

# Lesson Four: Commentary on Philemon

## *House Churches & Koinonia*

Philemon 1:2 *And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in your house:*

The Christians of a city would be gathered into different “house churches” with a city “bishop” overseeing the different house churches. House churches are also mentioned in Romans 16:5 and Colossians 4:15.

*“Up to the third century we have no certain evidence of the existence of church buildings for the purpose of worship; all references point to private houses for this. In Rome several of the oldest churches appear to have been built on the sites of houses used for Christian worship.”*  
(Oesterley)

Spurgeon points out that apparently, Philemon had a church that met in his house. This suggests to believers that their homes should also be a church, and that each home can have the characteristics of a healthy church:

- Saved sinners meeting together regularly.
- Worshipping together.
- Together having a bond of mutual commitment and love.
- Supplied one another’s needs.
- Teaching one another always present.
- Encouraging one another.
- Together reaching out to a lost world.

**Koinonia [koine]** Greek is common Greek, mutual sharing,  
To have all things in common reciprocity. Mutually edified Romans 1:11-12

*“I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong-- that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.*

Paul's argument is based on what has been called 'interchange', that mutuality of Christian life which, springing from common participation in the body of Christ, extends beyond mere common concern into actual exchange: 'if we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation... because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort' (2 Cor. 1:6-7, with which compare 4:10-15 and of course Col. 1:24).

**Galatians 3:28** *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

**Colossians 3:11** *Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.*

Philemon is to welcome Onesimus as if he were Paul, and to debit Paul's bill as if he were Onesimus (vv. 17-19). The Greek word that says all this is koinōnia,<sup>3</sup> and that is the key to verse 6.

**This Greek word koinōnia is difficult to translate.** 'Fellowship' means, for many, simply the enjoyment of the company of other Christians: 'sharing' usually implies mutual giving and receiving of material things; 'interchange' itself, useful for highlighting the way koinōnia functions, seems a bit mechanical.

**The idea we need to grasp – the theme that dominates the letter – is that, in Christ, Christians not only belong to one another, but actually become mutually identified, intertwined, bound together, truly rejoicing together, worshipping together, eating together, being taught and encouraged together, with strong emotions for one another genuinely weeping with the sad, and grieving with losses. (Rom. 12:15; cf. 1 Cor. 12:26; 2 Cor. 11:28-29).**

Koinōnia is part of the truth about the body of Christ. All are bound together in a **mutual bond** that makes our much-prized individualism look shallow and petty.

This fundamental meaning of koinōnia best explains its other uses, particularly that of 'generosity' or 'almsgiving' (e.g. Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor. 8:4): **Christians give to one another because they belong to one another.**

NIV, which here reads that you may be active in sharing your faith, introduces a quite extraneous idea, since the phrase 'sharing your faith' is used today to refer to conversational evangelism, which, though important, is not what Paul is talking about.

Koinōnia cannot mean 'sharing' in the sense of dividing something up or parceling it out. Nor is it the language primarily of business. **The key idea is 'mutual participation'**. The whole phrase then means 'the mutual participation which is proper to your faith'.

The faith is referred to as Philemon's, not because it is different to anybody else's (it is simply faith in Jesus Christ: that, as we will see, is the whole point), but simply because it is he to whom the appeal is being made.

Koinonia has broken down the walls of segregation. The walls of destination between **rich-poor, educated-uneducated, bond-free, male-female, Jew-Gentile, black-white, foreigner-citizen. etc.**

Koinonia is not Christian communism, but communion, togetherness, brotherhood, camaraderie, fellowship. No distinctions, classes, or casts, college professors, or migrant workers lose their distinctions at the door.

Thus Paul's correction of Peter in Acts and Galatians, and 1 Cor. Eating before others.

I am not better than you and you are not better than me.  
**We are ALL SINNERS saved by grace alone.**

Thus Paul's argument - "**but for the grace of God, there go I.**" -  
**I was an injurious person, blasphemer, murderer, worst of sinners.**

1 Timothy 1:13-14 (ESV)

*"Though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."*

**Notes from W.T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon***