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Koinonia and *Philoxenia* Toward an Expanded Ecumenical Ecclesiology

By Michael Kinnamon

Over the past three decades, the biblical concept of *koinonia* “has become central in the ecumenical quest for a common understanding of the life and unity of the church.”¹ *Koinonia* is usually translated as “communion,” “fellowship,” “sharing,” or “participation,” but the Greek word has resonance beyond its English equivalents. As the Orthodox scholar, John Zizioulas, points out, *koinonia* is derived not from sociological experience (e.g., that fellowship is “good for us”) or from ethics (e.g., that sharing is “the right thing to do”), but from faith in God whose very being is *koinonia*.² God, in Christian teaching, is not One who relates, but One – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – who *is* relationship. In Augustine’s memorable phrase, God is a “society of love.”

It is not coincidental that *koinonia* began to appear in the ecumenical vocabulary in 1961, when, at its New Delhi Assembly, the World Council of Churches (WCC) adopted a trinitarian affirmation as its theological basis. The report from that assembly includes a famous description of Christian unity as “a fully committed fellowship.”

The word “fellowship” (*koinonia*) has been chosen because it describes what the church truly is. “Fellowship” clearly implies that the church is not merely an institution or organization. It is a fellowship of those who are called together by the Holy Spirit and in baptism confess Christ as Lord and Savior. They are thus “fully committed” to him and to one another.³

It was only in the 1980s, however, that *koinonia* became a widely-accepted leitmotif in ecumenical discussions of ecclesiology,⁴ first in the bilateral dialogues (especially that of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission), but also in the multilateral work of the WCC’s Commission on Faith and Order. “The Unity of the Church as *Koinonia*: Gift and Calling,” a statement written by Faith and Order and adopted by the WCC at its 1991 Canberra Assembly, outlines the marks of *koinonia* in the church, including a common confession of the apostolic faith, a common sacramental life, a shared ministry, and a common mission of witness and service.⁵

The implications of this *koinonia* ecclesiology are profound. For one thing, it counters the individualism of western culture by insisting that the very essence of the church is relatedness. The communion which the Spirit creates is not a personal relationship of individual believers with Christ, but a shared participation in him of those who have been estranged from one another – thus reclaiming the ancient Christian insight *unus christianus nullus christianus* (a single Christian is not a Christian at all).⁶

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For another, *koinonia* suggests that “otherness” is constitutive of the church’s unity. Just as God is simultaneously Three and One, so the church is both One and wondrously diverse. As the Faith and Order text puts it, “Diversities which are rooted in theological traditions [or in] various cultural, ethnic or historical contacts are *integral* to the nature of communion.”⁷ The intimate sharing of those who are different is a mark of the church, not a mere accommodation to the increasing experience of plurality.⁸

The concept of *koinonia* also emphasizes that the unity we seek through ecumenical engagement is not organizational merger, but a quality of life together that the Book of Acts (2:44) describes with the expression *hapanta ta koina* (holding everything in common). To put it simply, *koinonia* signifies an intimacy with God through Christ, and a consequent intimacy with those others who have communion with him. The retention of the Greek term in ecumenical documents is surely intentional, signaling that this is a return to the New Testament understanding of the body of Christ, in which one member can never say to another, “I have no need of you.” This, of course, is not how the church actually appears to the world; it is, rather, a vision of how the church would look if it were true to its essential nature that can guide our efforts to renew it.

I give thanks, therefore, that “the notion of *koinonia* has emerged as one of the motivating ideas of the ecumenical movement.”⁹ The problem, however, is that *koinonia* focuses on the church’s internal life without necessarily making reference to its relationship with those outside its confessional boundaries.¹⁰ *Koinonia* names the communion Christians have with one another. But isn’t hospitality to strangers also an integral part of the Christian community’s identity? Isn’t its relationship to the world also part of the church’s essential nature?

In their commentary on Acts, Anthony Robinson and Robert Wall make the point that:

[h]ospitality and fellowship are related, but also distinct from each other. Fellowship is the experience of community, of care, and of life together among believers within the Christian community; hospitality is the welcoming of the

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stranger, providing care and support and welcome to those who are not already part of the community or congregation. And it may well mean providing welcome to those who are “not like us.”¹¹

In the remainder of this paper, I will make the case that fellowship with other Christians (*koinonia*) and hospitality to strangers (*philoxenia*) go hand in hand. They are complementary dimensions of an expanded, and more adequate, ecumenical ecclesiology.

The Greek word *philoxenia* combines the word for the deep affection one feels for family or friends or comrades (*philia*) with the word for stranger (*xenia*). It is the opposite of xenophobia, fear or hatred of the stranger, and thus connotes a relationship far more profound than the entertaining of occasional guests. In the paragraphs that follow, I will frequently use the English translation, “hospitality”; but, as in the case of *koinonia*, *philoxenia* carries a depth of meaning not conveyed by the usual translations.

The actual term *philoxenia* appears only twice in the New Testament – in Romans 12:13, where Paul’s marks of the Christian life include the calling to “contribute to the saints [*koinonountes*] and extend hospitality to strangers [*philoxenian*],” and Hebrews 13:2, where the author recalls the visitation of strangers to Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18) with this well-known admonition: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” The *concept* of *philoxenia*, however, is a key biblical theme, as a few examples may indicate.¹²

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Since the radical hospitality of Jesus – his insistence on eating with pagans and sinners – is often seen as a rejection of Jewish purity laws, it is important to stress that the theme of hospitality to strangers is by no means absent from the Hebrew scriptures. Women are notable practitioners, as in the stories of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17-18) and Elisha and the wealthy woman of Shunem (2 Kings 4). And acts of inhospitality – for example, by the men of Sodom (Genesis 19) and Gibeah (Judges 19) – are condemned. Even more important are those passages that invoke memory as a basis for communal hospitality, including Leviticus 19: “... you shall not oppress the alien [the Hebrew word is *ger*, which also means “stranger”]. The *ger* who resides with you shall be to you as a citizen among you; you shall love the *ger* as yourself, for you were aliens [strangers] in the land of Egypt.”

Jesus, it is fair to say, stands in this tradition of hospitality, even as he challenged those of whatever culture who would withhold hospitality for fear of ritual contamination. In the gospel stories, holiness is not maintained through separation; rather, hospitality, including table fellowship, becomes a means to holiness. According to the scriptural accounts, Jesus received, extended, and commended hospitality, as did the Apostle Paul in his travels throughout the early church (see, e.g., Luke 5:29, 10:5-7, 10:38, 19:5, 22:10-14, 24:29; and Acts 16:15, 16: 32-34, 17:7, 18:3, 21:4-16, 27:3, 28:23-30).

It is true that, in several New Testament texts (e.g., Galatians 6:10), hospitality is first directed toward other Christians in need of assistance; but, especially in Luke/Acts, the reaching out to one’s brother and sister is extended to all humanity. The paradigmatic text is the Great Banquet in Luke 14 (which echoes the feast “for all nations” envisioned by the prophet in Isaiah 25:6-9). The host’s dinner invitation is rejected by the peers to whom it is initially sent; but, instead of seeking vengeance for this slight, the host expands the invitation to “the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame” – those who have nothing to bring in return. This is set forth as explicit instruction: “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid” (Luke 14: 12). This does not mean, however, that there is no reciprocity between the host and his impoverished guests. In fact, scholars of this text (e.g., Willi Braun and Luke Bretherton) speak of the “conversion of the host” who, through his decision to offer expanded hospitality, “steps outside the accepted patterns of competitive social relations”¹³ – and is changed.

This is a crucial point: *Philoxenia* is not a matter of politeness or distant charity. As John Koenig puts it in his excellent study of this theme, “New Testament hospitality has to do with the establishment of committed relationships between guests and hosts in which unexpected levels of

mutual welcoming occur, whether or not the participants are already known to one another.”¹⁴ Hospitality is not simply a matter of something one does for the other, let alone something one does to convert the other, because it benefits the host as well as the guest. The divine visitation to Abraham and Sarah is one obvious example, but so is the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who, by welcoming the stranger, invite Jesus into their home (Luke 24), or the story of Peter and Cornelius, whose encounter transforms them both (Acts 10).¹⁵

All of this was internalized by the early Christian community and made central to its theological narrative. Through sin, we have made ourselves strangers to God. But, in Christ Jesus, God has welcomed us (an unmerited act of grace!), fashioning us as a community whose essential nature and mission is to offer to others the hospitality we have received. The divine act of *philoxenia* is the basis of the church’s *koinonia*, defining the character of its active participation in the world around it.

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As Christine Pohl documents in her “short history of Christian hospitality,” the church, from the time of its founding, recognized a responsibility to welcome strangers.¹⁶ In the earliest period, hospitality was, naturally, associated with the home or household; but, by the fourth century, the church was establishing hostels and hospitals (*xenodochia*) to care for strangers, especially those without other resources – a practice strongly encouraged by theologians of the period, including Jerome and Chrysostom. This continued in the medieval era, although, as Pohl points out, care was becoming more impersonal and increasingly separate from the church.¹⁷ By the sixteenth century, Calvin could lament the great diminishment of hospitable practice: “This office of humanity has ... nearly ceased to be properly observed among men; for the ancient hospitality celebrated in histories is unknown to us, and inns now supply the place of accommodation for strangers”¹⁸ – a description that has become even more apt in subsequent centuries. Still, churches have, from time to time, continued to display *philoxenia*, from the Stranger’s Friends Society, established by Methodists in eighteenth-century London, to those congregations that welcome homeless encampments in twenty-first-century Seattle.

One thing Pohl’s short history makes clear is that *philoxenia* has generally been understood as something the church *does*,

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not an indispensable part of what it *is* – a practice listed under “mission,” not “ecclesiology.”¹⁹ There have, of course, been notable exceptions. One of the most influential is surely the “Rule of Benedict” which instructed monks to welcome pilgrims and the poor because of Christ’s identification with them in Matthew 25. Hospitality to vulnerable outsiders was not simply the work or obligation of individual monks; it was essential to the witness and self-understanding of the entire community.²⁰

Other examples also come to mind: churches along the Underground Railroad and “sanctuary churches” along the U.S. border with Mexico, for whom dangerous hospitality was and is a defining characteristic; the Church of the Savior, founded by Gordon and Mary Cosby, in Washington, DC, and L’Arche communities, founded by Jean Vanier, for whom welcoming the stranger is a mark of identity. Perhaps the most powerful example for me is the French Protestant village of Le Chambon, whose members protected Jews, at great personal risk, during World War II. As Philip Hallie’s account makes evident, the peasants of Le Chambon were not simply acting as good people (which most of them explicitly deny); they were being church. To raise hospitable children, Hallie concludes, “you must *be* what you are trying to teach.”²¹ Hospitality, in other words, is not just a missional practice; it has to do with Christian nurture, grounded in worship and preaching. The practice of welcoming strangers, as in Le Chambon, is an outward expression of the church’s interior life.

This connection between *koinonia* and *philoxenia* has been hinted at in the reports of ecumenical gatherings, especially that of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order (1993) which met in Santiago de Compostela, Spain under the theme, “Towards *Koinonia* in Faith, Life, and Witness.” “God’s gracious gift of *koinonia*,” said the participants,

is an orientation to openness, to a consciousness of the calling to justice and truth. ... The Church as *koinonia* is called to share not only in the suffering of its own community but in the suffering of all: by advocacy and care for the poor, needy, and marginalized; by joining in all efforts for justice and peace in human societies; by exercising responsible stewardship of creation; and by keeping alive hope in the heart of humanity. *Diakonia* to the whole world and *koinonia* cannot be separated.²²

This is not the same, however, as saying that welcome of the outsider, through acts of care and service, is an essential dimension of the church’s communion. The church, of course, is not *constituted* by the welcoming activities of its members. It is constituted by the amazing grace of God who has welcomed us, while we yet were strangers, in Jesus Christ (Romans 15:7). But doesn’t that mean that the community so constituted is called to be an embodiment of *philoxenia*? The report from Santiago de Compostela says that “the church understands itself as both a foretaste and expectation of the *koinonia* of the entire creation with the trinitarian God”²³ Doesn’t the

church best anticipate such universal *koinonia* by insisting, here and now, that relationship with strangers is integral to its own identity? Churches involved in the ecumenical movement have long declared, in the words of the WCC’s Fourth Assembly, that “the church is [is to be] ... a sign of the coming unity of humankind.”²⁴ But how will the world recognize this sign if the church’s focus is on its own internal unity? Doesn’t the church’s welcome of the stranger point more unmistakably to the communion of all humanity?

Hospitality has been the focus of several works of Christian theology over the past decade, including Arthur Sutherland’s *I Was a Stranger: A Christian Theology of Hospitality* (2006), Amos Yong’s *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (2008), and Septemmy Lakawa’s *Risky Hospitality: Mission in the Aftermath of Religious Communal Violence in Indonesia* (2011). Again, however, hospitality is understood as a crucial dimension of mission, not ecclesiology. Yong, for example, argues that “Christian mission is the embodiment of divine hospitality that loves strangers (*philoxenia*), to the point of giving up our lives on behalf of others as to be reconciled to them, that they might in turn be reconciled to God.”²⁵

The outstanding exception is the American feminist theologian, Letty Russell, who, in such books as *Church in the Round* and *Just Hospitality*, makes the practice of *philoxenia* an integrated part of her ecclesiological vision. “... unity in Christ,” she writes, “has as its purpose the sharing of God’s hospitality with the stranger.” *Koinonia*, which she defines as “community in partnership,” is created around the “divine project” of extending God’s extravagant welcome.²⁶ Russell, before her death in 2007, was a member of the Faith and Order commissions of both the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches in the USA. But, as I have suggested, her ecclesiological insights have not been fully incorporated into the work of those ecumenical bodies.

There is no doubt that *koinonia* ecclesiology was, at least in part, a reaction to the model of organic union (manifest, for example, in the Church of South India and the United Church of Christ) championed by many Protestants in the middle years of the twentieth century. *Koinonia* obviously has strong biblical roots and would be an appropriate term for the church in any era; but it seemed particularly so to Christians for whom organic union, with its emphasis on the death of old identities and new common structures and confessions, felt too much like institutional merger. The concept of *koinonia*, as expressed in models of “full communion,” seemed more in tune with the post-modern appreciation for relationship among those who remain visibly diverse; and so, by the 1980s, it had supplanted organic union in ecumenical discussions of ecclesiology.

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Now, however, new social realities call for an expansion – not a replacement, but an expansion – of *koinonia* ecclesiology. The growing importance of interfaith relations in our religiously plural world; the increasing mobility of populations and concern over immigration; the astonishing level of global connectedness made possible by new forms of technology; and the growing estrangement experienced by many societies along lines of ideology, culture, and economic disparity all demand greater attention to the biblically-grounded practice of welcoming the stranger. *Koinonia* ecclesiology responded to the new experience of diversity by making room for continuing differences within the Christian community. *Koinonia* and *philoxenia* ecclesiology responds to the new experience of genuine otherness by emphasizing the welcome of those outside the Christian fold as a central mark of the church.

My basic argument, however, is not sociological but theological. *Philoxenia* is, most essentially, *koinonia* extended. Christians confess that we have communion (*koinonia*) with God through Christ, and, because of that, communion with all those others who have communion in him. This is a uniquely-precious, mutually-renewing bond and has, understandably, been the focus of ecumenical theology. Christians also confess, however, that the God we encounter in scripture and the Incarnation is the universal Creator whose Spirit is a work beyond the canonical boundaries of the church.²⁷ Doesn't this mean, therefore, that we have an essential communion with all God's children – indeed, with creation itself? Zizioulas pointed in this direction in his address to the Faith and Order conference in Santiago de Compostela:

The church as *koinonia* relates also to the animal and material world as a whole. Perhaps the most urgent mission of the church today is to become conscious of, and proclaim in strongest terms, the fact that there is an intrinsic *koinonia* between the human being and its natural environment, a *koinonia* that must be brought into the church's very being in order to receive its fullness.²⁸

In this sense, *philoxenia* is, if not a sacrament, at least sacramental: an outward and visible sign of the inward and

spiritual bonds that connect all those who bear the image of the Creator. It is not a consequence of *koinonia*, but a further expression of it – not something the church does, but something that it is as a community called into being by the gospel of God's gracious welcome which Christians have experienced in the One we recognize as God incarnate. 

This paper was presented at the Seattle University's School of Theology and Ministry.

Notes:

1. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC, 2013), par. 13.
2. Metropolitan John of Pergamon (John Zizioulas), "The Church as Communion," in Thomas F. Best and Günther Gassmann, eds., *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order* (Geneva: WCC, 1994), p. 104.
3. The Report of the Section on Unity from the WCC's New Delhi Assembly is in Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope, eds., *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 88-92. This quotation is on p. 89.
4. See Harding Meyer, *That All May Be One: Perceptions and Models of Ecumenicity*, trans. William G. Rusch (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp.63-64.
5. In *The Ecumenical Movement*, pp. 124-25.
6. See *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*, p. 232.
7. "The Unity of the Church as *Koinonia*: Gift and Calling" in *The Ecumenical Movement*, p. 125.
8. See the similar argument made by Brian P. Flanagan, "Communion Ecclesiology and Ecumenical Experience: Resources for Inner-Denominational Otherness" in Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, ed. *Ecumenical Ecclesiology: Unity, Diversity and Otherness in a Fragmented World* (London: T and T Clark, 2009), pp. 143-60.
9. J.-M.R. Tillard, "*Koinonia*" in Nicholas Lossky, et al., eds., *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC, 2002), p. 647.
10. It is frequently observed that Paul uses the same word, *koinonia*, when he speaks of participation in the Lord's Supper (I Cor. 10:16-17) and when he urges sharing on behalf of the poor in Jerusalem (Rm 15: 26-27) – an indication that worship and mission are integrally linked in any proper understanding of the church. This mission, however, is still only to other Christians.
11. Anthony B. Robinson and Robert W. Wall, *Called to Be Church: The Book of Acts for a New Day* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2006), p. 203.
12. For a survey of *philoxenia* in scripture, see John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) and Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 16-35.
13. A fine discussion of the Great Banquet in Luke 14, very pertinent to our topic, is in Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), pp.131-35. These quotations are on p. 132.
14. *New Testament Hospitality*, pp. 8-9.
15. *Philoxenia*, understood in this scriptural perspective, means

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