

Unity and Fellowship of Christians from a Pentecostal Perspective

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Abstract *Beginning with the historical development and the specification of the Pentecostal-Charismatic Movement, the first part of this article deals with the applied biblical ecclesiology of independent churches. Then it explains the role of the Holy Spirit in realizing and maintaining the unity of Christians.*

The unity of Christians does not require or assume uniformity of practice nor complete unanimity of teaching. Pentecostal churches excel in the various ways of worship and organizational structures, even in variety of teachings. The challenge for Christians today is living in unity without demanding that the worship, structure and the theology of the churches be more uniform than those of the New Testament churches.

Jesus Christ lives within Christians through the Holy Spirit dwelling in them, and Christians live in fellowship with one another by the Holy Spirit. While realizing God's will, the Holy Spirit creates different fellowships with Christ's disciples, binds them with one another and as a church. Most Pentecostals in Croatia do not support the ecumenical movement because they consider it to be founded not on biblical, but rather, on humanistic principles. They do believe in the spiritual unity of Christians and support fellowship with all the biblically founded churches and communities.

Introduction

The Pentecostal Movement is the most significant and largest Christian movement of the twentieth century. It was developed by the working of the Holy Spirit at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries in many places in different parts of the world. It especially progressed in the USA at the beginning of the 20th century, and in

Africa, South Korea, Argentina and Brazil at the second part of 20th century, as well as in Eastern Europe, only with a smaller intensity.

In the article, *Dialogue with Pentecostals*, Juan Usma Gómez¹ points out that within only ninety years, the Pentecostal Movement has revolved from a small community of believers which experienced revival, to a Christian force including about 450 million believers.²

The Pentecostal Movement in Croatia began a hundred years ago (1907) among the believers of the Evangelical and Reformed churches, who added additional studies of the Bible to their regular services in the parishes, during which the believers experienced baptism in the Holy Spirit. After the first baptisms in the Holy Spirit, more and more believers experienced the Pentecostal experience.³ With the new experience and a zeal for evangelism, they expected to be accepted in their churches and believed that other believers would be convinced about the power of the Holy Spirit. Neither the Evangelical nor the Reformed churches have accepted the groups of believers renewed by the Holy Spirit, but instead, have tended to isolate and stop their activities under the accusation that they are “fanatics” spreading “false doctrine”. The believers who had a Pentecostal experience were forced to leave their churches and tried to gather in private premises. More and more people converted, believing in the Lord, and the churches grew. During the growth and development of the Pentecostal Movement in Croatia, the believers often faced disputes, accusations and rejection from other believers, priests, pastors and spiritual workers of the Catholic Church, Protestant churches and the independent churches of Reformation heritage.⁴ In the middle of the

¹ At the time when his article was edited (2001), father Juan Usma Gómez was a member of the Pontifical Council for promoting the Christian Unity of the Roman Catholic Church. He participated as a Catholic representative in the dialogue with Pentecostals, 1996 and 1997. As a co-secretary (1997), he participated in the preparation and the final formation of the Document *Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness, The Report from the Fourth Phase of the International Dialogue (1990-1997) between the Roman Catholic Church and some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders*.

² Gómez uses information from: D. Barrett and T. M. Johnson, “Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 2000” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 1 (January 2000), vol. 24, pp. 24-26.

³ The Pentecostal experience, or baptism in the Holy Spirit, is an experience of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon a individual, like the example in the Book of Acts (2:1-13; 2:38-39) in which the Holy Spirit comes on the believer to anoint and fill him with power for special service (Jambrek, 2003:236).

⁴ Gómez points out this reality to a world level: “First of all, it should be noted that Pentecostalism does not follow as the result of an internal split or the division of a Church or Ecclesial Community. It arises, in an Evangelical context and in that of the so-called Holiness Movement, as a movement marked by a spiritual experience, whose marks and signs reflected and/or recalled the biblical description of Pentecost (Acts 2); as a movement with those charismatic expressions particularly mentioned by the Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 12)” (2001).

second part of the twentieth century, the Pentecostal Movement developed and got stronger, and toward the end of the century, 63 churches were involved in it (Jambrek, 2007:248).

Pentecostals have skillfully avoided the issue of the unity and fellowship of Christians, especially the visible Christian unity and effective fellowship, worldwide as well as on the domestic scene. There are many reasons for that, and most of them are direct or indirect results of the specifics of the World Pentecostal Movement and the domestic spiritual atmosphere between churches.

Specifics of the Pentecostal Movement

Pentecostal theological thought relies on conservative evangelical theology applied in the practical life of the believer. The experience of the baptism in the Holy Spirit brings the believer into a dynamic and close relationship with God the Father and with Jesus Christ, where revealed biblical truths change the man and become a foundation for his overall life instead of confessional utterances. The Pentecostal Movement is founded on the teaching of the Holy Scripture and is focused on Jesus Christ.⁵ The Pentecostals believe, teach and hold that the Bible is God's authoritative revelation. The Bible is God's Word, inspired by the Holy Spirit, infallible and a supreme authority in all the issues of faith and life. Therefore, the overall Christian belief, teaching and life must be founded in the Bible and judged by it. The Holy Scriptures are the only supreme authority on the issues of faith and ethics.

Pentecostals repeatedly point out that the grace of God is the only means to salvation, and that salvation is a gift which is accepted by faith. The true faith is recognizable by good deeds. The Christian life is discipleship – following Jesus Christ, which primarily implies a living relationship with God and attempting to fulfill His will in our daily lives, especially in evangelization. *Agape* love is asserted as the only adequate motivation of the Christian life. In spite of the assertion of love, the theologian Cecil M. Robeck Jr. concludes: “In the hundred years of our existence, *we Pentecostals have not learned how to agree to disagree with one another and still truly love and respect one another in spite of our differences*” (2004:314).

The church is a community of believers, that is, a *fellowship of the new-born Christians* baptized as adults after the confession of sin and their personal faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. By emphasizing the practical ap-

⁵ Although the believers with Pentecostal experience witness about the baptism in the Holy Spirit, they continually point toward a deeper relationship with Jesus and the total acceptance of Jesus as their Savior.

plication of the biblical teaching about the *priesthood of all believers*, Pentecostals have involved all believers in service to God and people. This has been reflected in evangelism and the “explosive” growth of the Pentecostal Movement.

Every local church is *fully a church* because it proclaims the Word of God and the Holy Spirit abides in it, therefore every local church is independent and autonomous. The church needs to be daily renewed in belief and action according to the model of the church as described in the Book of Acts and according to its specific task which God entrusted to her in the present time. The local church is a specific community in which Christ’s disciples are serving, endowed with different gifts by the Holy Spirit. The churches may have different structures, depending on the specific task entrusted to each one.

The Church, the Fullness of Churchliness and Unity of the Church

The ecclesiology of the Pentecostal churches, as well of the churches of Reformation heritage is founded on Jesus’ words: “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Mt 18:20). The church is two, three or more believers in covenant with God and in mutual fellowship. Pentecostals strongly emphasize that the church is a community gathered in Jesus’ name in a special place and with a special purpose. Of course, the entire life of the church is does not consist of merely gathering together in one place, because even when the church is not gathered together, it continues with life and the mutual serving of its members and the world. However, the gathering of the church in one place is a very important activity by which the church reveals itself and its churchliness.⁶ The community that gathers in the home of a believer is also called a church, as well as the community or communities in a city or region.

The community of believers that gathers in the name of Jesus Christ in a house or apartment is a church in its fullness. In New Testament times, the church gathered in the homes of believers; the New Testament notes the gathering of the church in Aquila’s and Priscilla’s home (Rom 16:3-4; 1 Cor 16:19), in the house of Nympha from Laodicea (Col 4:15), and in the house of Archipus (Phm 1-2). These were not only gatherings of the believers, but a meeting of the church. The meeting place in apostolic times was not important, nor is it to evangelical Christians today.

The church is made up of sanctified believers in Jesus Christ, holy and called, all of those who call upon the name of Jesus Christ in any place (cf. 1 Cor 12).

⁶ The use of the word *ecclesia* in the New Testament, especially in Paul’s letters, confirms the understanding of the church as the gathered community in a special place. Of course, the church is the “church of God” (1 Cor 1:2), but only as a community of people gathered in one place.

The church does not exist somewhere above or beyond the locally gathered community of believers, the church *is* the gathered believing community, the Body of Christ in the place where it is gathered (see Rom 12; 1 Cor 12).

In every church that gathers in Jesus' name to proclaim and praise Jesus Christ as a Savior and Lord, Christ is present by the Holy Spirit. The local church, therefore, is not only a part of the church but a whole church, because the church exists only in a locally gathered communities of believers (Volf, 1998:154). Therefore, a group of churches (denomination or regional church) cannot have authority and power above the local church.⁷ Every local community of believers that gathers in Christ' name is independent and is an autonomous church which stands on its own spiritual feet because Christ is present in his entirety by the Holy Spirit. In the tradition of the independent churches, every local church is equipped to make final solutions about everything, therefore, above it no higher church body exists to which the church should submit. Of course, the independence of the church does not exclude fellowship with other local churches. On the contrary, Christ's presence, which makes every church independent and autonomous, places them in relationship with one another (Volf, 1998:154). In that way, out of its own need and Christ's commission for the fellowship, the local church can transfer part of its authority to a leadership that has been chosen by God and approved by people, leadership of a number of local churches gathered for fellowship to fulfill a common vision.

The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Realization and Keeping of the unity of Christians

According to the teaching of the Apostle Paul, the risen Christ lives in Christians by the Holy Spirit who abides in them (see Rom 8:10-11); in the same way, Christians live in Christ and in fellowship with one another by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:12). The same Spirit is present in every person and binds them together. The Holy Spirit is the basic bond of unity for Christians, making all Christians open to other Christians and binding them in one church. What unites the church, therefore, is found in the plurality of its members. The unity of the church requires the presence of the Holy Spirit as a person (cf. Volf, 1998:154-158).

The church is one: it is "God's church", "Christ's church". The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus:

"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

⁷ Denominations (including the Catholic Church), local churches united in a certain country, or local churches in the entire world can be called a "church" only in a derived sense, but not in the literal theological meaning of the word.

There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Eph 4:3-6).

This New Testament text greatly determines the belief and behavior of Pentecostal churches. The utterance “one body” relates to the church as the Apostle Paul explains it:

“The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” (1 Cor 12:12-13).

The unity of Christians is a gift from God realized in Christ’s disciples by the Holy Spirit, and it is facilitated by Christ’s redemptive work on the cross (Weber, 2003). The unity among Christ’s disciples realized by the Holy Spirit is not equal to the unity of churches whose members strive to achieve it.⁸ Unity is a reflection of God’s being. The triune God is completely one. The Word became flesh in Jesus Christ and He kept perfect unity with the Father to the end, through His obedience, by which He serves as an example to the disciples. As Jesus lived in perfect spiritual, willing unity, so are the disciples called to live in a spiritual unity with one another. In His prayer, Jesus pleads the Father to actualize unity among the disciples and among those who would believe in Him according to their words (Jn 17:11.17-24). That prayer includes all Jesus’ believers, at all times. This prayer points out that the depth of unity has no limits because its example lies in the relationship between the Father and the Son. Just as the Father is one with the Son and the Son with the Father, and there is nothing to separate them, so the disciples can be one through Jesus Christ. That unity exists in reality as a sign for the world and people who seek the truth (Jn 17:21c.23b), and it is not an unachievable ideal.

Jesus knew He was praying for sinful people. But, through the work of salvation, the possibility for real unity arose for all those who seek the deepest unity with the Father. A relationship with the living God forms unity and bonds of love through Christ and the Holy Spirit. The relationship of the Son toward the Father is characterized by unconditional trust, unlimited love and obedience, as well as

⁸ Therefore, Pentecostals clearly differentiate between speaking about the unity of Christians and speaking about ecumenism. All the principles of the unity of Christians are found in the Bible and realized by the Holy Spirit in and among the disciples of Christ. The foundational principles of ecumenism, however, identify certain denominations (including the Catholic Church). Those principles, among which the majority is only partially founded in God’s Word, greatly reflect the tradition and specific teachings of the denominations.

a readiness for various sacrifices. This is the way for every Christian and follower of Jesus Christ at all times (Jn 2:41,46; 4:32).

The unity of Christians is not reflected by membership in the ecumenical or any other movement which places tremendous effort in the organizational uniting of the churches and Christian organizations. Unity is not a diplomacy or manifestation of the yearly prayer for the unity of Christians. Unity is a matter of the heart and the one who abides in it.

The unity of Christ's disciples generates from God's being. The Holy Spirit effectuates it. That is the unity of the Holy Spirit. We must never forget that. Nobody, no individuals, or church community, has understanding or knowledge that is wide, high or deep enough, to comprise the eternal will of God. Human theories, considerations and documents generated from them about the unity of Christians often violate God's will and oppose the teaching of the Bible – excluding some of those whom God has given as brothers and sisters, and including those about whom the Bible explicitly says will not enter the kingdom of God – and most often are serious obstacles to the unity of the Holy Spirit.

The unity of the church does not require or assume uniformity of practice nor complete unanimity of doctrine (Hammond, 1994:182). Right from the beginning, the Church has manifested itself in many local churches (in Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth etc.) with various styles of worship and organizational structures,⁹ and even with various teachings. The church was not uniform by the forms of worship and the ways of management, but by being comprised of those who truly love the Lord (Hammond, 1994:182).

The challenge for Christians today is living in unity without demanding that the worship, structure and theology be more uniformed than those of the New Testament churches. Of course, the evangelical churches hold that according to the New Testament, only reborn Christians, called by God and filled by the same Spirit and therefore made one in that Spirit, bound by peace, can make a church; Christians that believe in the Lord Jesus Christ; that are baptized on the basis of their own faith; over whom is God the Father who works through them and lives in them (cf. Eph 4:3-6; 1 Cor 12:12-13).

Regardless of the fact that the Church is divided into various churches and denominations,¹⁰ it is still one, because it is united with Christ regardless of the

⁹ Asked about which church structure they consider to be correct, most Pentecostals will answer: The one that does God's will and accomplishes God's will in concrete time and space (Js 1:22). Pentecostals believe that Christians should not become protectors and sustainers of their traditions and structures, but doers of God's will in all areas of life and activity.

¹⁰ According to the *World Christian Encyclopedia* (1982), at the beginning of the 20th century, about 1900 church denominations are evidenced, and toward the end of that century it is estimated that there are 22,000 (Omanson). In "Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 2000," David B. Barrett

inability to achieve outward unity through worldly management. The Church has an experiential, social dimension and therefore it should express spiritual unity by daily recognition of every community of believers (*ecclesia*) as a part of the one and only Church of Jesus Christ. This assumes openness and mutual unanimity of the believers in all the churches and denominations, and it also involves inclinations toward the visible unity of the churches. Unity is possible when we cease to consider our church or denomination as a vine, and the rest of the churches or denominations only as branches on that vine (Omanson, 1999). The Church is one only when Jesus is the vine, and the denominations and the churches are branches on that vine, which gives them life, dynamism and fruitfulness (Williams, 1966:23).

Fellowship of Christians

The believers with a Pentecostal experience consider it very important to have fellowship based on the Word of God and permeated with the action of doing God's will. Fellowship is created by God and Christians: God reveals His will, and the Christians fulfill it. God binds the Christians together for accomplishing His purpose. That is why there are different fellowships. Every common fellowship of Christians should generate from the fellowship of the individual believer with God. The closer, the more real and not declarative the fellowship is of the believer with the Lord by the Holy Spirit, the closer will the fellowship among believers be who accomplish God's will as the reason for their fellowship, through their life and activities. Every fellowship should be to the glory of God as a visible sign of the spiritual unity of Christians and the Church.

Fellowship is the bond of common purpose and the piety which binds Christians with each other and with Christ. The Apostle Paul used the word fellowship (*koinonia*) to describe the relationship between the believer and the risen Lord, and the benefits of the salvation which comes through Him.

The New Testament points out different fellowships of Christians. The fellowship with the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is accomplishable by faith and obedience to the Word of God (1 Cor 1:9; 1 Jn 1:3). The Holy Spirit is the most important bond of unity in the life of the church (Php 2:1-4; 2 Cor 13:13).

The precondition for fellowship in the faith and the believer (Plm 1:6) is fellowship with God: the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Apostle John

and Todd M. Johnson state that until 2000, there were altogether 33,800 different and organizationally separated denominations in the world. In 1990, there were 11,000 Pentecostal denominations in the world which represented 193 million classical Pentecostals.

says:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 Jn 1:1-3).

The foundation of Christian fellowship is comprehension of God’s Word, experiencing life (“we have seen and heard”) and fellowship with the Father and Jesus Christ. Without this comprehension of the Word or experiencing life and fellowship with God, we cannot speak of Christian unity and fellowship. People can call themselves believers, they can agree with the creed of the church they belong to, receive adequately shared sacraments and assert to have fellowship with God, but, what if they walk in darkness, lie and do not live by the truth?

“If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 Jn 1:6-7).

For most evangelical Christians, and therefore for Pentecostals too, it is an insurmountable obstacle to pray for unity with a church that receives in its membership persons about whom the Bible explicitly claims will not enter the kingdom of God (Mt 7:21). The Apostle Paul asserts:

“Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9-10).

The foundational question that conservative Pentecostals ask their ecumenically oriented brothers and sisters is: what kind of a unity can converted Christians that have fellowship with the Lord build with persons in any church about whom the Bible says will “not inherit the kingdom of God”? Unity - in what? Fellowship - around what?

Exhortation to fellowship in proclaiming the gospel (Gal 2:9; Php 1:27) is not only a benevolent feeling, but a call to partnership in the common task with one purpose: proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ to the person who does not have a personal relationship or fellowship with God. That is the purpose of Jesus’ prayer for the fellowship of those who believe in Him (Jn 17:23). This implies the

evangelization of all people who do not know Jesus Christ personally and have no relationship with Him, whether they are non-Christians or traditional Christians who, in principle, agree with the creeds of their church, but base their life on entirely worldly principles.¹¹

In addition to these, the Bible notes and points out a number of other Christian fellowships, of which we notice: fellowship in the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:23-32), fellowship in the glory of the Lord (1 Pt 5:1), fellowship in Christ's suffering (Php 3:10; Col 1:24; Heb 10:33; 1 Pt 4:13), fellowship in Christ's comfort (2 Cor 1:7), fellowship in material blessing (Rom 15:26-27; 2 Cor 8:4; 9:13; 1 Tim 6:18; Ac 2:42; 4:32), fellowship in sacrifice (1 Cor 10:18; Rom 15:26), fellowship in food and celebration (Ac 2:46-47), fellowship in service (2 Cor 8:3-4; 9:13), and fellowship in relationships and friendships (2 Cor 6:14).

We can add to it a number of other fellowships, especially in missions, education, and various social projects. It is worthwhile to mention that the unity of Christians is lasting, and the more we love the Lord, the more we love His children and our brothers and sisters. God gives unity and effects it only among those who love Him and wash themselves from sin in Christ's blood. Christians, however, must recognize and keep the unity.

Pentecostal believers and churches love fellowship and often create different partnerships with other Christians and churches. They are completely devoted to the invisible unity that exists among the believers through the Holy Spirit. Local churches tend to avoid fellowship and partnerships that would require from to deny their own autonomy and authority.

Dialogue Between Pentecostals and the Catholic Church

The relation of Pentecostals toward ecumenism is very layered and different in certain parts of the world, as well as in Croatia. As all the local Pentecostal churches are independent in making decisions pertaining to issues of faith and life, so every local church, although incorporated in a denomination, has its independent stance toward ecumenical issues. This independence has become obvious in the dialogue between Pentecostals and the Catholic Church. The status of the Pentecostal representatives in the dialogue was specific. Since Pentecostals do not have a representative international body, certain Pentecostal participants in the dialogue have represented their local community or denomination, while sometimes they spoke in a personal capacity but with the permission of the former.

¹¹ Conservative Pentecostals consider the Ecumenical Movement to be the greatest obstacle to effective evangelism because it assumes that the members of churches are people who do not need to be evangelized.

It is important to stress that before initiating the dialogue between Pentecostals and the Catholic Church, it was decided that the “dialogue will not focus on problems of structural unity, but only on issues concerning unity in prayer and common witness. The intention, then, was to explore the spiritual dimension of the fullness of life in the Spirit and to grow in mutual understanding and respect” (Gómez, 2001).

The dialogue between Pentecostals and the Roman Catholic Church began in 1972, and developed in several phases.¹² In the *First Phase (First Quinquennium)*, in 1972-1976, along with the representatives from the classical Pentecostals, there were also those who represented the Charismatic Movement, and the Protestant and Anglican churches. In this phase, the dialogue was concerning the biblical basis of the fullness of life in the Holy Spirit, the relation of baptism in the Holy Spirit to Christian initiation, the role of the gifts of the Spirit in the mystical tradition, the charismatic dimensions and structures of the sacramental as well as ecclesial life, prayer, worship, witnessing and evangelism (Sandidge, 1995; Gómez, 2001).

In the *Second Phase (Second Quinquennium)* of the dialogue (1977-1982),¹³ key themes were discussed, such as: speaking in tongues, faith and experience, interpreting the Holy Scripture, the relation between the Holy Scripture, tradition and the church teaching profession, healing of the sick, the church as a fellowship, the role of Mary, and the ministries in the church (Sandidge, 1985, Gómez, 2001). Various historical events, especially the announcement of the report about the Mariological character of Pentecostals - an issue which is still a source of division (Gómez, 2001), the dialogue fell into crisis and consequently suspended the commission's work in order to estimate the efficacy of the dialogue (Sandidge, 1985).

Another contact was established in 1984, and it was agreed that the dialogue would be continued for the next five years. The *Third Phase* of the dialogue (1984-1989) was about the fellowship of the saint. Four thematic discussions were held: the fellowship of the saint (1985); the Holy Spirit and the New Testament vision of *koinonia* (1986); *koinonia*, the church and sacrament (1987); and *koinonia* and the baptism (1988). During 1989, a Final Document was prepared:

¹² The first contact between the Pentecostals and Rome was initiated by the American Pentecostal preacher and pastor David J. du Plessis during his visit to Rome in 1961. Three preparative meetings preceded the official dialogue (September 1970, June 1971, and October 1971).

¹³ Contrary to the first phase where there were participants from the charismatic communities and the Protestant and Anglican churches, in this dialogue, only representatives from the classical Pentecostal Movement were involved. To include more representatives from the Pentecostal denominations, David du Plessis, Pentecostal chairman at the dialogue, suggested a greater number of “observers” to follow the discussions without participating.

“Perspectives on *Koinonia*: The Report from the *Third Quinquennium* of Dialogue between the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders” [1985-1989].¹⁴ In the fourth phase of the dialogue, Pentecostal theologians, pastors and denominational leaders were involved (see Sandidge, 1985).

Taking into account the achieved results of the *Third Phase*, the *Fourth Phase* of the dialogue (1990-1997) was focused on missions and evangelization of the Church. Discussion was made about the biblical and theological foundation of evangelism, its relationship to culture and social justice, as well as proselytism and the possibility of a common witness. A Final Document, *Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness* was acquired,¹⁵ in which common areas of work and formulated proposals to be evaluated by the local churches were identified, with the achievement of common witness and overcoming proselytism in mind. The document emphasizes the fact that the mission mandate cannot be fulfilled without considering the ecumenical imperative (Gómez, 2001). It cannot be denied, Gómez asserts, that someone’s tradition is reflected in evangelism, and if the missionaries do not recognize others as Christians but deny a priori the validity of a faith experience different from their own, their proclamation can be perceived as proselytism. In this regard, Pope John Paul II asserted: “It is necessary to distinguish clearly between Christian communities [including Pentecostals], with which ecumenical relations can be established, and sects, cults and other pseudo-religious movements.”¹⁶

The *Fifth Phase* of the dialogue (1998-2003) covered the theme of: Baptism in the Holy Spirit and Christian Initiation: Biblical and Patristic Perspectives. The discussion was focused on several sub-themes: the process of becoming a Christian; faith and Christian initiation: Biblical and Patristic Perspectives; Christian experience in fellowship: Biblical and Patristic Perspectives; Forming of the Christian and discipleship: Biblical and Patristic Perspectives.

¹⁴ In the third phase of the dialogue, there were two representatives from Croatia. Peter Kuzmić participated in the discussion about the fellowship of the saint in 1985, and Miroslav Volf participated in the discussions in 1985, 1986, 1989, and also in the writing of the scheme and the final report under the title *Perspectives on Koinonia* (see Appendix, *Perspectives on Koinonia*).

¹⁵ The document *Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness*, the Report from the Fourth Phase of International Dialogue [1990-1997] between the Roman Catholic Church and some Classical Pentecostal churches and leaders was announced in the *Information Service* 97 (1998/I-II), pp. 38-56 and in *Pneuma: The Journal of the Pentecostal Studies*, Volume 21, No. 1, Spring 1999, pp. 11-51. Representing the Evangelical Pentecostal Church in Croatia, Dr. Miroslav Volf participated unofficially in the dialogue of 1990, 1991, 1992, and 1994. (see Appendix I in *Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness*).

¹⁶ Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, n. 49.

It is important to stress that the participation of the Pentecostal churches in the Ecumenical Movement was discussed in the largest Pentecostal group of denominations, the Assemblies of God Fellowship and at the Pentecostal World Conference which includes most of the Pentecostal denominations. In those discussions, attempts were made to discourage the Pentecostal ecumenists and to find ways of preventing dialogue with the Catholic Church (Robeck, 2004:328).¹⁷

Ecumenism and Pentecostal Churches in Croatia

The attitude of the Pentecostals in Croatia toward ecumenism is multi-layered. The Evangelical Pentecostal Church and the Church of God are official members of the Convention of the European Churches, the most important European ecumenical body which assembles Orthodox and Protestant churches. They participate in the ecumenical coordination committee of the churches in Croatia.

However, since every church is independent, the attitude toward the Ecumenical Movement varies from church to church, swinging between two extremes: from fear and exclusion, to excited acceptance of ecumenism, regardless of the numerous compromises and the relativization of biblical truths. Toward the end of the twentieth century, the churches in the Pentecostal Movement in Croatia grouped themselves into three groups.

The smaller group of humanistically inclined Pentecostal leaders and churches developed a dialogue with the Catholic Church and continues to merge with it by having occasional common times of worship and prayers for Christian unity.

The larger group of conservative leaders and churches strongly believes that it is necessary to keep and reflect the unity of Christ's Church on the principles of God's Word, while doubting that the Ecumenical Movement has biblical grounds for unity in the church. They believe that the contemporary Ecumenical Movement has too many elements of secular humanism and syncretism, especially since ecumenism is often annexed with inter-religious dialogue.¹⁸ They believe in the spiritual unity of Christians, and want to keep it and achieve it in fellowship only with all converted Christians and evangelical denominations, and by being focused on the common objectives, such as evangelism, church planting

¹⁷ At the meeting of the World Assemblies of God Fellowship, pressure was put on Pastor David Yonggy Cho and Yoido Full Gospel Church from South Korea (about 750 000 believers) to break the ecumenical connections with the Korean Council of Churches and to stop the development of connections with the World Council of Churches, initiated in 2000 (Robeck, 2004:238).

¹⁸ Conservative Pentecostals in Croatia oppose the ecumenism promoted by the Catholic Church, considering that the ecumenical principles are basically worldly principles wrapped up in biblical vocabulary. The contemporary ecumenism of the Catholic Church is basically syncretism, often intertwining ecumenism with inter-religious dialogue.

and growth.

The third group of leaders and churches considers that ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue are the means for uniting churches and religions into one religious group from which the Antichrist will emerge. Therefore, not only do they reject ecumenical ideas, but openly fight against them and those who promote them with all spiritual resources.

Cooperation of the Pentecostals with Other Christian Churches

Exhorted by the biblical ordinance of unconditional love toward one's neighbor, the Pentecostal churches tend to show that love practically toward all people, regardless of their religious orientation. Most Pentecostal churches cooperate, and are willing to continue to do so, with certain religious communities considering the issues of common social significance and the solution of social problems if the application scriptural principles and solutions is possible. The basis for dialogue and cooperation among Christians is in acceptance of the teaching of Holy Scripture and personal conversion to God, as well as living by biblical principles.

The Evangelical Pentecostal church as the largest denomination in Croatia, actively cooperates with evangelically inclined and biblically focused churches and denominations, and it is open for Christian dialogue. Collaborating with other evangelical denominations, it is the cofounder of the Protestant Evangelical Alliance¹⁹ which assembles most of the churches of Reformation heritage in Croatia. It is a member of the World Evangelical Alliance,²⁰ European Evangelical Alliance²¹ and the Pentecostal European Conference.²²

¹⁹ An evangelical alliance in Croatia, the Protestant Evangelical Alliance (PEV) is an active member of the European Evangelical Alliance and WEA. The members of the PEV are the Evangelical Pentecostal Church, the Council of the Baptist churches, the Church of God and the Church of Christ.

²⁰ World Evangelical Alliance is a global network of evangelical churches and the international organizations which are assembled in the evangelical alliance in 121 countries which represent more than 335 million Christians. In their common action, most of the national evangelical alliances have focused on four areas: promoting unity of the evangelical Christians, encouragement and exhortation for prayer, mission and evangelism, and the struggle for freedom and confession of the faith.

²¹ European Evangelical Alliance (EEA) assembles national evangelical alliances and numerous European missions and para-church organizations. It is active since 1951, as a regional alliance of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) founded in 1846 in London. EEA serves as a venue and platform for common activities of evangelical Christians in Europe.

²² Pentecostal European Fellowship is a fellowship of the European Pentecostal churches and organizations which was organized after the Pentecostal revival at the beginning of the 20th century. The following organizations are involved in the PEF: Pentecostal European Conference (EPRO), Pentecostal European Mission (PEM), European Pentecostal Theological Association (EPTA), European Pentecostal Press Agency (EPPA), and Alpha & Omega Television Ministry.

Conclusion

The Pentecostal churches in Croatia are independent local churches, which according to biblical teaching, are fully churches and are fully responsible for their own lives and actions which have been entrusted to them and are led by the Lord Jesus Christ. The church is the gathered and devoted believers in Jesus Christ, called and sanctified; all of those who, in any place, call upon the name of Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor 1:2). In every community gathered in Christ's name to proclaim and glorify Jesus Christ as the Savior and Lord, Christ is present by the Holy Spirit.

Fellowship with the living God forms unity and bonds of love through Christ in the Holy Spirit. The relationship of the Son toward the Father is characterized by unconditional trust, unlimited love and obedience, as well as readiness for various sacrifices. That is the way for every Christian and follower of Jesus Christ at all times (Ac 2:41.46; 4:32).

The unity of Christ's disciples is a matter of heart and a matter of abiding. Unity generates from God's being, and the Holy Spirit effects it. That is the unity of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecostals believe that the unity of the church does not require or imply uniformity of practice nor a complete unanimity of doctrine. The challenge of Christians today is to live in unity without requiring that the style of worship, structure and theology be more uniform than that of the New Testament churches. Of course, Pentecostals believe, on the basis of the New Testament, that the church is comprised only of Christians called and re-birthed by God, that are filled by the same Spirit, one in that Spirit, bound by peace, that believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, that are baptized on the basis of their faith, and over whom is God the Father who works through them and lives in them (cf. Eph 4:3-6; 1 Cor 12:12-13).

Although the dialogue between Pentecostals and the Catholic Church on the worldly level has been active since 1972, and the domestic ecumenical meetings began nearly at the same time led by a small group of humanistically oriented Pentecostal leaders and communities, most conservative Pentecostals do not support ecumenism, not in the world's Pentecostal movement or in Croatia. They believe that the ecumenical movement has too many elements of secular humanism and syncretism, especially regarding the issue of inter-religious dialogue. They believe in a spiritual unity of Christians, and attempt to keep and accomplish it in fellowship with all converted Christians and evangelical denominations, and they are focused on common purposes such as evangelism and church growth.

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Sažetak *Polazeći od povijesnog razvoja i specifičnosti pentekostno-karizmatskog pokreta u prvom se dijelu raspravlja o primijenjenoj biblijskoj ekleziologiji slobodnih crkava. Zatim se razlaže uloga Duha Svetoga u ostvarivanju i očuvanju jedinstva kršćana. Jedinstvo kršćana ne zahtijeva niti podrazumijeva uniformnost prakse i potpunu jednodušnost u nauči. Pentekostne crkve ističu se različitim načinima bogoštovlja i organizacijskim strukturama, pa čak i s različitim učenjima. Izazov kršćana danas je življenje u jedinstvu bez zahtijevanja da bogoštovlje, strukture i teologija budu više uniformne od novozavjetnih crkava.*

Isus Krist živi u kršćanima po Duhu Svetomu koji prebiva u njima, a kršćani žive u Kristu i u zajedništvu jedan s drugim po Duhu Svetomu. Duh Sveti, ostvarujući volju Božju, kreira različita zajedništva s Kristovim učenicima, veže ih jedne s drugima te ih povezuje u Crkvu. Većina pentekostalaca u Hrvatskoj ne podupire ekumenski pokret jer smatraju da nije utemeljen na biblijskim, već na humanističkim načelima. Vjeruju u duhovno jedinstvo kršćana i podržavaju zajedništvo sa svim biblijski utemeljenim crkvama i zajednicama.

Translated by Ljubinka Jambrek

