Responses to Perspectives on Koinonia

Editor's Note: The publication of the Final Reports of the International Roman Catholic/Pentecostal Dialogue in Pneuma, and especially the publication of Perspectives on Koinonia for the first time, provides a unique opportunity to solicit responses from a variety of Christian leaders. Below, you will find thirteen such responses.

Readers should bear in mind that these responses are to be understood as the personal, candid responses of those who wrote them. They are not intended to be read as official endorsements or criticisms of the Dialogue, and they are not to be understood as representing in any official capacity, the constituencies among whom each respondent ministers.

Respondents were asked to be honest and forthright in their contributions. They were encouraged to speak freely and openly. They were asked to look at the strengths and weaknesses of Perspectives on Koinonia and write what they saw reflected there. Has the dialogue team fairly represented Pentecostal or Roman Catholic thinking? Is it a useful document? How could this document be put to effective use? What questions could be raised that might help further the discussion?

It is fair to say that fewer than half of those solicited chose to respond. Some simply could not respond due to their work loads. At least one Pentecostal leader chose not to respond because the Dialogue remains, in his eyes, officially unrecognized. But it is also fair to say that most readers were pleasantly surprised at what they found. Still, perspectives on Perspectives do differ—viewed by Roman Catholics, Evangelicals, Oneness Pentecostals, Holiness Pentecostals, and others—and those differences will surface below quite clearly. It is with great appreciation to those who responded to our invitation that we publish their reactions/responses to Perspectives on Koinonia. They are published in alphabetical order according to the author's last name.

Response to Perspectives on Koinonia

I will limit my response to issues for which Oneness Pentecostals can offer a unique perspective. It is important to note that the report repeatedly speaks of the views of "Pentecostals," but it does not give significant discussion to the views of Oneness Pentecostals. (It relegated them to a footnote that does not fully explain their views.) If the participants did not wish to include Oneness views, the report should have used the label "Trinitarian Pentecostals"; as it stands, the report is flawed in claiming to present the views of all Pentecostals, for historically, experientially, and statistically, Oneness Pentecostals are a significant branch of the Pentecostal movement.

For example, several of the Pentecostal groups whose members participated in the dialogue have close historical connections to Oneness pentecostalism. The founders of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada were Oneness. The first general superintendent of that group, the first general chairman of the Assemblies of God, and the founder of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel were all baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Several of the founders of the Assemblies of God later founded
Oneness organizations. Oneness Pentecostals experience the same baptism of the Holy Spirit with the sign of tongues that is the distinguishing mark of Pentecostalism generally. And according to Vinson Synan and David Barrett, Oneness Pentecostals constitute about 20 to 25 percent of all Pentecostals in the United States. In short, a report on Pentecostal views is incomplete without giving serious consideration to the views of Oneness Pentecostals.

Perhaps the reason why Oneness views were not discussed is revealed by the strongly trinitarian basis of the entire dialogue. For example, the report states, "Both Pentecostals and Roman Catholics believe that the koinonia between Christians is rooted in the life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (29). "For the Roman Catholic Church, the basis of ecumenical dialogue with Pentecostals, properly speaking, is found in the Catholic recognition of the baptism performed by Pentecostals in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (54).

In contrast to the traditional doctrine of the Trinity, Oneness Pentecostals emphasize that God is absolutely one in personality and essence (Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 44:6-8, 24; Galatians 3:20). They teach that God has revealed Himself as Father (in parental relationship to humanity), in His Son (in human flesh), and as the Holy Spirit (in spiritual action); and they further explain that these three titles describe manifestations or roles in God's plan of salvation. In order to save sinful humanity, God provided a sinless Man as a sacrifice of atonement—Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is the one God incarnate (John 20:28; Colossians 2:9). In begetting the Son and in relating to humanity, God is the Father. In working to transform and empower human lives, God is the Holy Spirit. To Oneness Pentecostals, the implication that there is fellowship within the Godhead just as there is fellowship between members of the church tends toward tritheism, not the monothelism of the Bible.

From the view of the trinitarian participants, do the statements quoted from the report exclude Oneness Pentecostals from the body of Christ and from salvation? Or can they see in the Oneness view of God an attempt to affirm the central truths of God's revelation of Himself in Scripture and salvation history without relying upon terms, concepts, and methods borrowed from Greek philosophy?

If the traditional trinitarian doctrine and baptismal formula must be the basis of dialogue, then both Roman Catholics and Trinitarian Pentecostals should reexamine some of their own history and practice of fellowship. For example, according to Hippolytus, a saint of the Roman Catholic Church, at least two Roman bishops, whom Catholics consider to be popes, opposed traditional trinitarianism in favor of a modalistic formulation—Zephyrinus (AD 199-217) and Callistus (AD 217-223). The apostle Peter, from whom the popes claim to derive their authority, clearly advocated and practiced baptism in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38; 10:48). So did the rest of the early church (Acts 8:16; 19:5;