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KOINONIA: THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

The word koinōnia does not in fact appear in the writings known collectively as the "Apostolic Fathers." But its cognate adjectives and verbs do, and from their use we can gain some idea of how these authors viewed the relationship of the community to the various forms of ministry. It is this relationship which forms the context for most instances of this word group and it is therefore not surprising that the words are most common in the First Epistle of Clement and the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, both deeply concerned about the ministry and about church unity.

In I Clement there are two references that concern us: in 48:6 Clement insists that no matter what gifts an individual Christian may enjoy, the more he must attend to the common good (καὶ ὑμῶν ἕξ) in humility; in 51:1 he appeals to the leaders of dissent in Corinth to give way, declaring that they ought to "consider what is common in our hope." In the first reference the interest of the community is the end toward which the individual's gifts (perhaps understood as charismata) must be employed; in the second the community of belief and hope is viewed as the source of the unity that ought to exist in the church -- those who cause factions are ignoring it.

Ignatius uses these themes in much the same way, but at greater length; moreover, he makes it clear that the community is not simply a local phenomenon, but one which binds all Christians together. He greets the Ephesians as "one who has been brought in bonds from Syria on account of the common name and hope"; he twice closes letters "in Jesus Christ, our common hope" (Eph. 21:2; Philad. 11:2). And it is in precisely these two letters that the idea of "what is common" appears most often. The Ephesians are commended for their unity, but the second and more spiritual epistle which Ignatius promises <sup>(Eph. 20:2)</sup> them is made contingent on their continuing to come together "each and every one in common, in grace from the Name, in a single faith and in Jesus Christ . . . to listen to the bishop and presbytery, . . . breaking one bread." Only by their devotion to their common life can they merit such a favor.

The Philadelphians, unlike the Ephesians, seem to have been

afflicted with serious internal divisions, which Ignatius disclaims having had any prior knowledge of, though he had delivered a strong plea to them in their congregation for unity around the bishop (11). But his letter bears clear traces of his concern for this. One may at least guess that he feels that the church authorities are themselves partly responsible for the divisiveness, for he emphasizes that the bishop has a *διακονίαν τὴν εἰς τὸ κοινὸν ἀνήκουσαν* "a ministry appertaining to what we have in common," and that he did not acquire it dishonestly or for selfish purposes (1:1). Further on, in the midst of an exhortation to unity Ignatius, somewhat unexpectedly, breaks off to declare his esteem for the *προϋπάρχοντες* (apparently not the regular, ordained clergy of the church), whom he then qualifies as "numbered together in the gospel of our common hope." One may take this to mean that both kinds of ministry, charismatic and "regular," are subject to the over-riding necessity of maintaining what is common to all.

The one other of the Apostolic Fathers who contributes to this same theme is Barnabas (4:10), who warns against isolationism or individualism on the part of Christians. But it is difficult to tell here whether the individuals in question are schismatics or ascetics or both. He warns his readers: "Do not isolate yourselves as if you were already made righteous (*δεδοικαμένοι*); but coming together, seek with each other as to what is beneficial generally (*κοινῶν*)." "

Finally we may note that the church's treasury can be referred to as *τὸ κοινόν* (Ignatius to Polycarp 4:3). In this connection it may be significant that in the old "Two Ways" document that underlies parts of both the Didache and Barnabas, the injunction to give alms is firmly founded on a prior communion of "things imperishable" (Did. 4:8; Bar. 19:8).

The word group we are here considering also has what appears to be a more individualistic usage. In the moralist Hermas the complacent husband of an adultress can be said to be *κοινωνὸς μελετήσας αὐτῆς* (Mand. 4:15). In the Martyrdom of Polycarp, the martyr's communion with Christ's sufferings is several times emphasized (6:2; 17:1, 3).

It is remarkable that these writers, even when emphasizing the

importance of congregational unity, do not much avail themselves of the concept of koinōnia. Perhaps it was not a strong enough term in a period of much division and in face of the spiritual arrogance of incipient gnosticism. Ignatius, at least, prefers to appeal to the ideal of ὁμοψυχία or to reiterate the oneness of the church in every aspect, apparently finding the most effective symbol of this in the one Eucharist around the one local bishop.

#### KOINONIA: THE GREEK APOLOGISTS

Koinōnia and its cognates are more common in the apologists (with whom I include the Epistle to Diognetus) than among the Apostolic Fathers. A majority of instances, <sup>however,</sup> have no theological significance whatever, but simply belong to common phrases. When we delete these, we are left with a residue that is quite different in orientation from Clement or Ignatius -- as indeed, this whole category of Christian literature is different, being directed not primarily to intra-church problems, but to the pagan world. Thus we have a sprinkling of philosophical commonplaces, as when Athenagoras (16:3) quotes Plato to the effect that the universe cannot be free of change, since it participates in bodily nature (κεκοινώθηκε σώματος). Both Athenagoras and Tatian are interested in what is "common", ie natural, to the world and man as created.

Once Athenagoras uses the word koinōnia to indicate the relation between Father and Son (12:2), but he draws no conclusions thence to the nature of the community of believers. Justin Martyr is, in fact, virtually the only apologist who uses this group of words in this context. He discusses the question of whether it is right to "have fellowship" with Jewish Christians who keep the Law and concludes that it is, so long as they do not press gentile Christians to follow their example (Dial. 47:2f.). He emphasizes the communal element in Christian worship (<sup>Apol.</sup> 65:1; 67:7). Not only do "we all arise together (κοινη) and offer prayers", but the president makes his prayer over the bread and wine of the Eucharist "in like manner" (ὁμοίως) (67:5).

There is not much, however, to suggest that Justin saw great theological importance in this. The "fellowship of the name" is

no longer, as for Ignatius, a fundamental bond among Christians, but rather a purely external quality and even an embarrassment; for heretics are apt to lay claim to it -- including some heretics whom the catholic Christians find both revolting and dangerous because of their immoral practices (Apol. 7:3; 26:6; Dial. 35:5). Tatian picks up a similar theme when he teases the "Greeks" for "sharing our teachings" (κοινωνοὺς ἡμῶν τῆς δόξης) (Orat. 19:2), a phrase that means nothing more than an accidental coincidence of opinions.

Justin perhaps retains some sense of an older and stronger sense of the term when he exhorts Trypho (and all men) to become "sharers" (κοινωνοὺς) of the grace of true Biblical interpretation (Dial. 58:1); but it is only a trace. Otherwise for him koinōnía is something which exists in the world as such, the simple and basic fact of human society. He may see the cross as the ultimate foundation for it, but only in a rather vague typology (Apol. 55:2).

The author of the Epistle to Diognetus had perhaps some sense, too, of the stronger sense of koinōnía. In his peroration (11:8) he proclaims that in what he has been moved by the Word to speak he has become a "sharer of revelations" with his hearers. And he also mentions it as a mark of Christians that they have a "common table . . . but not a common bed" (5:7).

Finally, we may note that Justin once refers to the church treasury as κοινόν (Apol. 14:2) and uses the verb κοινωνεῖν of Christian almsgiving (15:10). And the "moral" sense of the present group of words reappears in Justin's Apol. 2:6 and Dial. 27:2, 35:6, 82:4, as in Tatian's Oratio (18:2; 22:2). The latter usage, as we noted previously, seems to be ~~highly~~ individualistic.

It is fair to say, on the present evidence, that the writings of the apologists display an almost complete disregard for the term koinōnía and its cognates as a means of understanding and explaining the church. But these materials are not strictly comparable to the "Apostolic Fathers" and thus we cannot be sure that this is not simply an adaptation to a pagan audience, which is not much interested in the principles of the church's internal coherence.