

What Keeps Us Together?

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Date: 29 January 2006

Preacher: Rev. George Sinclair

[0 : 00] Many of you, or at least some of you have heard the story now of a party that I went to when I was in my fourth year of university. And I went to a party, and at the time I was in love with Louise, and she wasn't in love with me.

And I went to this party, and Louise was at the party, but I didn't go to the party with Louise or come home from the party with Louise. I went with Tom, and he's a great guy, but he wasn't Louise.

And after the party, as I was going home with Tom, we were walking, we sort of lived near each other, and we walked good ways together. I said to Tom, Tom, I really like Louise, but I think she's too good looking to go out with a guy like me.

And Tom said, George, you're right. She's way too good looking to go out with a guy like you. Every time I think about that story, I think, isn't it amazing that he went into counseling?

And I think he's probably good at it now. And, you know, many of us can look at couples, and you say to yourself, like, how on earth do those two get together?

[1 : 16] Like, what keeps them together? What is that magic or whatever that keeps them together? They just seem to be so different. You know, if we were to keep a little list of everybody who came to St. Albans today, and then tomorrow we were to interview them all, I mean, you know, there are people in this church, and I know this, there are people in this church who think the NDP aren't probably left-wing enough.

And I know that there's people in this church who think the conservatives are wusses and should be far more conservative. And, you know, if you were to line us all up, and all of a sudden you'd see that, you know, we differ in politics, we differ in marital status, we differ on children, a number of children, we differ in sexual orientation, we differ in education, we differ in race and culture, in sickness and health.

And so, you know, I mean, if you're not going to be a person, we differ in life, we differ in life. And I think, you know, how on earth do those guys ever stay in the same room? Like, what on earth actually keeps them together?

It just doesn't seem to make any sense. Just like for some couples. I think they'd say this about St. Albans, that they actually talked to us beyond these things. And the answer is, and hopefully, you know, there's lots of bad things that keep different people together, but for Christians, there's something really good which keeps us together.

And it's the second of the four marks of the church. Those of you maybe who are here this week for the first time, we've been looking for basically for four weeks, we've looked time and time again at this text which my son Tosh read, like sort of going right back to that early snapshot of what the church is like and what it's to be like.

[3 : 02] And in verse 42, we see the four marks of a church which is formed by the gospel and upon which the Holy Spirit has fallen, in other words, a true church. And the four marks are that they are devoted to the apostles' teaching.

And we understand that now to mean, of course, New Testament teaching and biblical teaching as understood through the New Testament with Christ as Savior and Lord, gospel-hearted, New Testament teaching, devoted to the apostles' teaching, devoted to koinonia, or fellowship it's translated, I think, here in our Bible, devoted to the Lord's Supper, which is more than just a ritual, but also involves the deep remembering of Jesus' death and resurrection upon the cross, and fourthly to the prayers.

And today, we're going to look at the second mark of the church because it's in fact koinonia in a good church which keeps such different people together.

Koinonia is a spiritual reality which generates a common life. Koinonia is a spiritual reality which generates a common life.

Devotion to koinonia is a devotion to a common message, a common mission, a common life, common boundaries, all flowing from a living communion with the living God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

[4 : 30] Right? It is a spiritual reality which generates a common life. Koinonia is a devotion to a common message, a common mission, a common life, common boundaries, all flowing from a living communion with the living God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Today, my sermon is going to be a little bit different from my usual sermons. I'm not going to exposit one text, but I'm going to look at several texts which help us to understand this mark of the church, which is koinonia.

And koinonia is really important. You know, without koinonia, New Testament study can just become arrogant, proof-texting. Liturgy can become just something that we have huge wars over. The Lord's Supper can be merely a boundary which marks our group versus your group. We won't allow your group to have the Lord's Supper with our group. And all of these things can become quickly and utterly deformed without this lifeblood of koinonia, which is a spiritual reality which generates a desire and a drive and a forming of a common life.

And so let's open your Bibles and turn first to 1 John 1, verse 3. Very tiny little book towards the back of your Bible. And if you're using the Pew Bibles, it's on page 1054.

[5 : 55] Page 1054. And John chapter 1. And it's verse 3, which is what I want to really focus. But I'm going to give you the couple of verses before and after so you have a little bit of the context.

Page 1054, 1 John chapter 1. But by the way, if, you know, many other Sundays we say an ancient creed. Today we sang a wonderful short creed.

But in the creed, we say we believe in the communion of saints, the koinonia of saints. And in fact, the word koinonia is one of the most common New Testament words.

Sometimes it's translated as communion. Sometimes it's fellowship. Sometimes as partake.

Sometimes it's participation. Sometimes it's sharing. And there's, what was the sixth word?

The sixth word will come to me later on. Oh, partnership is the sixth word. And so we can miss the fact that it's the same word time and time again. But listen to 1 John. That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and our hands have handled, concerning the word of life.

[7 : 09] Just pause there for a moment. He's talking about Jesus, who has been from all eternity the second person of the Trinity. And counter to the thought of the day, which thinks that God is distant, distant, distant, distant, distant, and could never, ever, ever, ever come and walk amongst us.

John has just said in very, very powerful ways. That which was from the beginning, the second person of the Trinity, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and our hands have handled, concerning the word of life.

The life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and declare to you that eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us.

That which we have seen and heard, we declare to you that you also may have koinonia with us.

And truly, our koinonia is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

And these things we write to you that your joy may be full. You see, koinonia flows first from responding to the apostles' message that God has sent his Son, Jesus, to be the Savior of the world.

[8 : 25] And the really spectacular news is that he came to be your Savior and he came to be mine.

And so koinonia begins when we hear the message of the apostles, the message of the Bible, that there is a Savior who loves you, who has died upon the cross for you, has risen from the dead and conquered sin and death and hell and hostile spiritual powers.

And he is conquered, not as a lonely victor, but he is conquered so that you can share in his triumph. And we hear this message and we respond to love in love and trust and obedience.

And what happens is that we have koinonia with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. That means mere mortals, pillars of dust formed by a soul, people who struggle with mortgages and with temptation and sickness and death.

You have said yes to Jesus and you got more than just Jesus loving you. You now actually participate in and taste and live in the very life of God.

Isn't that the most amazing thing in the world? Pillars of dust formed by a soul, people with bad knees and bad credit ratings and all of those things, that through Jesus you actually are brought into the very, very life of God and can begin to taste that and know that.

[10:05] And you are invited to have that become more and more a part of your life. It is a living reality. And the word here is that you and I are in koinonia, a communion, a participation, a sharing, a dwelling in the very life of the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ.

And through responding to the gospel message, the message of the apostles, and saying yes to this message, and all of a sudden discovering or beginning to discover that God, in fact, has granted you vastly more than you had ever begun to understand when you first heard an inkling of the person of Jesus Christ.

And at the same time, it is because we have responded to the gospel, have entered into the very life of God, that we also have koinonia with one another. Listen to the verse of Scripture, that that which we have seen and heard, verse 3, we declare to you, why?

That you also may have koinonia with us. And truly, our koinonia is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. Koinonia is a spiritual reality which generates a common life.

It is a devotion to a common message, a common mission, a common life, common boundaries, all flowing from a living communion with the living God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

[11:30] Spirit. Isn't that the most amazing and wonderful thing in the world? Let's look at the second text. It's Philippians chapter 1, verses 5 and 7, but once again, we'll read around it to give you a little bit of the context.

And for those of you using the pew Bibles in the church, it's page 1016. Page 1016. And it's verses 5 and 7, both have this word fellowship or koinonia.

And here's what, I'll begin reading at verse 3 just to give you the context. I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine, making request for you all with joy, for your koinonia in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this very thing, that he who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.

Just as it is right for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as both in my chains and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you are all koinonia with me of grace.

For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ, and this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.

[13:11] Amen. Hallelujah. Listen to this again. You see, it's a spiritual reality. It's a real communion with the living God, but it is more than that.

This living communion with the living God generates a desire for a common mission and common message and a common life and a common work which is being involved.

It's in a sense this desire not only to know Jesus. If you go in and read Philippians, he wants to know Christ and he wants to share in his sufferings and he urges them to participate in his mission and in his ministry and it's this sense that God is at work in the world, Jesus is building his church and when we are in communion with God, we have this desire to be part of that action, to be part of Jesus building his church, God being at work in the world through the proclamation of the gospel and people entering into God's family through adoption, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Verse 5, for your fellowship, your koinonia in the gospel from the first day until now. You see, they have a koinonia in the gospel message, in the proclamation of the gospel.

Verse 7, I have you in my heart inasmuch as both in my chains and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. You are all, you all are koinonia with me of grace.

[14:47] You see, this spiritual reality of communion with the living God generates within us this desire to be involved in mission, common mission and common proclamation of the gospel message and a common life.

You know, it's what, it's what drives us to be interested in Matthew Hoskin in Cyprus or other missionaries or the work of Katrin amongst the street poor or the work of Jill amongst the university

students or thinking of other ways that we can be involved in the extension of the gospel and what's going on in Nigeria and what's going on in the Arctic and it's a spiritual reality which generates within us this desire to know of and to participate in and to further this, the message, the mission and this common life.

But there are boundaries. There are boundaries. Our age has this ambivalence about boundaries. But this, there's boundaries. Let's turn to a, sort of a dark passage in 1 Corinthians chapter 10 verses 16 to 21. There's a warning here.

1 Corinthians 10 verses 16 to 21. We're going to begin at verse 14. It's on page 993 if you're using the Pew Bibles. This text, as you turn there to page 993, 1 Corinthians 10 verse 14 and following, you know, this text sort of opens up to us for a moment that the Bible has a different view of what it means to be human than our culture has.

[16:29] and it's almost as if you think of an hourglass and in some ways an hourglass is biblically speaking what a human being really is.

Our culture tends to think of us as being that little tiny joining part in an hourglass. But this, the Bible constantly pushes us to sense that really, even though, I mean, it's that little tiny part in an hourglass that we see, that little center part, that's what we see walking around, but that if in a sense we were to be able to have God glasses or biblical glasses that we would see that every human being is not just in a sense the little center part in an hourglass, but that because we are enfleshed souls, souls that have a body, an embodied soul, we would see that in a sense just speaking figuratively and literally that in a sense opening out from us is that every human being is open to these realities and spiritual realities which are far, far bigger than us.

that there's in a sense within every human being whether it's denied or whether it's pursued in wrong ways that in fact we open up to, there's an openness in every human being to these spiritual principles and realities which are just vastly bigger than us.

You see, one of the reasons why Christians reject almost all of the ethics that you'd have described in the Citizen and the National Post and they're all basically utilitarian, some type of utilitarian measuring, you know, pleasure and pain and harm and lack of harm that's caused to other human beings physically, it completely and utterly denies, completely and utterly evades the fact that human beings are fundamentally open to spiritual realities which are vastly bigger than them and that can be pursued wrongly and can be damaged and can be just completely and utterly wrecked. And at the same time human beings are not funnels, the narrow part at the bottom just opening up to the spiritual thing but the fact of the matter is that beneath us we are completely and utterly rooted in creation.

[18:43] That there is in fact something within us which is akin to the rocks and the trees and the wind and that some of us as we get older we become aware of the fact that gosh, you know, that nose has been handed down from father to son to father to son for generations, you know, and the eyebrows or other types of things and that we're part of this huge genetic and physical bigness and this text sort of points to that with something.

1 Corinthians 10 verse 14 Oh, just one other thing. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

There's two great messages in 1 Corinthians, two things that we are to flee from.

We are to flee from porneia which is anything which departs from faithfulness and heterosexual marriage or sexual abstinence and singleness. We are to flee from anything that takes us from that and we are to flee from idolatry.

It's the two great messages of fleeing in the book of 1 Corinthians and this text begins with one of those flee, flee from idolatry. I speak to you as wise men and women, judge for yourselves what I say.

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the koinonia of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the koinonia of the body of Christ?

[20:05] For we, being many, are one bread and one body, for we all, and here the word isn't koinonia, I'm going to say koinonia, but it's a synonym for koinonia, for we are all koinonia of that one bread.

Observe Israel after the flesh. Are not those who eat of the sacrifices koinonia of the altar? What am I saying then? That an idol is anything or what is offered to idols is anything, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have koinonia with demons.

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot koinonia of the Lord's table and of the table of demons, or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy?

Are we stronger than he? You see, this on one level says that this ability of koinonia, that in a sense, it's talking about something which is human.

On one level, it's something human, which is that, you know, that's why I was saying about there's, in a sense, out of the top of us that there's this ability to participate in and be influenced by spiritual realities that are bigger than us.

[21 : 15] And so it is possible for us to have a communion with things that are bigger than us and that are fallen and that are in rebellion against God and are in complete and utter denial of the gospel.

And Christians are ones who have responded to the gospel message. By responding to the gospel message are in a living relationship with Almighty God. There is now a spiritual reality which generates within us a common life.

There is a devotion to koinonia, is a devotion to a common message, a common mission, a common life, and common boundaries all flowing from a living communion with the living God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

There are things that we can be open to. There are things that can bring us together which are in rebellion against God and we are to have nothing to do with them. There are to be boundaries.

The fact of the matter is that there are, in the history of the church, we can think of countless things that have brought Christians together. They have been brought together by racism, by prejudice, by hatred, by social class, by elitism.

[22 : 25] They have been brought together by a despising of the poor or a despising of the rich, by mere tastes in music or mere tastes in liturgy, by race, by ethnicity, by war, and by...

There have been many things that have brought Christians together. Many things that have brought Christians together and we are not to be brought together by these things.

We are to forsake these things and forswear these things that, in fact, the wonder of the gospel is that God invites us regardless of our race, our poverty, our wealth, our education, our gender, our sexual orientation, that Jesus comes to every human being and invites us to come to him and he receives us as his own and that when he receives us as his own, we enter into this living communion and fellowship with Almighty God and once that happens there is a spiritual reality which is to take place in us, which is to generate a common life and that common life is to be marked by all of a sudden the relativizing of race, the relativizing of class, the relativizing of education, the relativizing of gender, the relativizing of all of these things that there is, in a sense, a push past these boundaries that are not to be things which unite us.

We are to be united by the message of the gospel, by entrance into a common life with God and so there are to be boundaries.

We are to forswear or forsake any type of communion that opens us up to that which is not God, to that which is in rebellion against God, to that which is antithetical to God or a denial to God or to the message of the gospel, the mission of Jesus Christ in the world.

[24 : 24] We are to forswear that. One text, very briefly, before we leave this, it's in 1 John again, it's just after the part that we read at the very beginning, it's the other classic text on this.

1 John, chapter 1, and it's sort of the rest of that first chapter. If you're using your pew Bibles, it's on page 1054.

1054. And here we're looking at 1 John, that's verse 6 and 7, but we'll begin reading at verse 5. Page 1054, 1 John, chapter 1, verses 5 through 10. This is the message which we have heard from him and declare to you that God is light and in him is no darkness at all.

If we say that we have koinonia with Jesus and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have koinonia with one another and the blood of Jesus Christ, his son, cleanses us from all sin.

[25 : 36] If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar and his word and his word is not in us. Here we see once again that we are not to have koinonia with darkness but only with light.

We are not to have koinonia which proclaims a false gospel or an antithetical gospel. We are not to be united by class or by institution that koinonia is responding.

It develops from responding to the gospel message. It creates a spiritual reality which generates a common life and there is a devotion to a common message, a common mission, a common life, common boundaries all flowing from a living communion with the living God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

You know, one of the things which we have been looking at over the last few weeks as we draw to a close is that the church is learning you know, in Acts chapter 2 verse 46 the church is learning to live large and live little.

[26 : 54] Koinonia is what in a sense generates a desire for Christians to live large. It's what generates Christians to say I'm not supposed to be alone I should be part of a church.

It's what generates a desire not only to be part of a little church here in the corner of King Edward and Daly but to also be in some type of common life with other Christians in the denomination and other Christians across denominational boundaries.

Koinonia is that mark of the church that spiritual reality which generates this desire to live the Christian life large and to think big.

And it's also that which generates within a Christian the desire of a church and the desire of a Christian to learn how to live little. It's what pushes us to say how can we make our families Christian?

How can we make our marriage Christian? How can we find spiritual friendship? How can we find those little gatherings where we gather together in prayer?

[28 : 07] You know maybe it's just you and some people who all work near each other who decide you're going to get to work a few minutes early and spend half an hour in the cafeteria over a cup of tea and a cup of coffee and maybe share one Bible verse and share a couple of things in your life and then quietly try to pray or maybe it's a more formal Bible study or a more formal teaching session but it's koinonia this spiritual reality which generates a desire for a common life the desire for a common life is both living large and living little it's that part within us which says I need Christian friends I need a small group where people know my name like I have to confess to you you know it's I have to confess that you know over the last it's funny you know on one level I want to confess and apologize to you folks last time I talked to the wardens about it said you know George don't apologize for these things you know part of what God has called you to do right now is to be involved with some of these big things that are going on in the Anglican church you know and I just

I'm so grateful that you folks have blessed me and released me and you're patient for me as I spend time in some of these things with the continuing crisis but you know we have to get out of the way so Koinonia can work in your desire to find to live the little Christian life as well as the large Christian life and we have different Bible studies and groups open that you guys can come to but if you say you know George I don't feel like coming downtown I'd like to do something in Manor Park or I don't want to come downtown I want to do something in Kanata or George I don't want to do that I want to get something going right in the center of Ottawa we're all going to get together a little bit earlier at the Starbucks you just tell us and you come alongside with us and you help us because in fact the mark of the church is not only gathering around apostolic teaching it's not only gathering around the Lord's Supper and remembering Jesus' death and resurrection upon his resurrection it's not only the prayers it is also koinonia a spiritual reality which generates a common life this common life is living large and living little it is a devotion to a common message a common mission a common life not that we all live identical not that we become clones but that in our difference in our idiosyncrasies in our uniqueness that we learn to live a life common and together with bonds of affection and with friendship and with helpfulness to each other and peaceableness with common boundaries all flowing from a living communion with the living God the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit let us pray Father we give you thanks and praise that you do not want us to all be clones and all be uniform and identical you don't care if we all in fact Father we probably you know given that you've made every snowflake different you would probably be offended if we all dressed identical or combed our hair the same way we thank and praise you Father that you are a God who loves difference and loves uniqueness and Father we thank and praise you for that and that you will keep us in our uniqueness we thank you Father at the same time that the healing authority of your Son Jesus and the healing authority of your Holy Spirit will bring healing to brokenness and darkness and sin in our lives we thank and praise you that you lead us to a common life with others who are

different but who have also come to your Son
Jesus Christ Father may your Holy Spirit fall afresh upon this church that koinonia might truly mark
us and that we might live large and live little for your glory in Jesus name Amen and glory