BOOK REVIEW


Reviewed by: Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Professor of Systematic Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA., USA. E-mail: vmk@fuller.edu

Some time ago Cecil M. Robeck, the leading Pentecostal ecumenist, somewhat surprisingly called Pentecostals “anonymous ecumenists.” By that striking phrase he simply meant that notwithstanding their lack of consciousness of and sometimes even prejudices against efforts toward Christian unity, there is a robust and deep “ecumenical” orientation within the movement. This collection of essays edited by Professor Wolfgang Vondey, Pentecostalism and Christian Unity, is a testimony to the fact that, against the expectations of both uninformed outsiders and many insiders (!), Pentecostal ecumenism has already made its mark and achieved some significant milestones.

The book is a collection of 14 essays by nine international scholars and is divided into three main parts. In the introduction the editor provides the reader with a “crash-course” in the basics of ecumenics. The first part consists of six essays on the rise and development of Pentecostal ecumenical consciousness both at the global level (Harold Hunter) and in North America (Douglas Jacobsen). Furthermore, there are case studies in Dutch Pentecostalism (Paul van der Laan) and in Chile (Carmelo E. Álvarez), the latter in relation to joining the World Council of Churches. Raymond Pfister’s essay expands the notion of Pentecostal ecumenism into the direction of reconciliation, and the long-time co-chair of the International Pentecostal-Roman Catholic dialogue, Professor Robeck, offers a highly useful and insightful reflection on that dialogue and its background.

The second part is a collection of key ecumenical documents that have come out of two long-standing bi-lateral dialogues, namely with the Vatican, beginning in 1972 and still continuing, and with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. From the former dialogue process four quinquennium reports are selected (including the highly influential Perspectives on Koinonia report from the third round of talks, 1985-1989). From the latter dialogue, the first major final report will appear in the book (1996-2000).

The third part engages the ecumenically most important statement currently on ecclesiology, The Nature and Mission of the Church. The three commentators
Putting together a volume consisting of such diverse material is a daunting task in terms of guaranteeing thematic integrity. Although the editor’s introduction serves as a wonderful “Ecumenism 101,” another introductory essay looking at the Pentecostal ecumenical involvement and activities at the global level might have been useful as well.

The book meets several needs and serves many interrelated causes. First, the publication of major Pentecostal ecumenical documents in itself is a worthy task. It simply is the case that mainstream ecumenical players are not well informed of the long-standing ecumenical practice among Pentecostals. Second, Pentecostals themselves are in need of in-house information and training about their own efforts towards Christian unity. I am thinking here particularly of the needs of Pentecostal Bible schools and theological colleges and seminaries. Third, the inclusion of documents Pentecostal and ecumenical (Faith and Order) for theological analysis by Pentecostals helps engage the wider ecumenical reflection.

I wonder, though, if the book should have attempted a more focused analysis and commenting on the many significant bi-lateral documents. Dr. Robeck’s great essay is basically the only one that specifically engages the documents included in the book, and even that one essay can only look broadly at the documents rather than going into any details. For future publication plans, it would be worthwhile to invite a number of Pentecostal theologians to analyze, engage, critique, and affirm the extensive ecumenical materials produced by the dialogues.

I also wonder if reflections beyond one ecumenical document outside of the Pentecostal world, namely The Nature and Mission of the Church – as important as it is in itself – would have helped the cause of this book. I am thinking of documents such as Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry, or those on, say, evangelism and proselytism, and so forth.

It is always problematic for the reviewer to suggest yet other topics or contributors not included in a collection of essays. Often the list is endless. Yet I think it would have helped make the book more inclusive if there had been an essay or at least an extended discussion of the Lutheran-Pentecostal preparatory talks begun in 2004, which may well lead into the establishment of ecumenical dialogues as well as emerging Pentecostal-Orthodox engagement plans. Furthermore, not much is said of many regional consultations between the World Council of Churches and Pentecostals in various locations that took place already in the 1980s and 1990s and which also have produced useful documents. Similarly, it would have been useful to see some discussion of the significant Pentecostal presence in some worldwide ecumenical events such as the WCC’s World Missionary Conference in Athens in 2005 and particularly at the historic Edinburgh conference in 2010 – both conferences that also had a years-long theological preparatory process – not forgetting that the Consultative Group between the WCC and Pentecostals started in the year 2000.

Professor Vondey, himself trained by the leading North American Roman Catholic ecumenist Michael A. Fahey, SJ, at Marquette University, has taken up
a mighty challenge in attempting a state-of-the-art analysis of key Pentecostal ecumenical endeavors. His wide and extensive knowledge of ecumenism in its various forms has helped create a volume whose time has come – and is already past! Hopefully he is already planning for a follow-up volume as theological work on the many Pentecostal ecumenical frontiers continues to flourish.