

# **‘Koinonia’—A Missing Ingredient in Today’s Church**

*A small congregation in Puerto Rico reminded me that we can’t build the New Testament church without supernatural love.*

Last week I preached for several days at Casa del Padre, a small but growing church near San Juan, Puerto Rico. The congregation meets in a rented facility with tile floors and folding chairs. They don’t have a worship leader yet, so a CD player provides accompaniment for the singing. The pastor, a gentle guy named Luis, keeps a second job to pay his family’s bills. Up until a few weeks ago, the church’s office was in his garage.

Casa del Padre is not a fancy place. But the church’s lack of sophistication is overshadowed by an amazing level of love. When I ministered on Sunday morning, the meeting began at 10:30 a.m. yet I didn’t leave the building until 5 p.m.—not because I preached too long but because nobody wanted to go home.

**“We must return to *koinonia*—but you can’t download it. There’s no app for it, and you can’t fake it. We will have to scrap artificial, event-driven programs if we want to return to the relational Christianity of the Book of Acts.”**

You might be tempted to say:

“That’s just the way Puerto Ricans are. They’re very relational.” It’s certainly true that Puerto Ricans love to party. And their food—especially the rice, beans, pork and *mofongo* (mashed plantains)—keep people coming back for more. But the authentic fellowship I experienced in San Juan can’t be trivialized as an expression of Latino culture. No, this Puerto Rican church understands a biblical secret many of us have forgotten.

The Book of Acts tells us that after the first disciples were baptized in the Holy Spirit, they were “continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to *fellowship*, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42, emphasis added). The Greek word used for “fellowship,” *koinonia*, appears here for the first time in the Bible and then is used 18 times throughout the New Testament.

*Koinonia*, which can be translated “partnership,” is a supernatural grace that causes Christians to love each other deeply. It was not possible before Pentecost because it is a manifestation of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Just as *dunamis* power enables us to heal the sick or work miracles, *koinonia* knits our hearts and binds us together.

Christianity is the only religion on earth that invisibly connects its followers with supernatural

affection. It makes us feel  
like a family—and our love for each other, if it is truly from  
the Spirit,  
transcends all boundaries of race, gender, age and class. It  
motivates us to  
pray for one another, bear one another's burdens and lay our  
lives down for one  
another.

After the outpouring of the  
Spirit in Acts 2, *koinonia* caused the early disciples to share  
their  
possessions unselfishly (v. 44-45) and to share meals often  
(v. 46). Many  
people decided to become Christians when they saw this loving  
community (v.  
47).

*Koinonia* was an essential ingredient in the New Testament  
church. It is what  
connected Paul, Timothy, Luke, Titus, Priscilla and Aquilla as  
a team. It is  
what held the early churches together in the face of  
persecution and caused  
them to lay down their lives for one another.

In many parts of the  
church we've forgotten about the essential need for fellowship  
and tried to  
build the church without it. We developed a sterile church  
model that is  
event-driven and celebrity-focused rather than genuinely  
relational.

We build theater-style  
buildings where crowds listen to one guy talk. The crowds are  
quickly whisked  
out of the sanctuary to make room for the next group. Many of

these people  
never process with anyone else what they learned, never join a  
small group and  
never receive any form of one-on-one discipleship.

We need the apostles'  
teaching of Acts 2:42, of course, but without the *koinonia*  
mentioned in  
the same verse, teaching can become dry and clinical. The  
church is supposed  
to be more like a family room than a classroom.

Because we lack  
relationships today, we have tried to fill the void with  
technology. We think  
if we can create a wow factor with cool video clips, 3-D  
sermons and edgy  
worship bands, the crowds will scream for more. I don't think  
so. Trendy can  
quickly become shallow.

Pastors and Christian  
leaders often tell me that they don't have any friends. Close  
relationships are  
scarce. This is often because leaders felt betrayed in a  
previous relationship.  
Meanwhile, Many Christians have given up on church  
altogether—not because of  
doctrinal issues but because they were wounded by someone at  
church.

I am not an advocate of  
getting rid of church (like the spiritual arsonists who think  
all church  
buildings are outdated and irrelevant). The church is still  
God's Plan A, and  
it will always be. Acts 2:42 contains the blueprint.

We must return to *koinonia*—but you can't download it.  
There's no app for it, and you can't fake it. (If you want a  
concrete example  
to copy, I can give you the address of a church in San Juan.)  
We will have to scrap  
artificial, event-driven programs if we want to return to the  
relational  
Christianity of the Book of Acts.

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