

The Fellowship of the Holy Spirit

Some Notes on the Best Translation of the Phrase,
"The Fellowship of the Holy Spirit" II Cor. XIII 14.

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1. The Importance of the Phrase.

THE importance of this phrase scarcely needs emphasising. It is used at the end of every service of Morning and Evening prayer, and on many similar occasions. It stands for the central distinctive Christian experience of the gift of the Holy Spirit. The majority of people take their theology from the phrases they hear and use in their worship. It is obviously urgent that the phrase as translated into Chinese should correctly represent the meaning it first had in the experience of the early Church.

2. General Points to be Considered in Translation.

(a) The first point to be considered is accuracy. The sentence we use as a grace in worship is a direct quotation from II. Cor. xiii 14. The phrase as translated should therefore correctly convey the meaning of St. Paul, as contained in his original Greek phrase.

(a) Secondly doctrinal considerations are important. The phrase stands for a teaching about the Holy Spirit, which in turn points to an experience of the Holy Spirit. We need to retain as far as possible every shade of meaning which the original phrase carried. In particular we must be careful not to neglect teaching which was important in the first life of the Church, and which may be as urgent, yet relatively neglected, in the life of the Church today.

(c) Thirdly comes the importance of finding a phrase which is good Chinese. This is obviously important for a phrase which is to be continually used in worship. It is obviously third in place, for we should not want a phrase however good, which had a wrong meaning.

(d) The question may arise whether or not we can use a new Chinese phrase, and it is important to see this question truly. In the history of human affairs and human language, new ideas constantly arise which need new terms for their expression. This is equally true in the material as in the spiritual field. To take a simple and obvious instance, the term 飛機, which is now in constant idiomatic use, would have seemed a strange and unnatural expression before the invention of aeroplanes. A new invention needed a new term, and a new term was formed by the building together of two words into a compound.

In the development of Christianity, new experiences arise, which are genuinely a fresh creation of the Spirit of God, and for which therefore no term could exist apart from Christian experience. In every language two courses have then been possible; and in every language sometimes one, sometimes the other has been followed. We can on the one hand take a term in common use, and read into

it a new and different meaning to convey the new experience. Thus the simple word "love" means something more to the Christian who has seen the love of Christ, than it could ever mean apart from the knowledge of Christ. On the other hand we can invent a new phrase for the new Christian experience, in precisely the same way that the phrase 飛機 was invented. It is important to see that we must of necessity adopt one or the other of these courses. If we sought always to use old pre-Christian phrases in their old meaning, we should by that imply that Christ had not brought anything new into human experience.

3. The Original Meaning of the Phrase, the Fellowship of the Spirit.

With these considerations in view, we can now ask, what is the original meaning of the phrase for the Holy Spirit, which we use in the Grace.

The original phrase in the Greek is *He Koinonia Tou Hagiou Pneumatos*. We have to ask what the word *Koinonia* means. We have to ask the meaning of this word in itself, considering its use in other places in St. Paul's writing, or in other New Testament writings. We then further have to ask what is the relationship of the Holy Spirit to *He Koinonia* in this particular phrase.

We may say at once that this is no easy task. The word *Koinonia* became almost a technical term in the early Church for their new experience. By the time St. Paul used it, it had gathered up into itself a rich content of new meaning from its associations in the life and teaching of the Early Church. Further, the construction of this particular phrase in the Greek is ambiguous. One commentator remarks that "no exegetical skill" can give us certainty as to the exact meaning of this phrase. (Lietzmann quoted by Plummer in the *International Critical Commentary*.)

Certain conclusions however emerge fairly clearly.

(a) If we turn to the dictionaries, the following English equivalents are used for the word *Koinonia*; *fellowship, association, community, joint participation, intercourse*. A German-Greek dictionary gives the translations, *Gemeinschaft, enge Verbindung, innige Beziehung*. The word thus has the sense of a communion or fellowship, whose members have a mutual relationship of intimacy.

(b) If we turn to the New Testament use, we shall find the word used equally of the fellowship between God and man, and between man and man. A peculiarly clear case is to be found in I John I:6-7 where the word is first used of fellowship with God, and then of the fellowship of man with man.

It is clear that this double use expresses a fundamental point in Christian teaching and experience. It is because of our common fellowship with Christ that we are drawn into a new intimacy of fellowship with one another. Just because Christ is love, there must be this double fellowship. If we are truly in fellowship with Him, we must be drawn into a new close fellowship with others whom He loves; apart from such fellowship, in other words apart from

Chinese have remained individualist over against the wider circles of social relationship. It is all the more urgent, in a phrase which for many will sum up the teaching of the Christian Church, to keep this sense of social relationship and responsibility, which in its original sense the phrase undoubtedly contains.

5. The Chinese Translation of the Phrase, the Fellowship of the Spirit.

We are now in a position to look at the various Chinese translations which have been adopted; and to weigh their various merits by the standards originally suggested.

(a) 感動 This is the translation in the earlier versions of the Cantonese Prayer Book; it is used in the American Prayer Book; it is also used in the present edition of the Kuoyu Bible, Edition 3235.

Of this translation we may say that it is good Chinese, in the sense that it is an idiomatic combination; and that it has very little else if anything to commend it!

Strictly translated back into English, the phrase means the influence of the Holy Spirit. Whatever the original Greek exactly does mean, quite certainly it does not mean this!

It does not accurately convey the relationship of man with the Holy Spirit. Influence is a one-sided relationship, fellowship is a two-sided relationship. However difficult the latter double relationship may be, it is suggested in such other New Testament phrases as, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us," Acts XV:28, and "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God which worketh in you." Philippians, II:12,13. Man in Christian teaching is not merely a passive recipient of influence; he is also called to exercise his own powers of choice and thought and judgement in a mutual relationship of fellowship with God.

Much more important, this translation excludes, and cannot even with interpretation be made to include, the relationship of fellowship between man and man. It is open to a purely individualistic interpretation of the Spirit's influence on each individual as an isolated unit. It does not suggest, and cannot be made to mean the view, that the Spirit is the Creator of a fellowship between man with man, in which the individual is called out of his isolationism into a life of love. This fellowship of man with man is suggested in the original Greek phrase; it is an essential Christian doctrine; it is a doctrine of especial importance in the presentation of Christianity to China. It is urgent therefore that this doctrine should also be kept at this place to which it properly belongs, the last words of most periods of Christian prayer and worship.

(b) 感通 This is the translation which was adopted by Mr. Jenkins in the later versions of the Cantonese Morning and Evening Prayer. It is also used in the later versions of the Cantonese New Testament. Its use is not confined to the colloquial Cantonese translations, for it is also used in the most classical of the translations, in the Wenli Bible, Union Version.

A number of people object to this translation, on the ground that it is not an idiomatic Chinese combination. If the actual characters were read and seen, it would probably be understood; if it was merely heard by someone who had not been taught its meaning, it would be a meaningless sound. In any case, its use might offend those who cared for the accurate use of Chinese terms.

Before the phrase is condemned on this ground, one or two things must be said. We have already noted that new experiences inevitably need new words for their expression. We must either take an old word and read a new meaning into it, or coin a new phrase. There may be actual advantages in the latter course. The old word may leave people thinking that the old meaning is adequate; the new word, which has no old meaning, may by its very strangeness awake in hearers an awareness that Christianity has a new life to offer them, which cannot be contained within the limits of their old vocabulary. Whether this particular phrase can be justified on these grounds, it must be left to Chinese to say. At least we must claim that there is a development in the soul of man, not less than in his use of material things; and that Christianity is quite as justified in coining a new vocabulary for its new distinctive experiences, as is the world of science in the progress of mechanical civilisation. Moreover it must be noted that this particular phrase has already now had a history of some years, and is therefore already current coin, familiar to very many Christian hearers.

As to the actual merits of this phrase, it must be said that it is certainly an improvement on the earlier one. The character 通 was substituted for the character 動 to modify the sense of influence, and to bring in a little more of the sense of fellowship.

On the whole, however, this phrase still suffers from most of the objections raised against the first one. It still mainly suggests the one-sided relationship of influence, rather than the mutual relationship of fellowship. It still suggests the relationship of the Holy Spirit to man, and does very little to suggest the resulting relationship of man with man. The most that can be said for it is that it is open to receive this latter significance, with proper exposition; and that the very fact that it is meaningless without interpretation suggests that it stands for something new and makes such interpretation necessary.

Neither of the phrases which have so far been mainly used are very satisfactory. Neither suggests that sense of Christianity as a society calling man out of an isolated individualism, which is present in the original term. We must therefore ask that if this second phrase is abandoned as bad Chinese, it is not in order to return to the first phrase which shares with it in being bad translation, but rather in order to go forward and find another translation that is new. For this several possibilities are available and have in fact sometimes been used. We must consider briefly these other possibilities, and invite Chinese to say which of them comes closest to interpreting the full range of meaning in the original phrase, while also according with Chinese standards of style.

(c) 交通 This phrase has already been used for translating the fellowship of the Spirit, Koinonia Pneumatos, in both the Kuoyu and the Cantonese Bible, in Philippians II:1. (Incidentally a reference to the Greek Koinonia in a Greek concordance, and an inspection of the corresponding passages in the Chinese of different versions, will show what very various courses the translators did pursue, in translating this all important primitive Christian term!)

Of this phrase we may say that it is idiomatic Chinese. It is a definite improvement on either of the first two, in that it does suggest the mutual relationship of fellowship, and not merely the one-sided relationship of influence.

This phrase has, however, one grave drawback which probably makes its use impossible. When it is qualified by a spiritual term, as in Philippians II:1 it can stand for the communion between God and man. It cannot however unfortunately stand for the spiritual communion between man and man. On the plane of earthly relationships, it has already been specialised in the purely physical material sense, for movement from place to place, or communications in the sense of transport. It is true that on earth the spiritual continually has to invade and redeem the material! In the modern world, as in the earliest days of the Church, transport may play an all important part in building the fellowship of the Church! But it would be stretching this point too far, to let this phrase suggest that intimate bond of friendship between soul and soul, which is created by a common allegiance to Christ, and is suggested as part at least of the meaning of the term koinonia.

(d) 友誼 Occasionally this term has been used to translate the fellowship of the Spirit. This again is an improvement on anything we have so far had. It is an idiomatic combination. It expresses admirably the double relationship of friendship with God and the resulting deepening of friendship with man. At first sight it may not bear this meaning; but it is open to both interpretations, and with Christian teaching, it could be made to bear the full meaning of the term koinonia.

Probably however we have not yet quite found the ideal term. In English, if we compare carefully the meaning of friendship with that of fellowship, we shall probably say that the former is slightly more natural, slightly more sentimental. Friendship lacks the slight element of gravity which is present in the less usual term fellowship. Moreover friendship normally suggests the relationship of two close friends, fellowship normally suggests membership of a larger group. The difference is slight; and there is one admirable precedent for calling men "friends of God and prophets," Wisdom (VII:27) and a still better precedent for God speaking to man as a friend. Exodus XXXIII:11. Still in each of the points mentioned, and especially in its wider, more corporate sense in English "fellowship" is a better translation of the Greek terms than 'friendship.' It is for Chinese to judge; but probably 友誼 comes closer to the English "friendship" than to the English "fellowship," and as such lacks a little of the full meaning of koinonia.

(e) 團契 This is another possible translation which has occasionally been used. It is I believe a fairly recent, but by now thoroughly idiomatic combination. It is the phrase adopted in the recent Book of Common Worship.

Probably it takes us another step closer to the meaning of the original Greek term. It can stand for the mutual relationship of fellowship, and not for the one-sided one of influence. It can stand for the God-man relationship or for the man-man relationship. With interpretation and teaching it could bear the full meaning of the Greek term koinonia.

It is still questionable if it is exactly correct. If this term has a fault, it is probably that it is just a shade too firm and concrete. It is a recent term. But it is probably coming to have the meaning of a definite recognizable society of people. In the present state of the Church in China, it might be a positive advantage to err on this side; and this may well prove to be the best term. So far Christian work in China has been notoriously weak in cultivating an experience or a doctrine of the Church, as a recognizable organised institution. Chinese Christianity, in keeping with Chinese tradition, has been strong on the social and the ethical side, and weak on the side of mysticism or organised institutional life. The early Church was an organised institution. Its purpose is to convey a Gospel and an experience; but it is only as a visible organised society that the Church has been able to endure, and preserve and pass on that Gospel from age to age.

If this phrase should be found to stress this aspect of the Christian life, it will therefore be stressing a neglected element and erring on the right side. Nevertheless, though it would be true to the life and message of the early Church as a whole, it would probably not be completely true to the meaning of the exact word koinonia. This word expresses the deeper spiritual bond between God and man, and the resulting spiritual bond between man and man, for which the Church as an institution exists, and without which the institution would become bones without blood, body without spirit. This phrase would therefore only be a suitable translation, provided in Chinese eyes it was quite clear that it did mean primarily the spiritual bond of fellowship, and not primarily the hardening of that fellowship into a social institution.

(f) 契通 One last phrase may be suggested. It is a less usual, less idiomatic combination than those we have just been considering, though considerably more so than the phrase 感通. Like the last two terms, it has the necessary requisites of expressing the mutual relationship of fellowship, and being capable of interpretation for either the God-man or the man-man relationship. Its greater rarity compared with the last two terms may make it all the more free from non-Christian associations, and all the more ready to become the vehicle with interpretation, of all that wealth of meaning contained in the term koinonia. We may suggest that any of these last three terms is possible; and that of the three, this last one is probably the best.