

Koinonia, the spirit of the church

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We are now living in the era of COVID-19. Until now, more than 15 million people have been infected with the virus in the world, and among them, more than 600,000 people have died. Currently, there seems no safe place on earth from coronavirus, including Australia. Yuval Harari, the author of *Sapiens*, says that we will live in a new world, after coronavirus, that will be very different from the world before the pandemic. He argues that we cannot return to the world before COVID-19.

Then, what does the new world living with the virus look like? How will it change the way we have lived and communicated? How about our faith life and faith community? How should we prepare for the new normal, and how can we be a healthy church participating in God's mission appropriately in an entirely different context? These questions are directly connected to another critical question: "Then, what is the church?"

The first Christian church emerged at Jerusalem after the coming of the Holy Spirit in Pentecost. The Apostle Paul called the early church *ecclesia* (ἐκκλησία) in Greek.



The literal meaning of *ecclesia* is gathering of those summoned, and in the Christian community, the church *ecclesia* has been understood as a faith community called from God. But, the word contains deeper meanings in it.

It is noted that *ecclesia* was the political assembly of the citizens in the democratic city-states of ancient Greece, in which critical civil agenda were discussed and determined by voting in public. Then, why did the Apostle Paul call the early

gathering of Christians *ecclesia*? Here, we can find a significant biblical understanding of the Christian church.

First of all, the church is *ecclesia* the assembly, as it is not a building. The church is the gathering of believers rather than a religious place, because Christianity is about being a disciple of Christ and living the way of Christ rather than keeping religious regulations and responsibilities at the so-called holy place like temple or synagogue. This is the reason why Jesus said, “Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.” Since mid-March, the church buildings have been locked down, but it does not mean the church is closed down because the church is everywhere when two or three gather in Jesus’ name.

Furthermore, the church as *ecclesia* reveals the equality of all believers. As the ancient Greek assembly *ecclesia* was open to every citizen, the church as *ecclesia* is open to everyone who follows Jesus Christ regardless of race, gender, rank, culture or language. That is, the church is a shalom space for everyone to live and grow together with others. There must be no racism, sexism, classism, or any supremacy in the church. The concept of the church as *ecclesia* was a massive paradigm shift to the early Jewish Christians religiously and culturally.

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What’s remarkable is there is another essential word used to describe the church in the Bible. That is *koinonia* (κοινωνία).



The word *ecclesia* reveals the identity of the church, while *koinonia* is the spirit of the church, the way the church exists. *Koinonia* means fellowship; first, the fellowship with God and second, the fellowship with others. These two dimensions are indispensable and interconnected. If there is a fellowship with others but not with

God, it is not the church but a social gathering. If there is a fellowship with God but not with others, it is just a worship place.

Today's Bible readings talk about two interesting stories related to *koinonia*. Genesis 32:22-31 is the story of Jacob wrestling with God, which shows his dynamic life transformation toward relying on God entirely, not on his abilities. After wrestling with God, Jacob was limping in the rest of his life because his hip was wrenched. His disability must have been physical evidence of his confession that he could not even walk properly without God. It is noted that after recovering the deep fellowship with God, Jacob could restore the broken relationship with his brother Esau.

On the other hand, Matthew 14:13-21 is the story of the fellowship of more than 5000 people sharing bread and fish. You know, it was a miracle to feed such a large crowd just with five loaves of bread and two fish, which shows clearly that Christian fellowship can happen anytime, no matter what situations we are in if we are with Jesus and if we share what we have, like the little boy offering his food. Imagine the scene where thousands of people gathered, ate, talked, laughed, and were amazed with God's wonders, which was a real *koinonia*.

The essence of *koinonia* is found in the Holy Communion, in which we can deepen our relationship with the Triune God and strengthen our fellowship with sisters and brothers by sharing the body and blood of Christ Jesus. Since Jesus' resurrection and ascension, Christians have celebrated the sacred gifts, and one of the most beautiful Eucharists in history would be the Communion of Empty Hands conducted by the Rev Thomas Pettepiece in prison, which was recorded in his 1979 book, *Visions of a World Hungry*.

Peter was a political prisoner. When he had the first Easter Sunday in prison, about 20 Christian prisoners gathered to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. They wanted to have the Holy Communion, but they did not have any bread, wine, cup or plate at that time. So, Thomas had the idea of the Communion of Empty Hands and conducted it.

He said, "This meal in which we take part reminds us of the imprisonment, the torture, the death and final victory of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The bread is the body which he gave for humanity. The fact that we have none represents very well the lack of bread in the hunger of so many millions of human beings. The wine, which we don't have today, is his blood, and represents our dream of a united humanity, of a just society, without difference of race or class."

Imagine that small gathering of prisoners sharing the imaginary loaf and the non-existent chalice. Their hands were empty, but their heart must have been full of *koinonia* with God and others, which was a real living church, the church as *ecclesia*. I believe this is the church we must fashion together in the world after COVID-19. Amen.