

# **Koinonia and Integrity: Catalysts for Growth in the Early Church**

**Dr Isaac D. Akut**

Dean of Academics, St Francis of Assisi College Wusasa, Zaria,  
Kaduna State, Nigeria

isaacakut@yahoo.com/08026291992

and

**Tony Aku Amba**

Lecturer in Systematic Theology & Philosophy of Religion, Department  
of Integrative Theology, LAWNA Theological Seminary (Affiliate of  
the University of Jos), Gamajigo, Jos, Plateau State  
revtonyakuamba@gmail.com/08036043565

## **Abstract**

The birth of the church on the day of Pentecost (Act 2) in AD 30 is one of the remarkable events that shape world history. On inception, this newly founded faith was greeted with great scepticism and her adherents were severely persecuted by those who see her as another unwelcome sect within Judaism. Despite stiff molestations; the early church steadily experienced tremendous qualitative and quantitative growth. Previous studies on the early church focus on how the preaching of the disciples led to growth, this paper argues that koinonia fondly calls fellowship and the audacious integrity of the early disciples as handed down by Jesus were two key indispensable factors responsible for the outstanding growth recorded by Christianity at its infancy. While, the coming of the Holy Spirit helps to convince, convict and convert people to the Christian faith, integrity and koinonia fostered the sustainable growth and development of the early church. Using the historical-grammatical method, the twin concepts: koinonia and integrity are traced from the pre-Christian era to early Christian era down to the current church. Additionally, this study looked at some unwholesome practices amounting to lack of integrity and suggest that, if the current church could be more hospitable, strengthened her interdenominational and inter fellowship collaborations coupled with urging her adherents to live above

sin and reproach, the spiritual and physical growth of the early church would be consolidated.

**Keywords:** Integrity, Koinonia, Early Church

## **INTRODUCTION**

The 400 years silent period between Malachi and the New Testament era created a spiritual vacuum that was filled by the coming of Jesus Christ and the establishment of Christianity. It is generally agreed that the growth of the early church is credited to the aggressive proselytization by the disciples. On the contrary, this paper investigates how Koinonia with integrity among the early church brethren serve as catalysts for early church growth on one hand and on the other hand how lack of it among some of the early church adherents continue to threaten the mutual fellowship and growth of the early church during her hay days. Integrity and koinonia partly existed in pre-Christian societies but the full version was introduced by Jesus into Christianity when he called his disciples to be with him; a fellowship which lasted for about three years before his ascension. This new way of commonality became widespread after the day of Pentecost providing the newly founded Christian communities with the auspices to learn the teachings and practices of their new faith. Koinonia is used in the New Testament both to express spiritual sharing and sharing materially. Koinonia and integrity relate to sharing one's common life within the body of Christ at all the levels of existence and experience i.e spiritual, physical, moral, intellectual, emotional, and economic. For a proper understanding of how Koinonia and integrity resulted in growth during the early church era, an attempt would be made to start by looking at the conceptual definition of some key concepts.

## **DEFINITION OF TERMS**

**Integrity:** Several studies conducted in the past have tried to provide varied definitions of the concept of integrity. The Encarta Dictionary describes it as the quality of being truthful, just, reliable and upright.<sup>1</sup> It is a state of being morally sound and correct in one's judgment and attitude. It is all about meeting up and fulfilling the desired etiquettes generally approved in a given society. This highly cherished virtue can be contrasted with the state of being low in virtue. A study conducted by

Becker and Talsman linked integrity to virtue by describing it as the quality of being wise, just, courageous and temperance in all dealings.<sup>2</sup> Integrity from a moral standpoint (having to do with 'Dos and Don'ts', 'Good and Evil', 'Right and Wrong') can be viewed as the acceptable norms, values, standards and behaviours in a given society or community.<sup>3</sup> In the early church era, Christians distinguished themselves by their integrity; no wonder, Tertullian one of the notable patristic fathers is known to have written a letter to the Roman Emperor, during the persecution of Christians citing their integrity and loyalty as reasons why their treatments are unfair thereby requesting that<sup>4</sup> they should be exempted from persecution.<sup>5</sup> Lack of integrity, therefore, implies a situation where there is a violation of the acceptable rules and regulations governing the community.

***Koinonia:*** (*κοινωνία*) is a Greek word which appeared in several passages of the New Testament for different functions. In Act 2: 42, it is simply rendered as 'Fellowship'<sup>6</sup> This fellowship describes the believers in a state of being in one accord, fellowshiping together horizontally and vertically in binding force that transcends ethnic, professional, educational geographical and other boundaries in which people meet to worship and show mutuality in sharing from their resources is deeply rooted in Christ Jesus. In I Corinthians 10:16, Paul used this term when referring to the Eucharistic feast involving the mutual breaking of bread, drinking of wine and mutual sharing with one another in sacred communion. There is a strong connection between koinonia and integrity in the early church. To join a community where members willingly part with hard earn resources for the collective benefit of all show a great level of integrity.

***Growth:*** This is the process of increment either in number or size. Concerning the early church, growth has to do with numerical and qualitative development of how Christianity grew from a sect in Judaism with few believers to a world religion with numerous adherents.

***Early Church:*** The early church has to do with the church from the time of her birth on the day of Pentecost till the second century when she started taking roots in all the nooks and crannies of the world. The early church can also be described as the church at infancy.

## **KOINONIA AND INTEGRITY IN PRE-CHRISTIAN SOCIETIES**

### ***Pagan Societies:***

Before the advent of Christianity, *koinonia* existed in some form in societies. Pythagoras established a kind of commonality and fellowships for his followers.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Aristotle's model for an ideal society prescribes communal ownership of land but private ownership of other properties.<sup>8</sup> Ancient Poets like Cynics in his songs painted a picture of communality which leads to shared experiences about the gods as the ideal society which was not the socio-cultural ideal of the society at that time.<sup>9</sup> Early Philosophical thoughts like the stoic, anticipated a future blissful stage that will be ushered by the present bound of brotherhood and fraternity.<sup>10</sup> Studies show that *Koinonia* only existed theoretically not in reality in typical early Greek societies.

### ***Jewish Societies:***

The Jews are known to be very religious rights from inception. They have their religion called Judaism founded by father Abraham their founding Patriarch. Full *Koinonia* existed among the Jews in the activities of one of their sects known as the Essence. The Essence is known to be one of the earliest pre-Christian Jewish communities to practice *koinonia*. Records have it that they often secluded themselves from the rest of the society into a communality where they lived an ascetic lifestyle. Members of this sect as a mark of their integrity shared meals, clothes and other properties.<sup>11</sup> Another secretive sect known to practice *koinonia* among Jewish in ancient times is the *Therapeutae* sect. Little is known about this elusive sect but some scholars link them with the Essence sect who lived in Egypt. This group is said to share some similarities in their ways of life with Essence like living a communal lifestyle, seclusion from the society and asceticism, the strict rule regarding membership and strict disciplinary lifestyle, the practice of solitude, practice of composition of hymns and the use of the right hand.<sup>12</sup> Notable differences have, however, been observed between these ascetic sects as it regards dietary laws and other regulations.

## **JESUS MODEL OF KOINONIA AND INTEGRITY**

Jesus being the head and institutor of the church started the whole idea of Koinonia in Christendom. His relationship with his disciples is a model of koinonia subsequently adopted by the early church which can be summarized as the three 'Cs': The Call, Communality and Commission.

**Call:** When Jesus reached the age of thirty (Luke 3:23) before the full commencement of his earthly ministry, he made a remarkable decision after seeking his father's face in prayers to call the 12 disciples one by one. This call was to separate his followers from been contaminated by the perversion of this sinful world unto fellowship, holiness, integrity and learning under his tutelage. (Luke 6:12- 16)

**Communality:** Jesus called his disciples to leave everything, follow him and be with him. Peter with his brother Andrew and James with his brother John the children of Zebedee were all fishermen with their fathers at the sea of Galilee Matthew 4:18-22, Matthew was a tax collector when they were all called out of their former community and professions to form a new community of integrity where fishing men would be their future profession. In Mark 10:28-30, Peter was uncertain of their lots having left family, profession, friends to follow the master. Jesus understood the frustration setting in among his disciples encouraged them saying,

'I tell you the truth,' Jesus replied, 'no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields — and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. (Mark 10:29-30)

Jesus is said to have called his disciples to be with him, spend time together, learning at his feet, fellowshiping together and sharing things in common. Through this koinonia, the disciples of Jesus were able to form a new community by staying together, learning and imbibing the new integrity oozing forth from Jesus' daily exemplarily interactions with them. Biblical accounts remain silent of Jesus' private life with his disciples but some of the records which show how Jesus exemplified koinonia and integrity in his dealing with his disciples and other followers include:

- The Disciples learning at the Master's feet. Mark 8:34, Matthew 5:1-48

- Jesus sent his disciples to buy food which they will mutually share John 4:8
- Jesus eating a meal and the Eucharist with his disciples Matthew 26:26-29
- Jesus and his Disciples Praying together Matthew 26:40
- Jesus and his disciples singing hymns and involving in religious procession Mark 14:26
- The crowd spent three days with Jesus and his disciples' fellowshiping and learning at the Master's feet. Matthew 15:32
- Jesus and his disciples participated in the cost of discipleship: self-denial, taking their cross daily and following the Master Matthew 16:24
- Jesus and his disciples fulfil their civic responsibilities by paying their taxes Matthew 17:24-27
- Jesus encourage sharing during koinonia when he fed the crowd of 5, 000 men with five loaves and two fishes belonging to a young boy who willingly offered his lunch. John 6:5-13
- Jesus prayed in John 17:21 for a future strong koinonia and integrity among his followers

**Commission:** It is after the disciples have been made men of integrity that they were commissioned to preach the gospel both with their lifestyle and verbal persuasions. Another striking thing about Jesus commission to his disciples is that they should go and make disciples of all nations. (Matthew 28:19-20) Discipleships is a form of Koinonia that was practised when Jesus called his disciples and started winning converts. Jesus started the koinonia with his twelve disciples, it then grew to seventy-two and then to his other followers in the innumerable crowds that kept following him from place to place. Jesus model of koinonia largely entailed, separating the people to himself, teaching and discipleship to make them men and women of integrity, provision of meals, healings, deliverance, singing of hymns etc.

## KOINONIA AS A MARK OF INTEGRITY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

*Koinonia* took different formats and patterns in the early church some of which are hereby discussed as summarized in Act 2:42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

***Fellowship:*** A term used synonymously with worship in western churches has to do with the coming together of the believers to worship.<sup>13</sup> Ignacius in his teachings demands love, one accord and obedience to the Bishops and Church elders as a way of fostering true *koinonia* among brethren in the early church.<sup>14</sup> Congregational worship was, therefore, birthed out of this *koinonia* when the early church which was formally house churches grew so large that she could not manage them.

***Mutual sharing:*** The early church was widely known to share things in common as a mark of integrity in the *koinonia*. It has been observed that it is not only the teachings of the early church that drew people to the faith but to a large extent, the way they demonstrated integrity in practicalizing the teachings of the faith which makes them upright in the societies, their level of unrelenting selfless giving to meet the needs of less privilege became contagious that led to the conversion of several pagans among whom was Pachomius<sup>15</sup>

***Mutual Love:*** Patristic fathers in their writings urged their audience to show mutual love to one another as a way of strengthening the *koinonia* among them.<sup>16</sup> Early church *koinonia* was characterized by agape love and care both for outsiders and members of the *koinonia*. It was charming that, believers were not afraid to lose their lives in their quest to show love for God and humanity.<sup>17</sup>

***Breaking of Bread:*** This is another name for the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion and the Eucharist a sacred feast that all faithful share. It is a

means of fellowship and grace. When this was later abused, Paul gave some regulatory framework which partakers of this sacred meal must abide by to prevent incurring God's wrath on those eating this holy meal in an unholy manner.

## **KOINONIA, INTEGRITY AND THE GROWTH OF THE EARLY CHURCH**

Aside from koinonia, there are several integrated lifestyles demonstrated by believers that resulted in the rapid growth and development of the early church.

The integrity shown by early church believers in their respect for the sanctity of life attracted a lot of outcasts and underprivileged in the society to the church. The pagan society at that time was filled with several bestial behaviours like infanticide, murders, abortion and slavery. These above mentioned anti-social activities diminish trust, justice and integrity among people apart from the reduction in the overall population. In sharp contrast to this, the early Christian koinonia communities did not approve of any of these acts which led to numerical growth through the centrifugal and centripetal mission.<sup>18</sup> Hence the early church accommodated all willing but dejected in the society to their advantage.

The exemplary lifestyle of the early church earned them the most deserved name: Christian (Act 11:26). The way they lived their lives and the high moral virtue they maintained soon become like a magnetic force attracting non-believers to their fellowships and faith. This life of honesty, blamelessness, inclusiveness and lack of reproach was so contagious that even persecution and threat of death could not deter people from wanting to be part of them. The oneness and simplicity that comes from the mutual communality, make it unlikely for any class distinction to exist among them, thereby typifying them as an ideal group most people love to join.

Contrastively, several cases of lack of integrity rear their ugly heads among some low virtue followers. But, the way and manner these unfortunate situations were handle brought sanity and growth to the early church. In Acts 5:1-11, the case of Ananias and Sapphira in their bit to participate in the koinonia sold a piece of land whereas showed lack of



integrity by turning over a part of the proceeds but deceptively claiming to turn overall. God's instant judgement on them due to their deceptions brought fear and serve as a deterrent. As people kept living up to expectations the church kept experiencing tremendous growth. Acts 6:1-7 recorded another case of lack of integrity during koinonia in the Early Church. Partiality was shown to the Hellenistic Jewish widows by those sharing the daily meal. When they cried out citing how the native Hebrew widows are treated better than them in the daily rationing of meals, the people responsible for such acts of lack of integrity were quickly replaced with seven deacons who have distinguished themselves as men of integrity. This brought an end to this problem. Also, in Romans 2: 11-14 Paul boldly and openly rebuked Peter in Antioch for hypocrisy. Before the arrival of Jewish Christians, Peter was relating well with the Gentile Christians but on the arrival of these Jewish believers, Peter started withdrawing from the Gentiles believers, Paul saw it as a lack of integrity and double standard. Hence, he rebuked Peter openly since such dishonest acts coming from a top disciple is capable of tarnishing the image of the newly founded Koinonia.

## **KOINONIA AND INTEGRITY IN NIGERIAN CHURCH**

Nigeria, one of the nations with sizeable Christian adherents globally, is experiencing a great setback owing to the activities of perverse followers and leaders who show a lack of integrity during koinonia. A few examples of lack of integrity related to koinonia in the church in Nigeria are hereby highlighted:

- a. The proliferation of churches by adherents who cannot submit to leaderships: The opening of churches that are supposed to be the mark of church growth, has been hijacked by some self-acclaim prophets whose motive for opening churches is for personal gain.
- b. Religious prostitution by adherents seeking material prosperity and miracles instead of God: Koinonia stipulates oneness in worship and mutual sharing but some adherents today go to churches for the material gain they would get. It is not uncommon for them to change church if their perceived prayers are not answered in a particular church.
- c. The deification of some men of God by naïve adherents: Some Pastors have assumed the status of divinity. They claim to possess

special divine revelatory knowledge which makes them superhumans. Through their big titles, affluence, wealth, protocols, convoys and claims to have close contacts with God, members reverence them rather than God.

- d. Defrauding and extortion of gullible members through multiple seed sowing, selling of anointing oil, paying consultancy fees as demanded by religious leaders who see pastoring as a lucrative business.
- e. Idolatrous practices like some religious leaders seeking powers from witch doctors to attract adherents to their churches, asking pregnant women to be prayed for and delivered of their baby in churches instead of hospitals, bathing naked women in the river at midnight in the name of deliverance.
- f. Denominationalism through the brainwashing of adherents to see a particular church as the only route to salvation: Instead of encouraging members to love and fellowship with one another irrespective of denominational affiliation, churches are tearing family and people apart. Some churches even erroneously teach their members not to marry nor have any dealing with persons of other denominations on the guise that adherents of other denominations are sinners.
- g. Abuse of Scriptures: There are several ways the Bible is been abuse today. Some of which includes: utilization of a portion of it as a charm, fearful adherents opening psalms 91 under their pillow as a protection from evil spirits to mention but a few.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Koinonia and integrity remain one of the sure ways to experience tremendous growth in the church today. This koinonia and integrity can be attained in its fullness through:

***Ecumenical Fellowships:*** Christians are deeply polarized along denominational, ethnic and national divides. Inter-Church fellowships at all levels of the divides can go a long way to bring us together. Ecumenical bodies like the World Council of Churches (WCC) for International fellowships, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) for interdenominational national fellowships, and Bible society of Nigeria fellowship should be encouraged.

***Inter fellowships meetings:*** within the same ecclesiastical denomination, churches or sub-groups between different administrative structures can be fixed. These fellowships are essentials because it draws closer, increase cordiality, love and help brethren to understand and better appreciate each other.

***Hospitality:*** Hospitality entails a lot of things including the opening of houses to visitors, adoption of destitute and sharing with others. It also involves the sharing of foods and clothes with those in need.<sup>19</sup>

***Faith Base Organizations:*** Faith Base Non-Governmental Organizations can be floated by church denominations providing various humanitarian services like provision of food for those in need, fighting for the right of the girl child, fighting for the right of the persecuted etc.

***Qualitative teaching of the Word:*** All the various platforms that bring people together should be explored to teach believers to be men of integrity.

***Regulation of Excess behaviours:*** Following the permissiveness and perversion of religion presently experience in Nigeria. The church need to come together and put a regulatory framework on some unwholesome practices of some religious adherents and leaders whose motive is at variance with the teaching of Christianity.

## CONCLUSION

The social life of the Christian community in the early church was very intimate because fellowship and integrity were the bedrocks of the existence of the early church. Koinonia and Integrity remain two inseparable and indispensable axioms of church growth. The roles these two distinct ingredients plays are not only complementary but also serve a causative effect for the growth of Christianity. The history of Christianity has proof of how she had survived several onslaughts owing to koinonia and integrity. Hence, if meaningful progress can be recorded today in the field of growth, the church should urge her adherents to maintain integrity and mutuality in fellowship and a sharing community where agape love reigns. The early church members were united through the Holy Spirit. According to Luke, they were "all together in one place" (Acts 2:1, RSV), meaning that they were bound together in unity through the koinonia of the Holy Spirit. These men and women were open to one another, dependent upon one another, supported by one another. Christian

Koinonia and integrity have horizontal as well as vertical dimensions. These two aspects must be held together. Fellowship with Christ leads inevitably to fellowship with Christians and produces integrity in our communities.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Encarta Dictionary: Thesaurus; Integrity

<sup>2</sup> Becker, M., & Talsma, J. *Adding colours to the shades of grey: Enriching the integrity discourse with virtue ethics concepts*. (London, England: Routledge, 2016), 37

<sup>3</sup> Leo WJC Huberts, *Integrity: What it is and Why it is important*, [www.Integrity/2018PIIIntegrityWhatitisandWhyitisImportant.pdf](http://www.Integrity/2018PIIIntegrityWhatitisandWhyitisImportant.pdf) (assessed February 12, 2020)

<sup>4</sup> Leo WJC Huberts, *Integrity: What it is and Why it is important*, [www.Integrity/2018PIIIntegrityWhatitisandWhyitisImportant.pdf](http://www.Integrity/2018PIIIntegrityWhatitisandWhyitisImportant.pdf) (assessed February 12, 2020)

<sup>5</sup> Tertullian, Apologia, 194, in Wim A Dreyer, The Amazing Growth of the Early Church, *Research Gate*, [www.Integrity/Amazinggrowtheearlychurch.pdf](http://www.Integrity/Amazinggrowtheearlychurch.pdf) (assessed March 7, 2020)

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Robert L. New standard American Aramaic and Greek Dictionary, (Anaheim: Foundations Publications, 1998), 453

<sup>7</sup> F. Hauck, *Koinonia: The theological Dictionary of the New Testament Abridged in one Volume*, P 789

<sup>8</sup> F. Hauck, *Koinonia: The theological Dictionary of the New Testament Abridged in one Volume*, P 790

<sup>9</sup> Sharing a Life- from Ancient Greek to Christian Communities, [www.ellopos.com](http://www.ellopos.com) (assessed July 4, 2020)

<sup>10</sup> Sharing a Life- from Ancient Greek to Christian Communities, [www.ellopos.com](http://www.ellopos.com) (assessed July 4, 2020)

<sup>11</sup> F. Hauck, *Koinonia: The theological Dictionary of the New Testament Abridged in one Volume*, P 791

<sup>12</sup> Josephus Flavius: *The works of Josephus, complete and unabridged Peabody*: (Hendrickson, 1996, War ii wall) viii

<sup>13</sup> A. Casurella, *Koinonia: Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Development*, (Oxford: Inter-varsity Press, 2000), 224

<sup>14</sup> Ignatius, Letter to the Magnesians (Unpublished)

<sup>15</sup> Schor in Wim A Dreyer, The Amazing Growth of the Early Church, *Research Gate*, [www.Integrity/Amazinggrowtheearlychurch.pdf](http://www.Integrity/Amazinggrowtheearlychurch.pdf) (assessed December 3, 2019)

<sup>16</sup> I Clement 37-38 (Unpublished)

<sup>17</sup> Tertullian in *Koinonia: Christian Fellowship and the life of the Church*, Maranatha Briefing, 2012

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<sup>18</sup> Wim A Dreyer, The Amazing Growth of the Early Church, *Research Gate*, [www.Integrity/Amazinggrowtheearlychurch.pdf](http://www.Integrity/Amazinggrowtheearlychurch.pdf) (assessed December 3, 2019)

<sup>19</sup> Jessica Brodie, What every Christian Need to Know about Koinonia, [www.crosswalk.com](http://www.crosswalk.com), (assessed April 6<sup>th</sup> 2020)

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