

**EUCCHARIST AND CHURCH
FELLOWSHIP IN THE FIRST
FOUR CENTURIES**

by Werner Elert

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY N. E. NAGEL

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Translator's Preface

The desire to translate this book grew from a student's gratitude to its author. Hardly less than Elert's pastoral concern was his profound concern for healing the divisions among Christians. He was far too great a theologian to pretend they do not matter or to suppose they can be mended by a few sweeping gestures. So in this book he does not deal in generalities but rather with instances. His assessment is carefully built up bit by bit. The pieces have a way of embracing other pieces, particularly when their arms are as long and strong as *koinonia's*. The goal of this study may be said to be the true perception and practice of the *koinonia* of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

An apparently small matter which yet touches the nature of the church is the question when *c* in *church* shall be big or small. *Catholic* also has something in it which resists the imposition of a capital. It is, nevertheless, so used in this translation when a proper adjective, and so also *church* when a proper noun.

The question of *synod* or *council* is answered here by keeping *synod* for the East and *council* for the West, except when a synod is acknowledged by both East and West as ecumenical, for example, Synods of Antioch but the Council of Nicaea.

Elert's rather awesome bibliographies are sometimes reproduced more out of deference than for their accessible usefulness. They do, however, show the thoroughness with which the question has been examined. A few things have been added in the footnotes that may hopefully be useful to the English reader. When no *LCC* reference is available, one from *ACW* is given if possible, and *FC* is third man. A similar sequence has been followed with Stevenson, Bindley, Bright, and Watkins. Some local references may escape the English reader, but they also serve a purpose in showing that this study grew from earnest efforts to heal divi-

Author's Preface

The task of furnishing an account of the relation between altar fellowship and church fellowship in the history of the church was more easily accepted than carried out. In undertaking this task I felt sure that enough literature on the subject would be available to permit making a synopsis without difficulty. Such optimism was without foundation. A glance at the early church revealed that apart from occasional comments the historical literature consulted dealing with the church, its laws, dogmas, and liturgies, was practically unproductive. There was no exact account of what is meant by church fellowship (*communio ecclesiae* or *ecclesiastica*), although the expression appears often enough in the sources. Nor was there an answer to the questions whether and how church fellowship is essentially related to the understanding and practice of the Lord's Supper. There was nothing to do but to open a long-distance conversation with the early authors themselves.

Since the time for gathering, sifting, grouping, and evaluating the material was limited, various restrictions resulted. During the course of the work I also gained the impression that there was some justification in the material itself for limiting myself to the early church; not as though the early church took a stand peculiar to itself in this matter but rather because it anticipated almost every point of view, even those of today. The only person who might dispute this is the man for whom Christianity's confessional divisions are a phenomenon reserved for modern times. I believe the evidence adduced shows quite conclusively that this assumption, though widely held, is false. What is more, the early church also has the advantage of nearness to the apostolic age. This may appear at first to be only a chronological nearness, but this does not mean that it does not also enjoy a spiritual nearness such as the church of every age seeks to attain. In any case it is basic for the

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1

COMMUNION

The early church had various names for the Lord's Supper. One of them was *koinonia*, in Latin, *communio*. Modern Catholics know *communio* as a current term for the reception of the Eucharist. It is also used in canon law (*sacra communio*). The derived terms "communicate" and "communicants" are found also in Protestant liturgies. There is already an interpretation of the rite in this term, not exhaustive, to be sure, and perhaps consciously one-sided from the receiver's point of view, but in any case one that expresses something still different than when "Last Supper" "Lord's Supper," "mystical sacrifice," "Eucharist," or some other expression is used. Here Paul is our guide. From him we have not only the oldest account of its institution but also its first interpretation. He calls it the "Lord's Table" (1 Cor. 10:21) or the "Lord's Supper" (11:21). He also uses the expression *koinonia* for the cup and the bread. (10:16)

Koinonia went into Latin as *communio*. There was no alternative. Hence our Communion for the Lord's Supper. *Communio*, however, has more than one facet and therefore its setting is always crucial. In church usage we also find, for example, *communio ecclesiae* or *ecclesiastica*. This is church fellowship. In *communio*, then, we have a term which embraces both items of our study — the Lord's Supper and church fellowship. The German *Gemeinschaft* is similar. Luther so translated Paul's *koinonia*. German also has *Abendmahlsgemeinschaft* (altar fellowship). It would appear, therefore, that our first task is to discover the precise meaning of *communio*, or *Gemeinschaft*, and then to apply this to both the Lord's Supper and the factors involved in altar and church fellowship. This does not involve a departure from Greek usage,

2

KOINONIA AS PARTAKING (*METALEPSIS*)

The Creed's *sanctorum communio* in its original Greek form meant the Lord's Supper. This in itself expresses a particular understanding of the Sacrament held in the early church at least in the East. However, since there is no explicit discussion of it even in the East, the question regarding the extent of its theological implications still remains unanswered. For the pursuit of these a comparison with other terms may prove useful, for in the East, too, there were obviously other terms used of the Sacrament. A comprehensive presentation of the ancient understanding of the Eucharist is of course not our purpose. It must suffice to investigate only what relates to the question of Eucharist and church fellowship.

Koinonia, the principal word of our phrase, appears in combinations of considerable variety. Already in the New Testament, especially if we take into account its verbal forms, we find various possibilities for its combination with a genitive of things. It is clear at the outset that its combination with τὰ ἅγια does not mean the extending of sympathy, liberality, or benevolence, as is usually the case in contexts of charity.¹ The phrase cannot mean to confess that we extend the *sancta* to others. What is meant by fellowship nowadays is most closely approached by such expressions as *koinonia* of life, love, or faith (Excursus III). If our phrase were understood in harmony with these, we would then have to take it as a fellowship of common relation to the *sancta*, that is, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. This thought is certainly not to be rejected, for the concept of a fellowship brought about by the Sacrament among those who participate in it is indeed found in the early church. To derive this immediately from τῶν ἁγίων κοινωνία would, however, be to skip some crucial evidence.

4

“THE LORD’S SUPPER, NOT THE CHRISTIANS’ SUPPER”

For the early church the Lord’s Supper was always a fellowship. Only in the course of time did this receive theological definition. Isidore of Pelusium’s definition of *koinonia* centered entirely in being made one with Christ, although he did move beyond a purely individual understanding in pointing out that thereby we become “partakers of His kingdom” (p. 19). Nevertheless, no specific consideration was given to this lateral fellowship. This theme which we saw developing in Chrysostom and Cyril of Alexandria has its first definitive statement in John of Damascus. “We say *koinonia*, and so it is, for through it we have *koinonia* with Christ and partake of His flesh and deity, but through it we also have *koinonia* [among ourselves] and are united with one another. Since we receive of one bread, we all become one body of Christ and one blood, and members one of another. We are united in one body with Christ.”¹ Here the *koinonia* of the communicants with one another is the corollary of the *koinonia* with Christ. That they are understood not merely as two things externally side by side is shown by the use of Paul’s statement in 1 Cor. 10:17 as documentation.

This passage flows into the general stream of Paul’s thoughts about the body of Christ, whose members are the Christians.² Perhaps it is even the source of the whole stream.³ Its contribution must doubtless be ranked high. What otherwise might be taken as metaphor or analogy this passage establishes as solid fact. We eat one bread and by that, by that eating, we become one body. The “bodily unity” of which ancient Greek theology is always speaking, or the “fleshly unity,” as Ignatius puts it, is not meant metaphorically but literally. We cannot but go on with Chrysostom, “Because it is one bread, we many are one body. . . .