos*) of the divine nature”** (2 Peter 1:4). Christians have received the things of God’s Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:10) and Christ dwells in us through faith (Ephesians 3:17).

The question remains—*When exactly is a Christian practicing fellowship?* In one sense a Christian is always in fellowship with God and other Christians. Yet not every activity we share with other Christians is “fellowship in the Gospel.” When Peter, Andrew, James and John went fishing together it would not have been accurate to call that “fellowship in the gospel.” It was fellowship in the fishing business. *What kinds of activities are “fellowship in the gospel?”* First Corinthians 10:16 describes the observance of the Lord’s supper as the **“communion (*koinonia*) of the body of Christ.”** In this text the church (i.e. the body of Christ) jointly participates in the memorial emblems of the broken body of Christ. The same text compares this with the sacrifices of the old covenant. Those who ate from the tabernacle or temple were **“partakers (*koinonos*) of the altar”** (10:18). When we participate together in those things that involve the Gospel we are “partakers” of the gospel of Christ and engaged in “fellowship in the gospel.” Four times in the New Testament the word *koinonia* is used in reference to material or financial contributions that support the teaching of the gospel (see Romans 15:26, 2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:13 and Hebrews 13:16). The gentiles who helped the Jews in Romans 15:26-27 were

described as having “**shared** (*koinoneo*) **in their spiritual things**” (NASB).

In our day and age the word fellowship is often used to refer to the eating of a common meal. While we know that early Christians ate with one another as a result of the love they shared for each other (Acts 2:46), the word fellowship is never used in the New Testament to refer to a common social meal. Christians should spend time with one another away from times of assembly alone, yet, if we begin to think of participation in social functions as “fellowship in the gospel,” we are misapplying a biblical concept. May we all continue to study this matter and always strive to use “Bible names for Bible things.”

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