

## Who's in Charge Here? Kyrios and Koinonia

Study Hour Sunday, September 28, 2014

**Kyrios** is the Greek word for "Lord" or "Master." It ordinarily referred to someone in charge like the owner of a vineyard, or someone who controls his own property. It was used as well for political leaders, supernatural powers, and deities. By using the word *kyrios* to refer to Jesus, the early Christians were doing something subversive, counter-cultural, perhaps even a bit treasonous.

**Koinonia** is the Greek word for fellowship, association, communion, close relationship, generosity, participation. In verbal form it can mean to share, to participate, to contribute. The early church regularly used the word *koinonia* to refer to mutual experiences of blessings, suffering, faith, community, solidarity with the poor, and (more mystically, perhaps) with Jesus.

*Kyrios* and *koinonia* raise the question of **authority and unity** in the church. Who's in charge, and in what way, when *kyrios* (Lord) Jesus answers his disciples' leadership question by kneeling in front of each of them and washing each one's feet? How are decisions made by the *koinonia*, the church fellowship of mutual sharing, where possessions are held and decisions are made not by any one leader or hierarchy but, as we see throughout Acts, by everyone in common? What keeps the church unified when leadership is not about imposing the leader's will but through mutual service?

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Michael Armour and Don Browning, in *Systems-Sensitive Leadership: Empowering Diversity Without Polarizing the Church*, speak of the special need to work for unity in diverse congregations. "We must regularly hold up the ideal of unity. And we must do so in countless forums, not just occasional ones. In effect we are trying to create a heritage that says, 'We don't fight here. We find more responsible ways to handle our differences.'" (127)

Unity doesn't mean uniformity, of course. Everyone doesn't need to have the same opinions, passions, or ways of understanding or articulating their faith. Unity doesn't mean merely tolerating differences, either. Who wants to be someplace where they are merely tolerated, after all? Toleration and indifference are hard to tell apart. And neither is very welcoming.

Unity does mean working to understand each other. It can mean *deference* to something I don't find meaningful but someone else treasures. A particular hymn, prayer, or theological conviction may be a core part of someone else's faith and not be part of mine. I don't have to agree with them. I can even argue with them about it. But if we each choose to approach our differences with humility, gentleness, patience, and love, then we can disagree without disrupting our relationship. Deference is a form of respect. In all but the most extreme cases where behaviors or beliefs foster injury or harm, there is a range of discomfort I can accept in order to honor and respect someone else's needs.

Armour and Browning write:

One of the authors works with a congregation that knew it would encounter some resistance when they began to blend contemporary music with what had been a very traditional style of worship.

Within their own ranks, therefore, the church tacitly adopted the motto, "We're the church that sings each other's songs." They made this a rallying cry around which they could defer to one another's tastes.

"You know how much you want everyone to really sing the songs you like," the congregation was regularly reminded. "Well, it's our duty as brothers and sisters to really put our heart into the songs that others like."

Soon, whenever there was a need for deference in the congregation—not just in worship—you would hear people saying, "You know, we sing each other's songs around here." Now singing one another's songs has become a metaphor for deference throughout the entire congregation.

#### Questions for discussion

1. "Jesus is Lord and Savior" is an early Christian confession of faith. Given that one of Caesar's official imperial titles was "Lord and Savior" what do you think the early Christians meant by it, and what risks were they taking when they used Caesar's title for Jesus?
2. There's a sense of *koinonia*, participation or equal sharing in all things, among the first Christians. How does that compare with the way we make decisions in church today?
3. Unity can come from sharing a common beginning, being made of the same stuff, pursuing a common purpose, or obeying the same limits or rules. What sort of unity seems healthy to you? Unhealthy?
4. What would it take for Spirit of Joy to become a church where "we sing each other's songs"?