incredible Pentecostal growth, the Roman Catholic Church is still almost twice the size of all other Christian churches put together. Any answer to Jesus’ prayer for unity in John 17:21 must necessarily include this huge and ancient church which, after all, preserved the Scriptures and the faith in the West for the 1900 years before the Pentecostals appeared on the scene.

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Response to Perspectives on Koinonia

This document engenders thankfulness and excitement. That such dialogue has been in process for almost 20 years testifies to farsightedness and boldness by both parties, but especially by the Pentecostals. As acknowledged in this document, Roman Catholics have recourse to centuries of theological tradition while Pentecostals have less than a century of tradition to draw on. Yet, they did not allow this disadvantage to deter them. By contrast, Evangelicals are only now exploring the advisability of consultations with the Roman Catholic Church. The Pentecostals deserve credit for bold and imaginative trailblazing in this area.

My excitement is generated by the topic of this consultation: koinonia or communion. This notion is at the heart of present ecumenical discussion. Before exploring the treatment of this concept, I will make a few comments on the nature of this dialogue.


Early in the document certain strictures are placed on the dialogue. The goal, we are told, is not “organic or structural union,” but the development of “a climate of mutual understanding in matters of faith and practice.” More specifically, the aim is “to find points of genuine agreement as well as to indicate areas in which further dialogue is required” (5). There are undoubtedly good reasons for this modest aim. Moreover, this approach has at least one advantage. It allows for an open and relaxed exploration of uniting and dividing issues.

Two disadvantages hamper this approach, however. For one thing, it is overly amenable to a method of dialogue that is known as “comparative ecclesiology.” Put crassly, this method takes inventory of the understandings of two traditions, places them next to one another and notes agreement and divergences. The Third World Conference on Faith and Order (Lund, 1952), advocated an alternative method, that of “Christological concentration.” This method proceeds from the basic con-
viction that in a significant sense we are one in Christ. This determines the shape and path of dialogue among the different traditions: “From the unity of Christ we seek the unity of the church on earth, and from the unity of Christ and His Body we seek a means of realizing that unity in the actual state of our divisions on earth.” Unfortunately, to pose “mutual understanding” as the alternative to “organic or structural union” is to absolve oneself too readily of engaging in the struggle for manifestations of unity other than such union.

Fortunately, this document often goes beyond “comparative ecclesiology.” Yet, without a clear focus on a greater manifestation of unity, agreement and differences are often identified without any indication of the ecumenical significance of either. When we read that Roman Catholics and Pentecostals differ, for example, on “the need for and value of ordination for the life of the Church” (85), the reader may well ask, “So what?” Is this difference sufficient to justify, for example, proscribing cooperation in evangelism or mutual prayer for Christian unity? By paying no heed to the need for a greater manifestation of the unity of the church, the significance of the agreements or disagreements that are discovered hangs in the air.

2. Koinonia: Promising and Problematic Key to Unity

The title of the document, Perspectives on Koinonia is somewhat misleading. The first major section, dealing with “Koinonia and the Word of God,” touches only obliquely on koinonia. The third section, “Koinonia and Baptism,” while more directly related to koinonia, does not explore the potential of this notion as fully as it might have. These two sections cover one-third of the body of the document as a whole. In the sections dealing more directly with Koinonia, its significance is not thematically elaborated.

This document remains somewhat vague regarding the nature of the agreement and differences between the dialogue partners on the meaning of the term koinonia. They both believe that “koinonia between Christians is rooted in the life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit” and that the Holy Spirit is the source of communion (29, 30). The difference appears to be one of emphasis: Roman Catholics stress the “God-givenness of the koinonia and its trinitarian character,” as well as the sacramental means of initiating and sustaining such koinonia; Pentecostals “stress the fact that the Holy Spirit convicts people of sin, bringing them to repentance and personal faith into fellowship with Christ and one another. . .” (31, 32). The next paragraph characterizes this as a contrast of emphasis between, respectively, the communitarian and the personal dimension “of the same koinonia with God which comes from the Holy Spirit. . .” (33).

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