"KOINONIA" IN REFORMED THEOLOGY

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Abstract. This presentation is an edited and revised version of the presentation given at the Ecumenical International Conference "Active Participation in Community", Pannonhalma Archabbey, 21 October 2022. The theme of the conference was synodality – accordingly, this paper aims to present the basic features of Reformed ecclesiology. It highlights the fact that adapting different forms of communion from a secular context is not a viable solution for the church, even though it remains a challenge for the church today in almost all countries. Instead, the ecclesiological and practical implications of koinonia must be considered. According to Reformed theology and Confessions of faith, the ministries, services and governance of the church derive from the koinonia with Christ and with one another. Participation in this communion requires a concrete form of ecclesial and social service; it is concretized by participation in the threefold office of Christ (royal, priestly and prophetic). Last but not least, sharing in the threefold office of Christ has an as yet unexploited ecumenical potential for the common witness of Christians.

Keywords. Reformed Theology, Communion, Church organization, threefold office of Christ

„If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans", says an old rabbinic saying. The relevance of this saying is not that it is meaningless to talk about the plans of our church or our churches, especially the effort to seek more Gospel-oriented aspects of community life and church government. Besides, Christians are often assumed to be humorless. Reformed Christians in particular have a reputation for gloomy composure and sanguine sobriety. And the world is amused from time to time by the contradiction between the churches' loss of socio-political public space and their assertion of their own importance…

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The question is not even whether the open or implicit indifference, cynicism or mockery against the churches is justified or excessive. The point, I think, is rather whether we have the theological humor – the humor of faith – to look at our own efforts with real sobriety and at God's possibilities with greater hope. *Karl Barth* says that „to have humor" we must indeed „become children of God", and it is only in the light of Christ as the „light of the world" that we realize how much we do not have control over the future here in the present.[2]

And to show that Calvin was not so lacking in humor as posterity would have us believe, here is a quote from him on his view of the synods:

> "Even in their ancient and purer councils there is something to be desiderated, either because the otherwise learned and prudent men who attended, being distracted by the business in hand, did not attend to many things beside; or because, occupied with grave and more serious measures, they winked at some of lesser moment; or simply because, as men, they were deceived through ignorance, or were sometimes carried headlong by some feeling in excess. […] any one who reads their acts will observe many infirmities, not to use a stronger term.[3]

At the same time, Calvin knows no greater authority on matters of faith and doctrinal development than the universal Church, represented by the Synod.

Therefore, what is needed for the Christian churches, with their specific traditions and the diversity of their different structures, to learn and continue to learn the unexplored dimensions of community life, and at the same time to provide a model for the world and civil society - with humor (i.e. with an awareness of the relative nature of human effort) and hope (i.e. with openness to God's possibilities even where they are not yet evident). The *internal basis for* holding this duality together, according to Reformed theology, is „koinonia", and *its external form is the* shaping of community life – the latter being the demand and work of the believer in obedience to the Word.

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[2]   Karl BARTH, *Ethik II. (1928/1929)*, GA II/10 (hrsg. Dietrich Braun), Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1978, 438.

[3]   John CALVIN, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. by Henry Beveridge, 1845), Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2011, (4,9,10), 973.

The theological sense of communion – and the problem of non-theological notions of community

Community as a concept has a good reputation these days. Politicians are calling for the organization of community, and many professional and stakeholder organizations, associations, NGOs and, not least, churches are working to build communities. Community organizing courses are starting up at university level, but there is also a demand for religious organizations based on the principle of utility: a religious organization is only relevant to social life if it builds communities…

The problem starts when this demand is accepted without reflection by religious organizations, specifically by our churches, when they adapt this demand (as evidence) without theological reflection. In political and social contexts, a variety of values can form the theoretical basis for community organization: a common language and culture, a shared past, economic interests, political goals. Such self-organization can have positive effects – as the history of European culture and civilization shows, and in which the churches have played (and can play) a positive role – but it can also be ideological or lead to conflict. Historical examples show the disastrous consequences when totalitarian regimes have tried to establish their power based on a sense of community of race, ethnicity or class identities. In this regard, *Max Weber's* critique is still relevant and merits attention today: the claim to a community based only on a "subjective consciousness of emotional belonging" is ultimately an object of the imagination ("geglaubte Gemeinschaft").[4] This therefore calls for further carefulness and critical reflection in the social sphere. And the expectations of society towards the church – o be actively involved in the cultivation of different (non-biblical and non-theological) forms of community or to provide a framework for the experience of certain forms of community identity – are both a burden and irritating for the church.

But often, even within the church, we use the concept of community without reflection. Although our use of the term community reflects the meaning of the Greek words *koinonia* and the Latin *communio*, the everyday use of the term in the Church does not necessarily include the theological implications of the term. Almost all congregations, parishes or territorial churches are engaged in

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[4] Max WEBER, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft, Kapitel IV: Ethnische Gemeinschaftsbeziehungen* (Digitale Bibliothek 58), Berlin: Directmedia, 2011, §2, 237.

intensive community-organizing work, maintaining a network of relationships, from partner church meetings to jointly undertaken or supported projects (e.g. social, cultural, ecological, etc.). In the ecumenical movement and at the level of inter-denominational relations, common occasions, commemorations, worship services, demonstrative cooperation on political and public issues, solidarity with one another, all create a sense of community. It is based on a shared past or a pressing present. All such intra- or inter-denominational activities are built around the notion of community, which has become a paradigm – although the different underlying theological traditions and hermeneutical approaches make it a problematic issue. Not all initiatives, encounters or joint actions are theological communities.[5] On the other hand, from a theological point of view, any attempt to give a Christian rhetorical color to various community ideas and to accept them without theological reflection within the church is dubious. This phenomenon leads over time to the deconstruction of the substance of the church – especially when the (supposed) ideas and values on which the community organization is based are also represented by other associations or formations within a society. In Reformed Theology, the meaning of the concept of *community* in the church (or *ecclesial communion*), whether at the level of a local, legally identifiable local parish or in an interdenominational context, is *a common sharing in Christ*, through the sacraments and the Word, by the creative power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, communion in God, communion with God and communion with one another! In this sense, this communion of sharing is provided by the Holy Spirit (see Phil 2,1; 2 Cor 13,13), the Spirit of the risen Cyrios-Christ, and those who share in this reality receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.[6] According to Calvin

> "All the elect of God are so joined together in Christ, that as they depend on one head, so they are as it were compacted into one body, being knit together like its different members; made truly one by living together under the same Spirit of God in one faith, hope, and charity…"[7]

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5   At the same time, the terms used in different languages (e.g. „Kirchengemeinschaft", „communion", „fellowship") lead to translation difficulties, interpretative possibilities, and practical differences.

6   See Rudolf Bultmann, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976, 253–254.

7   Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (4,1,2), 846.

Or, as Luther says, in the Eucharist the church becomes an integral unity with Christ and with each other – „one dough"[8] .

So to be *in the* koinonia is to be in Christ. Or, in Barth's definition, to be in the congregation gathered for worship is to be „in the earthly-historical form of the existence of Jesus Christ"[9]. The cause and source of this communion is therefore a spiritual event: the common participation of baptized believers in the presence of Christ, according to the gospel promise: „For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt 18,20). In this sense, the existence of the church is indeed a matter of faith,[10] *credo ecclesiam* – as the Apostles' Creed testifies. But as such, the Church is not an „invisible formation", but a „particular gathering of men"[11] by which the universal Church of Christ is realized in a concrete historical place and time. In other words, the work of the Holy Spirit is embodied in the visible unity and, in this sense, in the community. This local and visible community is part of the *communio sanctorum*, made concrete *by the presence of* Christ, by the *interaction of* its members with him and with one another, and by their common *sharing*.[12] This spiritual process is moved by a force over which man

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8   „Eyn kuchen mit Christo […] ein kuchen mit einender als mit dem nehisten" – says Luther in a High Thursday sermon in 1523. This transformation into „one dough" also indicates that for Luther, experiencing unity with Christ is not an individualistic possibility, but an act of communion from the very beginning. See Martin LUTHER, „Sermon am grünen Donnerstag (2. April 1523)", in *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 12., Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1891, 485.

9   Karl BARTH, *Church Dogmatics* (CD), *Volume IV/1: Doctrine of Reconciliation* (§. 57–63), edited by Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas Forsyth Torrance, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956, 716

10 See Karl BARTH, *Credo. Die Hauptprobleme der Dogmatik, dargestellt im Anschluß an das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis. 16 Vorlesungen, gehalten an der Universität Utrecht im Februar und März 1935*, Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1948, 136; See also Jan Milič LOCHMAN, *Az Apostoli Hitvallás. Dogmatikai vázlatok a Hiszekegy nyomán* [The Apostles' Creed. Dogmatic Sketches on the Basis of the Apostles' Creed], Budapest: Kálvin Kiadó, 1995, 157–161.

11 BARTH, *Credo*, 136.

12 See BARTH, *Credo*, 151; Eberhard HAUSCHILD – Uta POHL-PATALONG, „Gemeinde, kirchlich", in Werner Heun (eds.): *Evangelisches Staatslexikon (EStL)*, Neuausgabe, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 2006, 696. At the same time, this experienced reality (participation in the relationship with God) also affects the sphere of everyday life (e.g. community of property, solidarity), and begins already here, in this earthly life, and

(and the Church) does not have control - but which can be described empirically in terms of experience, perception, insight, cognition and understanding.[13] In the language of faith, this is understood by theology and the Church as the work of the Holy Spirit. The individuals participating in this spiritual event become a community: they are caught up in a sense of "we", experiencing themselves as part of a collective[14] that is different from any other group or community formation in the world. And it is the gathering together in the name of the Triune God, the praise and supplication, the listening to the interpretation of the Scriptures, the living of the sacraments, the confession of faith and the blessing that gives it its permanence and intensity. All the institutional, organizational and structural forms of the Church make sense in terms of this spiritual event, this communion, and vice versa: their raison d'être is to provide a framework for this spiritual event. This communion cannot therefore be humanly created or (like an event) managed – it „happens" when and if the believers are touched by the Gospel and the Spirit.

The consequences of koinonia for the organizational life of the Church

The Reformed understanding of *koinonia*, is that the creating work of God's Word is its source and foundation. In other words, koinonia is „*creatura verbi*"[15], which also marks the beginning of the historical existence of faith and the Church.

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affects the afterlife. See Friedrich Hauck, κοινός, κοινωνία in: Gerhard Kittel et al. (eds.): *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament (ThWNT)*, Vol. 3, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1938, 804–810.

[13] Hauschild-Pohl-Patalong: Gemeinde, 696.

[14] More on the theological implications of the collective acting actors, see Sándor Fazakas, „From collective sin to collective reconciliation: Some aspects of the church's involvement and role in the development of historical and social sin and the process of reconciliation", in Julia Enxing – Dominik Gautier – Dorothea Wojtczak (eds.), *Satisfactio: Über (Un-)Möglichkeiten von Wiedergutmachung*, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2019, 134–153.

[15] „Ecclesia enim nascitur verbo promissionis per fidem…" See Martin Luther, „De captivitate Babylonica (1520)", in *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 6, Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1888, 560. See also Calvin: „Wherever we see the word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the Church of God has some existence, since his promise cannot fail." Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (4,1,9), 853.

However, we should make further distinctions concerning the socio-historical existence of the Church: (a) we have to distinguish between the *hidden reality* of the origin of this communion, i.e. *of the Church*, and (b) *the external order* that is *experienced by all* (and the different aspects and manifestations of this external order as a social formation).[16] Hidden is the reality that creates faith and the Church, because man cannot have or create it, he can only receive it as a gift. But what man has to deal with is the concrete, visible form of this communion. The order, the structure, the external form of the community is already a human enterprise: the community of believers shapes itself if and when it obeys the will of God. However, any committed effort, which we call conciliarity or synodality, is, according to Reformed theology, nothing other than the work of the believer committed to God and listening to God's will; it is the search for correspondence and correspondence between the divine action, which creates the Church and the human actions, which shape the empirical reality of the Church.

Well, the above theological clarifications and insights were crucial for the organizational forms of the Reformed Church and its governance - at least in terms of theological precision. The conception of the church as a "koinonia" was the *theological deep layer*, which should (should have) shaped and formed the church's experienceable form of being and its external order embedded in historical-social determinations… (I say "should have" because this "shaping" was often done in the light of realities, by re-functionalizing existing structural elements, and later, guided by tradition). In terms of content, however, this church-forming claim of the Reformed creeds was built around three elements. These are:

(1) the offices and government of the church,
(2) the relationship of the congregations to one another, i.e. the synodical structure of the church,
(3) and the order of life of the congregation, including church discipline.

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[16] Eilert HERMS, "Das evangelische Verständnis von Kirchengemeinschaft", in Eilert Herms, *Von der Glaubenseinheit zur Kirchengemeinschaft*, Vol. 2, Marburg: N.G. Elwert Verlag, 2003, 303–304; See also Michael BEINTKER, "Das Wort vom Kreuz und die Gestalt der Kirche", *Kerygma und Dogma* 39 (1993), 150–151.161. This distinction is in line with the teaching of the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europa on the church, which gives this context and the realization of the church's existence in the world in terms of „Grund", „Gestalt" and „Gestaltung". See LEUENBERGER KIRCHENGEMEINSCHAFT – GEMEINSCHAFT REFORMATORISCHER KIRCHEN IN EUROPA, *Die Kirche Jesu Christi* (Leuenberger Texte 1), ed. by Wilhelm Hüffmeier, Frankfurt am Main: Otto Lembeck Verlag, ³2001, 21–63.

Regarding (1) offices, it is useful to note briefly that the Reformed confessions define all offices as ministries, but that the basis of all offices is the office of Christ – that is, all ministries are subordinate to the unique and threefold office (as Prophet, Priest and King) of Christ. At the same time, the plurality of offices in the Church is recognized: all offices (pastoral, elder, diaconal) are legitimated by participation in the body of Christ, they are functions of the head (Christ), and they are called to lead the church only together, complementing each other. From the very outset, there is no subordination or superiority between them, no dependence on authority.

Concerning (2) the synodical structure of the church, it is important to underline that the common position of Reformed theology and the Reformed Confessions of Faith in this regard is that the church, consisting of congregations, is built "from below", from the gifts of the Holy Spirit given to the body of Christ. The so-called Presbyterian-Synodal System of reformed Churches does not derive from a democratic principle of popular representation, nor even from a principle of synodalism, but *from the need for spiritual communion of* believing congregations with one another. It cannot be denied that in the Reformed churches, too, a practice has developed over time which, while claiming democratic principles, has resulted in a deformed practice based on false principles: for example, where the church operates a quasi-church parliament, or where church offices at various levels rule over congregations as authorities. *Paul Jacobs* points out that this deformed practice is essentially *the result of a reversal of cause and effect*[17]: that is, Christ as the basis and source of all offices is replaced by the church organization, which is designed and conceived in one way or another, becomes self-serving and dominant, and as such no longer serves the edification of the congregations. Thus, the reference to Christ remains merely a form of self-justification.

Regarding (3) lifestyles of believers and discipline, it is worth mentioning that in the reading of the Reformed Confessions, the main emphasis on the issue of church discipline – contrary to later interpretations and negative assumptions that still persist today – was not on rigorous punishment, exclusion, or even education. The need for discipline and disciplining appeared only when, like the former, the link between cause and effect was broken: that is to say, the invocation of the Word was not followed by a life order, based on faith and voluntarily

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[17] Paul JACOBS, *Theologie reformierter Bekenntnisschriften in Grundzügen*, Neukirchen: Verlag der Buchhandlungen des Erziehungsvereins, 1959, 123.

assumed, in accordance with the Gospel. In other words, the hearing of the Word, participation in communion/eucharistic communion, blessing, was not followed by a consecrated life.

These three aspects must be in *a dynamic* – even not free from tension – relationship. The organizational order of the Church must be dynamic in the sense of the „theological deep layer" mentioned above. This means that organizational issues need to be reviewed from time to time according to the criterion of the extent to which human orders contribute to the true worship of God, the practice of faith, the edification of the Church and the good order of life together in general. The external order of the church is therefore not fixed finally - especially if the existing order and form have been developed based on previous faith experiences or in the light of past socio-historical realities. For the community of believers, the revision of the external form must be a matter of negotiation, theological reflections and consensus seeking, and at the same time open to renewal, revision and improvement. At the same time, the Church's particular form of organization can be the result of *interaction*: it is shaped by the tension, interaction and interrelation of biblical and theological truths, as well as socio-cultural, legal and political conditions.

How does this „koinonia-based consequence", i.e. the order of life of the communion of believers, become concrete?

Reformed theology answers this question by sharing in threefold office of Christ. This is not an exclusively Reformed approach, by the way. This „formula" is also relevant ecumenically, as *Edmund Schlink* notes: although it was not created before the great schism, but after it, it is nevertheless found in the teaching of almost all Christian denominations.[18] At its core, participation in the threefold office of Christ (*triplex munus Christi*) enables us to understand the public work of Jesus Christ through his church in the world and to participate in his work as called ministers of *that* Church. In Reformed theology we find it in several orders.[19] I will now follow the recommendation that emerged from the theological dialogue between

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[18] Edmund Schlink, *Ökumenische Dogmatik. Grundzüge*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983, 414.

[19] See Calvin: „Therefore, that faith may find in Christ a solid ground of salvation, and so rest in him, we must set out with this principle, that the office which he received from the Father consists of three parts. For he was appointed both Prophet, King, and Priest…" Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2,15,1), 416.

Daniel Migliore from Princeton and *Michael Welker* from Heidelberg, which starts from the pre-paschal life and public ministry of Jesus Christ.[20]

The *kingdom of Jesus Christ* revealed before Easter is a clear witness to the power of freedom and servant love. Though he was King, above all and above all, he took the form of a servant, reaching out to the lowly. „For this king is not only a king, but both a brother and a friend, yes, a poor and an outcast."[21] Therefore, this kingship, in the light of the filling of the Spirit, revolutionizes the hierarchical and monarchical order of the Church, as well as the power structures of political systems. This coming of Christ to the little man is made possible only by „free and creative self-limitation…"[22]

What might be the implications of this for the believer in Christ, the church, and the world? Well, through free self-restraint in gratitude, for the good of neighbor and environment, and by protesting against oppressive mechanisms, it is possible to create a situation for fellow human beings who are suffering and in need, in which they can taste the flavor of active love. It is a kind of diaconal ethos, a way of living the Christian soul that is perhaps unique and incomparable in our world, but which makes possible a different and qualitative life. An ethical orientation that is not only reactive but *pro-active*, preferably at a local level, making its impact felt in the world, with sensitivity to local problems.

The dimension of *Christ's office as High Priest* is revealed, among other things, in the words of Hebrews: „He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people" (Heb 2:17). The church shares not only in the life of Jesus, but also, through the Holy Spirit, in his office as High Priest. In this place we are confronted with the reality of the universal priesthood of the faithful, whose ministry goes beyond the framework of liturgical worship and the dimensions of the cultivation of traditional religious culture. What could be the consequence of this? *Worship rightly* understood and celebrated, and *an ethos of atonement* and *reconciliation*. Rightly interpreted Worship serves to open, consolidate and deepen the knowledge of God – the knowledge of God that is lacking in the secular world. This lack of knowledge leads to religious-secular uncertainty; at the age of shaken life, man desperately

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[20] See Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999, 155; Welker, Michael: *Gottes Offenbarung. Christologie*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2012, 201.

[21] Welker: Ibid, 223,

[22] Ibid.

seeks possibilities of interpretation, including religious interpretation: e.g. why is suffering in the world, or what is the meaning of life? These questions need answers – in the light of a rightly understood knowledge of God. And our world, our environment, is dependent on peace and reconciliation. Not only because the issue of historical-social guilt, the heavy legacy of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, the history of wars past and present, weigh heavily and in many ways on the present - both East and West. But every day, the people and social actors of our time, their religious communities and civil organizations, are becoming part of new and new histories of conflicts, driven by economic, political or ideological interests. The new situations of conflict caused by new injustices and political struggles need to be addressed through reconciliation. Our churches can play a key role in this.

It cannot be overlooked and has been proven on numerous occasions and in many situations since then, that it is precisely those societies, countries or regions that suffer most today from the emergence of new injustices, human rights violations and extremist political tendencies, where there is simply no opportunity to come to terms with past and present conflicts, to learn from the mistakes of the past.

The participation in *Christ's prophetic ministry* and its implications may seem offensive. This is because in his preaching Jesus not only promised salvation but also judgment. He proclaimed his own suffering, but he also confronted the political, religious and opinion-forming forces of his time with the validity of the divine will. Christians and churches who share in Christ's prophetic ministry will always be exposed to the moral, cultural, political, and economic laws of their time and may be confronted by the „opinion-makers" of their own age. For the believer is and will inevitably be exposed to these conflicts if theology and the Church do not seek to affirm unreservedly the events of the world around actions and the us and rhetoric of those in power but seek to analyze the context in a factual way. False prophets have always been quick to join the chorus of the enthusiastic majority. But true prophecy demands justice in concrete times and situations and is open to criticism… but also open to self-criticism.

In summary, we know that the tensions and conflicts generated by critical reflection and self-critical analysis can make the church's external and internal relationships and capacity for action extremely difficult, but ultimately can be of great service to community life. It can be a warning against the tendency of the powers and authorities of the world to absolutize, and a warning against the forces

(economic, political, media, etc.) which seek to deprive man of his internal and external freedom. However, this prophetic voice can also be directed inwards: with critical self-reflection towards the inner circles of a Church which is on the path of self-justification and self-preservation, but in the hope of ever-timely renewal and self-correction - in the sense of *semper reformanda semper actualis*

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