The Implications of the Concept of Koinonia Concept on poverty Eradication in a Globalized World

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**Abstract**:

In such an interconnected world, one would expect the world to be a better place in terms of how people care for the needs of fellow human beings. However, this is not the present case, especially when you focus on world’s economic discrepancies. The economic, political, anthropological, and cultural structures to combat this by international institutions have not availed much; they have not fostered a caring community. This paper looks at the theological concept of *koinonia* as a biblical resource that can provide insights into how the globe can move toward a more understanding and caring community. The Early Church, that was multi-ethnic, demonstrate that it is possible to live together as a caring community. Using the social scientific method, the study examines the concept of *koinonia* in the Early Church and how it functioned to address socio-economic needs within the community. It explores the theological foundations of *koinonia* then draws its implications on poverty eradication in the age of globalization.

**Keywords:** *Koinonia*, Poverty, Globalization, Community.

# 1. Introduction

Though globalization is making the world more connected and integrated, economically, culturally, politically, and spiritually, the widening gap between the poor and the rich nations is alarming. Commenting on this gap, Rodrik (2011) asserts that statistically, the ratio between the rich and the poor has increased from 2:1 in the 18th Century to 80:1 in the 21st Century. International institutions for example, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Trade Organization (WTO) have put economic, political, anthropological, and cultural structures to address this, unfortunately these structures have not availed much. Rodrick’s statistics indicate that the commonality that globalization seeks has not been translated into a caring community; people are still wallowing in poverty whereas others are enjoying the benefits of globalization.

This paper argues that a clear conceptualization of poverty will affect how the globalized world would work towards eradication it; thus, narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor. Poverty in this case is conceptualized as both material and spiritual; as Sen (1999) and Myers (2011) articulate, poverty is all about those things and conditions that rob persons of a certain quality of life, of dignity and of well-being hence poverty is both material, relational and spiritual. The relational and spiritual aspects though often neglected, are foundational in creating a caring community. This is well exemplified in the application of the theological concept of *koinonia* in the Early Church. *Koinonia* as lived out in the church provides helpful corrective measures to our tendency toward an individualistic approach to community moving us toward a more understanding and caring community. The Early Church was a multi-ethnic community, yet she demonstrated that it is possible to live together as a community and care for one another.

Using the social scientific method, this study examines the concept of *koinonia* in the Early Church and how it functioned to address socio-economic needs within the church community. It explores the theological foundations of *koinonia* and draws implications of the concept on poverty eradication in the age of globalization. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section examines the meaning of the concept of *koinonia* by looking at its historical, philological, and theological background. The second section shows how the concept was applied in the Early Church by identifying and extracting the authentic message that the concept embodies and can be used in alleviation of poverty in the age of globalization. The third section draws implications that would foster a caring community in the age individualism, inequality and unequal distribution of resources that has widened the gap between the rich and the poor.

**The Concept of Koinonia Explained**

*Koinonia* is a multifaceted concept whose meaning and theological significance can be better articulated through a word study. Etymologically, *koinonia* belongs to the same family with the noun *koinos/koinonos* and the verb *koinoneo*. Both noun and verbal forms of the word serve as a backdrop for understanding the concept (Kittel, & Friedrich, 1965, p.797). According to Stott (1982), Kittel, & Friedrich (1965), the noun form refers to what is shared “in common or communal” that which we possess in common and that which is valuable whereas the verbal form refers to the act of holding something jointly. Thayer (1889) concludes that, *koinonia* is the spirit of generous sharing as contrasted to selfishness; a state of association of joint participation; fellowship, association, community, or communion.

 From this backdrop, *koinonia* centres on the shared community that involves deep close-knit participation among people who share and give for the benefit of everyone. It creates a sharing and caring community, a community that is vertically and horizontally oriented and approaches life holistically. The concept thus provides a holistic outlook on life whereby the common life and common good are at the core of relationships. According to Ramelli (2017), there can be no friendship without *koinonia* as it relates to commonality in the context of human society.

 In the Hellenistic world, the concept of *koinonia* was applied in both religious and social dimensions for as Rhee (2018) notes, the two dimensions are interwoven and inseparable. Religiously, Wenstrom (2002) asserts that *koinonia* focused on the unbroken relationship between man and gods as depicted in the lives of the Greek philosophers. He notes that Epictetus acknowledged that religions’ aim is *koinonia* with Zeus whereas Plato saw *koinonia* as the highest and most felicitous form of fellowship, which is the source of salvation, the preservation not merely of individuals, but the whole cosmos which includes both men and gods.

 Socially, the concept focused on a close-knit relationship amongst men. The Pythagoreans used *koinonia* to refer to “the fellowship of life” or the brotherly bond for it expressed the sense of brotherhood and a standing expression for the way social life was constituted. According to Plato, *koinonia* emphasized a sense of duty and common ownership within society including the sharing that was citizenship, for its political ordering was integral for “the preservation of society, and indeed of the cosmos (Kittel, & Friedrich, 1965).

 From the etymology and the usage of *koinonia* in the Hellenistic world, Williams (2000), concludes that *koinonia* was cognizant of the fact of the divine source of all the world’s goods. It expressed itself through the awareness of the connectional worth among the people of the world and functioned under the auspices of “right relations” in its most egalitarian significance. Hence according to him, *koinonia* as used both religiously and socially in the Hellenistic world meant “association, communion, fellowship, close relationship”; “generosity, fellow-feeling, altruism”; “sign of fellowship, proof of brotherly unity, gift, contribution”; “participation, sharing in something” as exemplified in the in the Early Church.

# Application of the Concept of Koinonia in the Early Church

The church was born in a multi-ethnic context; hence her membership was a cross section of the society which comprised of both the poor and the rich. At that time, Jerusalem was unstable due to natural phenomena such as famine and over population. This context prompted the church to embrace the concept of *koinonia* in both its religious and social dimensions. By applying the two dimensions of the concept, the church created a caring community whereby the rich shared their resources with the poor to an extend that none was needy in their midst. According to Williams (2000), the church did not seek for *idione* which reflects the individualism of the age of globalization but rather to *koinonia* which favours sociality which is built of egalitarian principle. Our focus here is how the church applied this concept in the book of Acts and the Pauline Epistles.

## The Concept of Koinonia in the Book of Acts

In Acts, the concept of *koinonia* first and foremost was relational; it began with a relationship with God. The caring community discussed in this book began immediately after the Pentecost, all those who believed in the resurrected Christ shared a common bond with God. This bond then led to their communion with one another; thus, their caring community was an outflow of the church’s restored relationship with God. This restoration made the first believers not only partakers of God’s blessing but partners with him in his agenda regarding the poor and less fortunate in the society. Therefore, as they shared in communion with Christ, they shared in the community of faith with others; *koinonia* with Christ inevitably involved *koinonia* with all believers (Williams, 2000).

Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 5:1-11 give accounts of how the church was sensitive to the needs of one another; there were no poor among them for the rich sold their possessions to meet the needs of the poor: “*All those who had believed were together and had all things in common . . . selling their property and possessions and…sharing them with all, as anyone might have need* (Acts 2:42-45). The rich selflessly shared their wealth with the poor in the community, for example, Barnabas sold his property and laid the proceeds at the Apostle’s feet. This voluntary and spontaneous sharing created a new community whereby there was no needy person in the community of believers (Acts 4:34, cf. Dt. 15:4, 11). Thus, they did not claim ownership of personal property; their property was meant to benefit the community. Constable (2007) observes that the church exhibited a community spirit of being mindful of the welfare of its members both materially and spiritually. When Ananias and Saphira (Acts 5:1-11) embraced an individualistic spirit instead of the community spirit, judgment befell them.

The *koinonia* of the church made her consider the less fortunate in their midst. In Acts 6:1-8 widows who are usually among the vulnerable in the society received relief from the church. This relief was to benefit all widows regardless their race or status in the society. When there was breach of equal distribution of the relief; Hebraic widows were favoured over the Hellenistic ones, the disciples stepped in and appointed deacons who would ensure equal distribution. Apart from the relief, Acts 9:36-43 acknowledges how individuals initiated projects to assist the poor, especially widows. Commenting on this attitude, Pilgrim (1981), asserts that in the Early Church there was neither discrimination or favouritism of one group over another or dominance of the rich members over the poor. He further notes that there was no gap between the rich and the poor for the new community was a caring one which felt obligated to ensure faithful administration of funds. Thus, the church was one body with one life, they experienced a common bond of fellowship and there was no one in need.

## The Concept of Koinonia in Pauline Epistles

Paul, in his letters used the concept of *koinonia*to designate financial sharing or collection; the Gentile churches were to share with the church in Jerusalem (2 Cor.9:11; Rom.15:26). Since *koinonia* with Christ was universal, there were no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female (Gal.3:28) for communion with Christ broke down any ethnic and cultural divisions. So, all were expected to have communion with each other. Paul reminded the churches he had planted that their relationship with Christ had concrete economic implications towards the Jerusalem church which was poverty stricken due to natural phenomena. They were to take responsibility over the poor in the Jewish church in Jerusalem; thus, the spirit of giving, receiving, sharing was not only reflected in Jerusalem but also in Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the world. Robinson (1979), observes that, the *koinonia* in spiritual things, for which the Jews were to give and the Gentiles receive, led in turn to a *koinonia*in material goods, for which the Gentiles were to give and the poor of the saints in Jerusalem receive (Rom. 12:13; 15:26; 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:13)..

According to Rhee (2018), this common bond was to be sustained in the church and that is why Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:17-34 rebuked the Corinthians for allowing social distinctions to disrupt and distort their *koinonia*/participation in the body and blood of Christ. His collection for Jews from Gentiles exemplified that the oneness of the new body of believers entailed dramatic economic sharing across ethnic and geographical lines. Paul was saying that the wealthy are to be rich in good deeds and economic sharing toward the poor (1 Tim. 6:18; cf. 2 Cor. 8:21). In response, the churches (Gal.2:10; 1 Cor.1:26) absorbed the *koinonia* spirit to an extent that Paul warned them against the fraudsters who wanted to take advantage of them.

# Implications

What relevance does the concept of *koinonia* as applied in the Early Church have for the globalized world where the gap between the poor and the rich is widening? Since we cannot oppose the changes of globalization or uncritically embrace them; there is need to tame the individualism and uncaring attitude which is widening this gap by creating a caring community. The concept of *koinonia* provides us with important inferences that can help eradicate poverty in a globalized yet poor world.

The first implication is that if we are to eradicate poverty in this age, we need to conceptualize it in terms of relationships rather than material deficit. Just as the Early Church’s caring community was founded on their relationship with God, so should the present society. This relationship should be the framework of interpreting the reality of poverty in a globalized world; it can provide ways of eradicating poverty. We need to remember that God does not separate being from doing, the two are in himis a relational God who created man to uphold right relationships. Our identity as Myers puts it, is expressed through our relationships; with God, self, fellowmen, and the environment (Myers, 2011, p.180). Unfortunately, these relationships are marred by sin and only conversion can mend them. God puts us right with himself through Christ and a good relationship with God should lead to a caring relationship with fellow men. Groody (2007), states that it is only conversion that can turn us away from globalization gods which lead to a self-seeking autonomy that sees the self as the source of life rather than a receptive creative agent of God’s divine power and reduces man’s value and worth to a ‘market fundamentalism.’ Conversion as he observes, will generate a community transformed by the love of God and others. It will also enhance “a deepening understanding of communion as right-relationship among all people and to carry out the theological imperative for Christian reflection.

Secondly, just as the Early Church understood her context and addressed poverty that was caused by natural phenomenon, there is need to understand the impact of globalization on poverty. We need to be alert of what is happening to people and communities as they get “integrated” in the globe for the whole world is the arena of God’s glory and of human accountability (Resolution, 2006). As Myers (2011) articulates, there is need to know who we are, where we are, what is wrong, and what time it is. As human beings created in God’s image to partner with him, we are living in an age characterized by individualism, inequality, and unequal distribution of resources leading to the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor. What do we have to do to change all these? We need to borrow a leaf from the partnership in the Early Church and let go the individualism, inequality, and unequal distribution of resources. There is need to embrace the overriding human responsibility for transmitting the creation as God’s gift to successive generations (Resolution, 2006). We must embrace the *koinonia* spirit which seeks to partner and share all the gifts bestowed upon us by God. As ethicist George Thomas (1955, p.317-318) puts it: “Christians must supplement the individualistic ideal of equality of opportunity with the more humane ideal of equality of consideration. This is the principle that everyone should be genuinely considered in the distribution of social benefit. . .

Thirdly, we must acknowledge that what we possess is meant to benefit the world. Material poverty is addressed through sharing of resources (Gal.6:2,10). The wealthy in the Early Church never considered personal property private; they sold it and laid the proceeds at the Apostles’ feet so that no one in their midst would be needy. They acknowledged God as the giver of wealth for the purpose of benefiting others, this then led to sharing equitably without some enjoying living in abundance whereas others lacked. In this individualistic age, we need to acknowledge that true wealth consists not in the accumulation of goods but in their distribution to others, not on cultivating into one’s bank account but in cultivating one’s heart, not in having more but in being more (Groody, 2007, p.85, 90). Commenting on this, Boerma (1980, p.69) explicates that one’s man’s prosperity is closely connected with that of others. One cannot be rich by himself hence the wealth of the rich is purged and transformed in the same way; this is why Paul urged the Corinthians (2 Cor.8-9) to complete their collection for the needy in Jerusalem. In doing this, Paul noted that they would discover the joy of corporate living which also brings spiritual blessings. All these must be intentional just as it was the case in Acts and Pauline epistles. The church did not just acknowledge the poor in their midst, but they acted on their behalf; they provided for them.

Fourthly, we need to acknowledge multiethnicity in the global village. As discussed earlier on, the Early church comprised of members from the cross-section of the community and did not discriminate or show favouritism of one group over another or dominance of the rich members over the poor (Pilgrim, 1981). By being non-discriminatory, we will be mindful about the welfare of every member in the community regardless their social status, race, and gender. The community will feel obligated to care for one another’s needs hence bridging the gap between the rich and the poor. This is a key steppingstone towards the eradication of poverty for as Williams (2000, p.94) asserts, it serves as a reminder that God owns the globe, it is his household which comprises of many kinds of cultural systems and with God at the centre, all cultures, races and genders should relate to each other

# Conclusion

The gap between the rich and the poor in an interconnected and integrated world can be addressed by adopting the concept of *koinonia* as exemplified in the Early Church’s association, communion, fellowship, close relationship, generosity, altruism, brotherly unity and contribution. These as articulated from both a religious and social dimension of *koinonia* are foundational in eradicating poverty for they conceptualize poverty as both material and spiritual. The community’s *koinonia* with God should translate into *koinonia* with human beings.

*Koinonia* with God gives the community a better perception of the material and spiritual aspects of poverty. It helps us understand our context and the resources bestowed upon the globe for the benefit of all, not just a few as is the case in the individualistic age of globalization. It also leads to a partnership with God; we partner with him in taking care of the poor in the community. Therefore, our *koinonia* with God and fellowmen is of essence in poverty eradication for it will narrow the gap between the rich and the poor in this age.

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