

CHARISMS AND LIFE IN COMMUNITY

Paul's Idea of Community

Paul's idea of community is the most detailed, the most developed, and the most profound in the New Testament. The relationship of believers to one another in their common experience of salvation is presented by Paul through the concept of *koinonia* or fellowship, which connotes "having a share in" and "giving a share in."

Koinonia is, first and foremost, "having a share in" the life of God through the redemptive work of Christ. This implies the restoration of the fundamental relationship and the healing of all other relationships.

Ekklesia, the term Paul uses to refer to the "local gathering of Christians," centres primarily around FELLOWSHIP with God and one another, expressed by the members in word and deed. This fellowship demonstrates concretely the already-experienced reconciliation between the individual and God and the individual and one's fellow human beings and other fellow-creatures.

Gifts and Fruit of the Spirit

The gifts and fruit of the Spirit are instruments through which this fellowship is expressed and deepened. This means that the focal point of reference is neither a book nor a rite, but *a set of relationships*, and that God communicates himself to them *not* primarily through the written word and tradition, or ritual, but through one another.

Paul shows little or no concern for the perfection of individuals, but is constantly concerned that his churches mature as communities of reciprocal gift-giving and fellowship. Individual Christians come together to share gifts with one another and to join in certain corporate activities. Within this, each member of the gathering has a particular contribution to make.

Since all have some function or responsibility to perform, there are no mere spectators in church but only active PARTICIPANTS. This highly participatory notion of community continues to challenge us today, even if the church has become more structured and charisms have become institutionalized and embodied in congregations of consecrated life and other secular institutes. We have to remember that Paul did not yet have a notion of the church as a universal entity. For him, *ekklesia* refers to the gathering of a local community, with each local community being regarded as *ekklesia* in the full sense. And in such ecclesial gatherings, everybody contributes one's own part and nobody remains inactive.

Gifts (*Charismata*) are not granted to individuals primarily for their own enjoyment, but rather for the building up of the community. It is by fulfilling the needs of others rather than personally seeking the *charismata* themselves, that all members of the community experience fully one another's gifts. Paul writes, "To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Cor 12:7). The basic principle applied is: All things should be done for the building up of the community.

This is the only reason that legitimizes the exercise of gifts. This basic principle still holds today, regardless of how complex the church has evolved. Each constituent of today's local church, whether a religious congregation or lay organization, or individuals not affiliated with any group, will have to learn to think and act with the local church.

Paul's Leadership and Authority

Paul was able to create conditions in which each person's "talent, drive, values, and passion could be released and could self-organize in an orderly way so that both individual and community could develop.

Instead of imposing rules, Paul describes a process whereby relationships can be nurtured, grow,

and evolve. His use of the “body” image emphasizes the organic nature of the relationships that must prevail among members of the community. He describes this vividly in 1 Cor 12:24-25: *God has so arranged the body, giving greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.*

Relationships are governed not by elaborate rules, but by a few simple concepts rooted in the gospel:

- Mutual love
- Mutual service
- Spirit-guidance

In terms of ethical behaviour, the simple guiding principle that should direct action is – “put others first.” Paul counsels the Philippians: *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others* (Phil 2:1-4). The same principle is behind Paul’s advice concerning the issue of eating idol meat: *Therefore, if food is a cause of my brother’s or sister’s falling, I will never eat meat, lest I cause my brother or sister to fall* (1 Cor 8:13).

Paul’s authority was basically charismatic, and different from that found in traditional societies and modern organizations. He does not apply a model of hierarchical, command-and-control, top-down leadership. Rather, leadership is a corporate affair, being shared by all who participate in the community’s gatherings.

Thus, in community gatherings, Paul could allow action to unfold with a minimum of directives. It is the Spirit that acts as the “invisible field that shapes behavior,” within which relationships develop.

The Continuing Relevance of Paul’s Approach to Community

The church, as we know it today, has grown in complexity and developed stable structures of leadership and ministry, which constitute a drift from Paul’s idea of community. Due to changing cultural situations, the *practical expression* of Paul’s idea of community has not always been applicable, but the *principles* underlying them are always relevant—

- Corporate solidarity
- Fellowship
- Participation
- Mutual love
- Mutual Service
- Spirit-guidance
- Put others first

Potential and Challenge

Today, what holds the promise for the future realization of the Pauline ideal of community is the grass-root approach to being ‘church’, that is, the *basic ecclesial communities*.

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