EXEGETICAL CIRCLES: AN INNOVATION
AT THE CHARLOTTE MEETING

by William G. MacDonald

In 1981 a method of scholarly interaction new to the SPS took shape at the annual meeting. Heretofore the Society has utilized the traditional way of lecture [lit., 'reading']-and-questions. That method has time-honored values especially when the lectures are outstanding and the end product is carefully edited and published, as was the case in the meeting at Oklahoma City in 1972 (Perspectives on the New Pentecostalism, edited by Russell P. Spittler. Baker Book House, 1976). It also has certain advantages for those auditors who are looking for fresh ideas but are prepared to expose fully their own as yet.

One of the reasons for introducing a new method in 1981 derives from certain perceived weaknesses of the lecture method as generally employed at scholarly meetings. Most of the activity centers on the lecturer. Program chairmen are generally faithful in admonishing paper-readers to leave ample time for questions at the end, but the typical presenter usually prefers to encroach on the audience-response time

William G. MacDonald (Th.D., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky), is Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Gordon College, Wenham, Massachusetts. He serves as President of the Society for Pentecostal Studies.
rather than to eliminate any of the good things he has so carefully prepared. Furthermore, the seating arrangement is such in the typical lecture format that it is difficult for those present to do more than dialogue with the speaker, though sometimes respondees would care to comment on a point made by another respondee. When only backs of heads are visible, anyone responding from the floor can easily feel that he is talking “at” others in the audience rather than conversing “with” them--the ideal. Moreover, many an incipient discussion has been foiled before it matured by the need to move on to the next paper on schedule.

The 1981 innovation was to rediscover the true seminar method that many of us worked with in graduate school. I say, true seminar, because today many charismatic and other kinds of meetings are billed as “seminars”, when the people who attend do not come as equals but are indoctrinated by the standard way of teaching and listening, without “seminar” ever meaning anything more precise than ‘something important and no doubt scholarly being said by an authority’. A true seminar consists of scholars sharing their findings with others who are competent to judge the validity or misdirection of each contribution. Collegiality assures that each mind is sharpened more than it would be working alone. It is the body working together to edify itself.

The facilities of the East Coast Bible College in Charlotte, NC, were admirably suited for our four simultaneous seminars, alias, “exegetical circles.” Each of these had a spacious room in which four narrow tables all turned at right angles to one another to form a hollow square were most suitable for seating everyone like diplomats at the proverbial round table. Following the wisdom of Proverbs 16:33, we drew lots held by a child, and let the Lord thereby determine the eleven participants who would join each of the preselected facilitators, and they in turn selected by lot their seminar rooms.

Those who preregistered received in advance of the meeting a packet of materials containing and following: (1) A set of provocative questions identical to those printed in the July SPS Newsletter. This handout listed the six passages specified for exegesis, all of which were pertinent to the theme of “The Spirit and Regeneration in John’s Gospel” [John 1:29-34; 3:1-2; 7:37-39; 14:15-20; 16:6-11; 20:19-23]. (2) A five-page bibliography pertinent to the passages to be exegeted. (3) A “textual transcription” of each passage, revealing the grammatical and syntactical connections in the stream of the Greek text. [Textual order of words is not changed but the text can be subordinated or placed in parallel by a system of lowering and tabulating lines, clauses, or phrases.] (4) A one-page explanation of how the exegetical circle functions. [Anyone wanting to acquire copies of this material (within 30