

5-1-1951

New Testament Fellowship: A Study in Semantics

R. T. Du Brau

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Du Brau, R. T. (1951) "New Testament Fellowship: A Study in Semantics," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 22, Article 29.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol22/iss1/29>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

New Testament Fellowship: A Study in Semantics

By R. T. DU BRAU

IN the seventeen passages of the New Testament which employ *κοινωνία* the associative idea is uppermost. One readily distinguishes three chief usages of the term: 1) a *common sharing* in all spiritual—and sometimes material—gifts; logically followed by 2) *mutual help* and assistance by association in contributory aid, all of which affects, and is effected by, 3) the existing intimate fellowship in the association as a divinely created and established communion of all believers in Christ.

The Hellenistic use of *κοινωνία* is at once versatile and restricted. It is versatile in its vivid shades of meaning and application. It is restricted by the Christian community to mean "the Communion of Saints," from its specific application of *communion* to the Sacrament of the Altar, to its absolute sense in the "right hand of fellowship."

This paper proposes a semantic examination of the varied but always associative use of *κοινωνία* in the New Testament. Illustrative examples will be adduced from such trustworthy papyri as have well-established readings and are without *lacunae* and from corroborative patristic literature. At times some ancient or modern translation will prove of further help in understanding the term. In no wise is the *corpus* of linguistic testimonials being exhausted in these pages, but the cases cited here are representative and of sufficient lexicological moment.

FELLOWSHIP AS "COMMON SHARING"

St Paul establishes a basis for New Testament fellowship when he thanks God for the Philippian "fellowship in the Gospel from the first day until now": ἐπὶ τῇ κοινωνίᾳ ὑμῶν εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον (Phil. 1:5). His statements concerning the diffusion of the Gospel in v. 7 (ἐν τῇ ἀπολογίᾳ καὶ βεβαιώσει τοῦ εὐαγγελίου συγκοινωνοῦς μου τῆς χάριτος) are anticipated here and should be read in connection with v.5. While the communion in the one true Gospel is

indeed basic, the Apostle here prepares his *συγκοινωνοί* for the common sharing of the Gospel and the participation in its extension. United action is based on a common possession. The object is joined to the subject by means of the prepositional phrase *εἰς τό*, and one can properly read "common participation in, and sharing of," the Gospel, or "union in, and uniting by," the Gospel.

There is a very fine distinction here between *communio* and *participatio*. Patristic Greek continues the thought: "How can there be any sharing (*κοινωνία*) if nobody has anything?" laments Clemens Alexandrinus in the 13th chapter of his *Quis Dives Salvetur*.

In the middle of the 4th century we have Cyril of Jerusalem, explaining in his five *mystagogic* catechizations the meaning of the baptismal rites to the newly baptized believers: . . . σύμβολον ἦν τῆς κοινωνίας τῆς πίστεως τοῦ χ'οῦ.¹

Translated into Latin, *κοινωνία* becomes *communicatio* in the Vulgate, but Theodore Beza prefers *communio*. There is a divergence in the chief Romance renditions, Italian: *partecipazione*; Spanish: *comuni6n*; and the curious but apt French: *votre attachement à l'evangile*. Among the Germanic translations Luther's "Gemeinschaft am Evangelium" covers the original and is parallel to the exact French. This is not quite so in the Swedish, where we have "deltagande i evangelium," nor in the simple Danish "Deltagelse."

Representative English translations are illuminating as to the use of *κοινωνία* in this instance. The Authorized Version has "fellowship in the Gospel." The Brit. RV and the ARV agree in "fellowship in the furtherance of the Gospel." The Revised Douay Version very explicitly renders, "your association with me in spreading the gospel," and Goodspeed translates very literally, "your cooperation in the good news."

In Phil. 3:10 Paul prays that he might know "the fellowship of His sufferings," i. e., Paul esteems it an honor to be associated with Christ in His sufferings, to participate in His sufferings. He welcomes being a cross-bearer with Jesus. Here the *κοινωνία* entails the taking up of His cross and following Him.²

The array of translations of this passage, ancient and modern,

is rather revealing. Jerome called the fellowship of Christ's suffering the *societas passionum*, while Beza translates, *ut cognoscam eum . . . et communionem perpassionum ejus*.³

This time, the Italian⁴ has no longer *partecipazione*, but "la comunione delle sue sofferenze." But, inversely, the Spanish now has *participación*, while the French agrees with Beza and the Italians: "la communion de ses souffrances." Here the German still has *Gemeinschaft*, but the Swedish is more precise: "delaktigheten i hans lidenden," and Danish: *hans Lidelsers Samfund*. Except for Goodspeed, who has "to share his sufferings," all English versions follow the Authorized Version.

In Philemon 6 occurs the significant phrase ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς σου . . . "the fellowship of thy faith." Here much depends on how the genitive is understood. Bengel viewed it as the genitive of the object when he expounded thus: "fides tua, quam communem nobiscum habes et exerces." Cremer understood it as the genitive of the subject, and wanted to read, "the fellowship to which thy faith impels." Both the nature and exercise of this fellowship are determined by a unifying principle, here by the unity of faith. Paul and Philemon share the same faith, and this common sharing compels them to common action in and by faith. This is the *κοινωνία* in practice.

Jerome and Beza agree here in translating *communicatio fidei*. The AV follows with "communication of thy faith." The two Romance languages closest to Latin differ here. In Italian we read, "la nostra comunione di fede"; the Spanish has "la comunicación de tu fe," and it is up to the French to come to the rescue with a clear-cut translation which is a marvel of perspicuity: "que la foi qui t'est commune avec nous est efficace," i. e., that the faith we share be effectual. "Der Glaube, den wir miteinander haben," or the sharing of our faith together, says Luther. Olaus Petri, father of the Bible in Swedish, rendered: "din delaktighet i tron" (lit., your having part in the faith). The BRV and ARV have "the fellowship of thy faith"; the Revised Rheims-Douay reads "the sharing of thy faith" and applies it to "the liberality of Philemon, inspired by his faith," in the footnote. Goodspeed departs from all traditional translations by injecting a new thought: "that they, i. e., the Christians, may effectually share your faith."

FELLOWSHIP AS MUTUAL ASSISTANCE

The well-known *κοινωνία* of Acts 2:42 adds concreteness to whatever is abstract in the general term of "communion," or "fellowship." Both Jerome and Beza already sensed this when they translate *communicatio*. No doubt, they translated thus in view of the following vv. 44-45, which point out the communication of material and spiritual goods in this unique fellowship. Long before this even Pindar had used *κοινοῦν* and *κοινᾶν* for "communicate." Rom. 15:25 is a case in point where *κοινωνία* is definitely a "contribution" made to the saints. Hence, Bengel comments: "Fellowship—in all goods, internal and external, actions, and plans. Compare as to their resources Rom. 15:26. . . . The Christianity of all, and of each, is to be valued, not merely from divine worship, but also from daily life." In this passage, then, the *κοινωνίαν* τινὰ ποιήσασθαι, etc., can be rendered literally, "to make a participation in reference to the poor," for the contributor enters into fellowship with the person aided; *κοινωνία* thus is the characteristic expression for almsgiving, without having changed its proper sense of *communio* into the active one of *communicatio*. It can properly mean and imply both.

Consequently, St. Paul couples *κοινωνία* with *διακονίας* in 2 Cor. 8:4, as also in 9:13; in Latin: ". . . et in omnes communicatione" (Beza), "communicationis in illos et in omnes" (Vulgate). With due allowance for the peculiarities of Vulgar Latin, St. Jerome often rendered an excellently apt translation. It is good Pauline philology to consider the participation in the good work for the saints a correct and proved semantic connotation of *κοινωνία*. As recently as 25 years ago, there was no known extra-Scriptural testimonial for such Pauline use of *κοινωνία* for "contribution," but now we have an inscription from Pogle on the Taurus (Asia Minor), where *κοινωνία* has the same meaning which the Apostle from Tarsus (Asia Minor) gives to the *κοινωνία*.⁵ St. Paul, who did not despise classic literary devices, writes τὴν χάριν καὶ τὴν κοινωνίαν (2 Cor. 8:4). This is a hendiadys and can be translated, "the grace of fellowship," i. e., the grace to be allowed to participate in mutual assistance. The εἰς (εἰς τοὺς ἁγίους) indicates the destination or direction of the communication demanded by the fellowship.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews combines *κοινωνία* with *εὐποιΐας*, "doing good" (13:16). Communicating and doing good are not only parallel Christian acts, but *εὐποιΐας* is an outcome of *κοινωνία*, and the *κοινωνία* is manifest in the *εὐποιΐα*. Attention being concentrated on this manifestation of *κοινωνία*, the word acquired in Patristic Greek the meaning of "something communicated," a meaning which Lutherans retain and emphasize in their Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism. The French Ostervald Version is nicely explicit: "N'oubliez pas aussi d'exercer la charité, et de faire part de vos biens . . .," which among other reasons makes the reading of the French Bible such a delight and inspiration.

FELLOWSHIP AS PARTNERSHIP

The *locus classicus* for an intimate, unique, Christian fellowship as a partnership in Christ, is 1 Cor. 1:9: ". . . ye were called into fellowship — *κοινωνία* — of his Son." To fully appreciate the import of this terminology it is insufficient to simply say *societatem* (Jerome); *communione* (Beza); or *communio* (French and Italian); or *participación* (Spanish). The full weight of the context and of Scriptural analogies will have to be brought in.

Per contra, the Greek student might ask, why does not St. Paul, who knew post-Homeric Greek quite well, employ *μετοχή* for this concept of a common partnership? *Μετοχή*, like *κοινωνία*, may cover *participatio*, as it covers *particeps*, *partem habeo*, *socius*, or even *coniunctus*, but nothing more. It lacks the unifying force, the intimacy of union, the *full* partnership, that is implied in *κοινωνία*. Thus, if *μέτοχος* had been employed, the fellowship would not have been complete, full, intimate; it would apply only to a sort of junior partnership.⁶

Outside the New Testament we find *κοινωνία* employed for the marriage relationship and in the case of a political alliance.⁷ Theology as well as philology can no longer disregard or neglect the testimony of the papyri and the inscriptions. It is precisely the research in these two sources which freed the Septuagint and the New Testament from their philological isolation and connected them with Hellenistic popular speech. But too often classicists have rejected our sacred literature on linguistic grounds and on precon-

ceived philological prejudices. Phenomena which heretofore were brushed aside as "Semitisms" or "barbarisms" are now known to be good Hellenistic Greek, and it is now proved that the Greek *μετὰ* frequently parallels similar usage in Hebrew.⁸

Paul uses *μετοχή* only once, viz., 2 Cor. 6:14: "for what fellowship — *μετοχή* — has righteousness with lawlessness? or what communion — *κοινωνία* — has light with darkness?" Here he seems to use *κοινωνία* almost reluctantly. St. Luke apparently uses *μέτοχοι* and *κοινωνοί* interchangeably. The first — 5:7 — he employs to describe the partners in the other ship; the second — 5:10 — he uses for James and John, "partners" with Simon. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, *μέτοχος* is used once as "fellow" and the other four times of their occurrence as "partaker."

Eustathius of Antioch, in his criticism of Origen's exegesis of 1 Kings 28:3-25 (composed about 325—30), also shows reluctance to call a fellowship of believer with unbeliever a *κοινωνία*; so he puts *κοινωνία* in quotation marks: "*κοινωνία*" πιστῶ μετὰ ἀπίστου.⁹

Eusebius of Caesarea, who completed his *Church History* about the time of the Nicaean Council, quotes from a letter of Dionysius of Alexandria in which the latter tells of one Herakles, who weepingly reported that the heretical Baptisms had no communion whatsoever with the true Baptism of orthodoxy: . . . τὸ βάπτισμα, ὃ παρὰ τοῖς αἰρετικοῖς βεβάπτιστο, μὴ τοιοῦτον εἶναι μηδὲ ὄλως ἔχειν τινὰ πρὸς τοῦτο κοινωνίαν, ἀσεβείας γὰρ ἐκεῖνο καὶ βλασφημιῶν πεπληρωσθαι (H. e. VII, 9).

Returning to our examination of 1 Cor. 1:9, it is now clear that this use of *κοινωνία* with the personal genitive denotes full fellowship with someone, including participation in his goods, in his works, in his benefits, and his blessings. That is why God is faithful, i. e., true to His promise of grace, by having called us into such *κοινωνία*, such intimate and complete fellowship with His Son.

The true and superior import, the *summum bonum* of the Christian *communio*, is revealed in 1 Cor. 10:16: τὸν ἄρτον ὃν κλῶμεν, οὐχὶ κοινωνία . . . ἐστίν. This is "partaking" in its most sublime relationship.

The various, but consistent, uses of *κοινωνία* in the New Testament combine to give us an ever-deepening grasp of the term. Its significant use by St. Paul in his benediction cannot escape us,

2 Cor. 13:13: καὶ ἡ κοινωνία τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος μετὰ πάντων ὑμῶν. This grouping of κοινωνία τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος has its parallels in the κοινωνία τοῦ αἵματος, etc. in 1 Cor. 10:16, and the κοινωνίαν παθημάτων αὐτοῦ of Phil. 3:10. In all these cases it is the reception and partaking of the Holy Spirit, the body and blood, His suffering, etc., which makes and sustains κοινωνία.

Fellowship in the New Testament is no passive, inactive, merely contemplative thing, it is action and activity in the Gospel. This is the use to which Paul puts the word in Gal. 2:9: δεξιὰς ἔδωκαν ἔμοι καὶ Βαρναβᾶ κοινωνίας, ἵνα ἡμεῖς εἰς τὰ ἔθνη, "right hands they gave to me and Barnabas of fellowship that we to the nations (should go)." ¹⁰ Here is the handclasp of fellowship, seal of partnership in the proclamation of the same Gospel. Κοινωνία and κήρυγμα belong together. And in Phil. 2:1 Paul joins "consolation in Christ," "comfort of love," with the κοινωνία πνεύματος. The underlying thought is: if fellowship of the spirit is to have any effect. The unifying principle of the Christian community, of the communion of saints, is the communion of the Holy Spirit and the consolation of Christ, the παράκλησις which sends to the κοινωνοὶ of the κοινωνία the παράκλητος. This affords us a glance into the circle of eternity and its unfathomable glories. And all this in the one great word: κοινωνία! The members and partakers of the communion therefore are to be of one heart and mind, in agreement with each other; and thus they are in truth a *societas spiritus*, as Jerome calls them, and they possess, as the Epistles aptly express it in French translation, *communion d'esprit*.

Who could sum it up better than the disciple whom Jesus loved? "Fellowship with us," "fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ," "fellowship with Him," "fellowship with one another," conditioned and sustained by the blood of Jesus Christ which "cleanseth us from all sin," such is the majestic manner in which St. John sums up the richness and undeserved gift of the κοινωνία into which just as undeservedly we have been called by our faithful God (1 John 1:3, 6, 7).

The κοινωνία is Christocentric in a still deeper sense: it is not only a set of common convictions and doctrines about Christ, but it is Christ fellowship. It comprises within its whole astounding semantic range the idea of participation in, and partaking of, the

blessings received from Christ and of union of all Christians with one another as redeemed by His blood and called by God into the *κοινωνία* of the Spirit. Properly do Christian people everywhere, wherever they are conscious of the uses of *κοινωνία* in the Scriptures, speak of the "communion of saints" and of the "Holy Communion." Thus from earliest times the "communion of saints" has formed one of the items of the Creed. It signifies that Christians everywhere have fellowship with God, with one another on earth, with the saints at rest. The foundation of our *κοινωνία* cannot be removed by death. Christ, who is the Life of all the living, who lives within them, is Lord both of the living and of the dead; and if I have communion with a saint of God while he lives here on earth, I must still have fellowship with him when he is departed hence, or when I depart hence, for such is the everlasting power of the New Testament fellowship.

Stanford University, Palo Alto, Calif.

FOOTNOTES

1. From the reading of the Codex Monacensis. F. Probst: *Liturgie des 4. Jahrhunderts*, p. 82 ff.—Cp. Rom. 11:17. Also: A. Baumstark: *Die Messe im Morgenland*, 1906, p. 37 ff.—The French translate *συγκοινωνός* with *participant*.
2. For a beautiful and exhaustive treatment of this theme, see CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, XV, 51 f.
3. Beza's Cambridge translation of 1582 is in a delightfully readable Latin. Our quotations are from the edition of 1642.
4. By Prof. Giovanni Luzzi, erstwhile of the Valdensian faculty in Rome.
5. *Jahreshefte des oesterreichischen archeologischen Instituts IV, Beiblatt*, p. 37 ff.
6. This is apparent from a great number of papyri. My own examination of all published papyri from Tebtunis, from the Fayum, and most from Oxyrhynchus, dating over a period from 172 B. C. to 196 A. D., showed that *μετοχή*, *μέτοχοι*, are used always for business partnerships and associates. Among 32 instances of this sort for the period covered, we found, e. g., "Horus & Partnership," "Herod and his partner," "The Bank of Heraclides & Co.," "Bank of Theon and Associates," a "Company of Fish-packers," "Appolonius and Partners," "Sabinus & Co., dealers in wheat," and many others. In all these instances, the term employed is *μετοχή* and not *κοινωνία*.
7. A few non-Christian uses of *κοινωνία* are noted; but these would point to a more intense partnership than a mere business association. The *Berliner Griechische Urkunde* No. 1051 carries a marriage contract of the time of Augustus, where marriage is called a life partnership: *πρὸς βίον κοινωνίαν*. Another instance from Augustan times is found in no less a monument than the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* in Ancyra (Angora, Galatia): οἷς τὸ πρὶν οὐδεμία ἦν πρὸς δῆμον Ῥωμαίων πρεσβειῶν καὶ φιλίας

κοινωνία; the Latin parallel of the text reads: "quibus antea cum populo Romano nullum extiterat legationum et amicitiae commercium" (Ehrenberg & Jones. *Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Augustus and Tiberius*, Oxford, 1949, pp. 28—29). Well in the Christian era are two more secular uses of κοινωνία. It could have been possible for the contracting parties to have been Christians, and that therefore the use of κοινωνία came quite easy to them. The first is a marriage contract of the year 170 A. D.: πρὸς γάμου κοινωνίαν (P. Oxyr. 905, Grenfell & Hunt VI, p. 243 ff.). Another document dates from 320 A. D. and is part of the correspondence of the famous councilman Adelphios of Hermopolis, telling of a complaint regarding Zois and Ibois "and their other partners": καὶ ἕτεροι πολλοὶ κοινωνοί (F. Preisigke. *Griechische Urkunden des Ägyptischen Museums zu Kairo*, Strasbourg, 1911, p. 5. Kairo Mus. 10567).

8. Cp. Psichari. *Essai sur le Grec de la Septante*. Paris, 1908.
9. E. Klostermann, ed. *Origenes, Eustathius von Antiochien und Gregor von Nyssa*. Bonn, 1912, p. 39.
10. Winer. *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Sprachidioms*, p. 546.