Editorial

A Challenge to Communion Ecclesiology

The current issue of Ecclesiology carries a study by Andrew Lincoln, Portland Professor of New Testament at the University of Gloucestershire, on the meaning and interpretation of koinonia in the New Testament, particularly in Paul. Professor Lincoln’s discussion has important implications for ecclesiology and ecumenism. It raises questions for both New Testament scholars and for theologians. In essence, it challenges the prevalent assumption in communion ecclesiology, which now underpins a great deal of our ecumenical dialogue and ecumenical agreements, that koinonein and its cognates refers to a shared participation in something held in common. The meaning ‘having in common’ remains, but the element of participation goes. (Lincoln goes on to give a substantial exposition of Paul’s treatment of communion between Christians in Romans and Philippians that is a model of how to handle this theme without falling into the trap of importing meanings from elsewhere.)

Professor Lincoln draws our attention to the recent study by Norbert Baumert, Koinonein und Metechein–synonym? Eine umfassende semantische Untersuchung (SBB 51; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2003). On the basis of an exhaustive study of Classical and New Testament Greek usage, Baumert concludes, contrary to a number of earlier studies that have been formative for ecumenical theology, that koinonein and metechein (and cognates) are not broadly synonymous; or to put it another way, that koinonein does not incorporate the aspect of participation signified by metechein. Lincoln’s provisional conclusion is that, in the light of Baumert’s analysis, the burden of proof now rests on those scholars who wish to challenge it, and that it is prudent not to build theological concepts of participation on koinonia.

Needless to say, and as Professor Lincoln himself points out, the New Testament has many other ways of speaking about the Christian participation in Christ, in the Holy Spirit, in the gospel. But it is not hard to see that, if Baumert’s view becomes generally accepted, the expansive theologies that describe the life of the Church as a participation in the life of the Holy Trinity, on the basis of the koinonia language of the New Testament, will have their
wings clipped. In itself, this would not be an unwelcome result. Considerably more reserve in the postulating of parallels between the inner life of God and the existence of the Church would be healthy. As Lincoln points out, the diverse usage of *koinonia* terms in the New Testament does not support the assumption that Paul, for example, operated with a fully worked out theology of communion (*koinonia*) that can be gleaned by collating all his references to this term.

However, it seems to me, as a non-specialist in this area, that there may well be some problems with Baumert’s position, not least in its attempt to cover all New Testament examples. The key question is whether *koinonia* sometimes – not necessarily always – signifies participation.

As Lincoln himself notes, one of the most difficult texts for Baumert to accommodate is 1 Corinthians 10.16, 18 (Baumert has an extensive discussion of this passage). This reference is important not simply for communion theology in general, but for sacramental theology in particular. ‘The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a *koinonia* in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a *koinonia* in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake (*metechomen*) of the one bread. Consider Israel according to the flesh; are not those who eat the sacrifices *koinonoi* in the altar?’ Here the element of participation in something held in common, linked to physical eating and drinking and expressed by *koiononia*, seems inescapable. Perhaps it is particularly significant that there is also what looks very much like a virtual synonymity of *koinonia* and *metoche*.

Another problem text, I think, would be 1 John 1.3: ‘we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship (*koinonia*) with us; and truly our fellowship (*koinonia*) is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ’ (cf. also vv. 6-7). The context, established in the first verse (‘what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life’), echoed in v. 3 (‘what we have seen and heard’) suggests a very direct, even sensuous experience of what it is that the authors want to share – which is, in a word, ‘Jesus Christ come in the flesh’ (4.2) – and a genuine participation in him, not simply a partnership or having in common.

I wonder what deeper linguistic, epistemological or even ontological factors are at work in Baumert’s approach. Is this an issue where the historic debate between nominalists and realists (in crude caricature, between Aristotelians and Platonists) is relevant? Certainly, in everyday English, to have something in common often implies that you share in that something and therefore