

## Schism and Ecumenical Initiatives in Nigeria 11<sup>th</sup> - 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries: An Illusion or Reality

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### Abstract

The procession for schism in church history in the eleventh century remains unresolved over Theology biases. The advent of ecumenical initiatives in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century became a notable attempt to put away schism in Nigerian Christian churches. However, this laudable attempt in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century was primarily based on theological and non theological variation. Though it is generally acceptable fact that the children of God all over the world were to be one family, it has rather over the years created conformists and non-conformists to the issue of oneness. It appears the study and practice for oneness of the Christendom in the classical text of the Lord's Prayer, John 17: 11 are mystic-centric. Can the recent thrust for unity of the Christian churches in Nigeria be based on conformists or non-conformist views on ecumenism? This paper attempts to do a critical African biblio-historical evaluation of church schisms and ecumenical concept in Nigeria in a little over ten centuries milieu. This paper will as well attempt to painstakingly make possible suggestions to make the prayer of the Master referred to at the beginning to its fulfillment.

**Keywords:** Schisms, Ecumenical, Initiative, Christianity, Churches, Nigeria.

### Introduction

#### Backdrop to Schisms in Christianity

According to Ndiokwere (1994), Church authorities find support for the ecumenical movements in the prayer of our Lord in John 17:11b. "so that they may be one, even as we are one" CF Eph 3:27-28 and Gal 3:27. History recorded that the first division in the church was the schism of 1054 between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. The next great division in the Church better known as the Reformation in 1517 began with Martin Luther of Germany. Barrett (2011) further revealed that when one takes a look at the trend of events in Christendom today, it is clear that all is not well with the church of Christ after the reformation. The unity and love of brethren, which has been the remarkable identity of the early church has been replaced by persistent divisions. Nnebedum (2009) added that there are over 33,000

denominations in 238 countries and there is a net increase of around 270 to 300 denominations every year, 8,196 denominations within Protestantism alone.

In fact, the above scenario is captured in the words of the Vatican 11 Council fathers as edited by Austin Flannery (1988).

In so far as Christ founded one church and one church only, the division among the Christian communities scandalize the world and impedes the spread of the gospel.

Many Christian communions present themselves to men as the true inheritors of Jesus Christ. All indeed profess to be the followers of the head but they differ in mind and openly contradict the will of Christ, scandalize the world, and damage that most holy cause, the preaching of the gospel to every creature (p. 452).

Based on Ndiokwere (1994) discovery, since the early days of division and disunity in the once indivisible church of Christ things have never been the same again. From the top of the ladder to the foot, from universal to the particular, the head quarters to the grassroots, division and disunity have continued to the present times and in the various parts of the Christian world including Africa and Nigeria. The seeds of division and discord sown by the leaders of the church, their agents and immediate followers seem to have attached deeply even on the younger generation who never know what the initial squabbles were all about. One simply has to join one camp or the other as the battle for supremacy continues to rage.

### **Exegetical Analysis of the Classical Text, John 17:21**

According to Nichol & Cottrell (1956), the historical setting of the book of John can be traced to the age when the life and purity of the Christian Church were being threatened by three major dangers: waning piety, heresy and persecution. Gromacki (1975) narrated that this classical book was written by John the apostle around the end of the first Century between AD 85 and 95. It was written in Ephesus to persuade the Gentiles to believe that Jesus is Christ is the son of God, and through Him they might have life. (Jon 20:30-31). The book of John is divided into 21 chapters but the focus of this work is on the 17<sup>th</sup> Chapter. The chapter records the prayer of Christ for glorification(1-5), preservation(6-16), sanctification(17-19), Unification (20-23) and prayer for habitation (24-26).The periscope of this work is on 20-21 particularly verse 21. Christ prayer on the eve of His arrest and crucifixion where Jesus prayed "that they may be one, even as we are one" has received several scholarly and denominational interpretations on the issue of "oneness", "unity" or "centrality"

for all the believers. The question that gauges the mind is what kind of "oneness" or "unity" was Christ praying for? Is it physical or spiritual?

<sup>NIV</sup> John 17:21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

Friberg (2000) unveils that concept of oneness in the above text implies one *and the same or the only one* ([Lk 12:52](#); [Ro 3:30](#); [1 Cor. 12:11](#)). The word one preposition with the dative; the primary idea is *within, in*, denoting static position. It is with a plural noun, denoting close relationship *among, within*. It designates further a close personal relationship, especially with God, Christ, or the Spirit. The word under study is locative of source, "just as you are in me" suggesting oneness in God and not a physical oneness but spiritual. It does not suggest association or one central denomination neither a central worship center for all Christians. The interpretation might rather favors unity in the same spirit and truth in Jesus Christ based on Bible. It is never on uniformity in diversity. Mathew Henry added that the oneness is the request of *knitting together* in the bond of love and charity, all of one heart. *That they all may be one*, (1.) In judgment and sentiment; not in every little thing--this is neither possible nor needful, but in the great things of God, and in them, by the virtue of this prayer, they are all agreed--that God's favor is better than life--that sin is the worst of evils, Christ the best of friends--that there is another life after this, and the like. (2.) In disposition and inclination. All that are sanctified have the same divine nature and image; they have all a new heart, and it is *one heart*. (3.) They are all one in their designs and aims. Every true Christian, *as far as he is so*, eyes the glory of God as his highest end, and the glory of heaven as his chief good. (4.) They are all one in their desires and prayers; though they differ in words and the manner of expressions, yet, having received the same *spirit of adoption*, and observing the same rule, they pray for the same things in effect. (5.) All one in love and affection. The concept of oneness implies not uniformity in diversity but unity based on the platform of Christ and the Apostolic Church and their teachings.

### **Concepts on Ecumenical Initiatives and Inter Faith Dialogue**

According to an on-line Free dictionary (2012), the word ecumenism (also *Oecumenism*), is from Greek (*Oikoumene*), meaning "The inhabited world's implying a world-wide phenomenon or general movement in extent, influence or application, presupposes a state of division among Christians. The word contrasts with interfaith dialogue or interfaith pluralism aimed at unity or co-operation

among diverse religions and referring to a world-wide "religious unity" by the advocacy for a greater sense of shared spirituality. Ecumenical", according to Webster's dictionary, means "pertaining to the entire inhabited earth", universal extent. The ecumenical "movement" began with protestant Christianity, expanded through organizations like the world Council of Churches, and now through grassroots associations, is understood as a complete interfaith dialogue. Available sources have it that ecumenical movement came from the Roman Catholic Church's attempts to reconcile with the Christians who had become separated over Theological issues. The Catholic Church sees itself as the one, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, founded by Christ himself. Its teachings state that the proper church of Christ is identical with the Catholic Church, thus excluding all other Christian religious groups and churches (Wikipedia, 2012).

Andre (2005) posits that the noun "ecumenism" was introduced in 1937 by the French Dominican, Yves Congar, and then was adopted and confirmed by Vatican 11 in the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Reintegration* (p. 472). Ecumenism takes as its starting point that Christ founded just one church, not many churches; hence the Roman Catholic Church has its ultimate hope and objective that through prayer, study, and dialogue, the historically separated bodies may come again to be reunited with it. The Roman Catholic Church recognizes 21 Ecumenical or General Councils, beginning with Nicaea in 325 AD to deal with issues that threatened the peace and unity of the church. As Christianity grew, various traditions emerged within the universal church. The church as the one body of Christ was divided between the West and East on theological and political grounds. The Western Church was also split, first into two broad sides, namely Catholicism and Protestantism. Again, According to Tachin (2009), Protestantism was split into various denominations on the basis of issues of biblical interpretations and theological conclusions. As events of wars and discrimination grew worse, churches saw the need to come together and seek ways of agreement between one another irrespective of confessional differences.

Vissert (1982) asserts the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement goes back to the protestant missionary conference in Edinburgh in 1910 as its name/stands, the conference set out to discuss the problems facing the Church and how to resolve them. In doctrine and policy, the protestant churches were of course not united and for this reason, the organizing committee stated clearly in its constitution for the conference that no expression of opinion should be sought from the conference on any matter involving any ecclesiastical or doctrinal questions on which those taking part in the conference differed among them. On this ground, the Anglican Church and other high churchmen sent

delegates to the conference. But the idea of excluding matters of faith and order did not please one important delegate to the conference. He was Bishop Brent of the Episcopal Church of America. He set out to see that a conference of faith and order was organized in 1927 at Lausanne in Switzerland. With this conference began what was later known as the faith and order communion of the world council of churches (WCC). Its main duty was to discuss matters concerning faith and order with the aim of bringing the churches together, to strive at organic unity. Hence, they extended their invitation to all Christian bodies throughout the world which accepts our Lord Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Similarly, Buhrmann (1976) recorded that the Roman Catholic Church was not among the 135 Christian denominations that assembled in Amsterdam for the formation of the World Council of Churches. The conspicuous absence of the Catholic Church was registered in the official report which states "All confessional families except the Roman Catholic were represented". Even establishing contact with the WCC after the Second Vatican Council and also establishing in 1965 a joint working group between the Vatican and the WCC as the official organ of cooperation, there was still the dragging of foot on the part of the Catholic Church. After the opening of dialogue and the expression of good will on both sides, the situation began to deteriorate and reached a crisis point in 1972 when Sodepax, the Geneva commission in social questions, developments and peace set up in 1968 by the World Council of Churches and the Vatican was re-organized.

Whatever the case may be, we may not forget that it bore the initiative and the dynamism of Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council to bring about a change of mentality and attitude of the Roman Catholic Church towards ecumenism and thus the activities of the World Council of Churches. When the Catholic Church however joined the modern ecumenical movement, she brought a new life to it and set a new accent in the area of bilateral dialogue. This was in fulfillment of the council's call on the sons and daughters of the Catholic Church to take active part in ecumenism. This call is seen in the numerous pronouncements of the council in the decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegration*) which specifies the Catholic Church's manner of approach to the ecumenical movement (African Synod, 1993). Ward (2000) posited that dialogue has been varied over ages as situations when one religion is in contact with another, debates, arguments, conversation, or other forms of different forms of intercommunication were carried out. However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it consists of

people who believe in different religions talking together about their beliefs so that they may understand each other and learn something from each other.

### **Objectives of the Ecumenical Initiatives**

Tachin (2009) stated the objective of this convergence of churches around the world as one body was to influence world governments in seeking mutual understanding and peaceful relationship between nations. The first major peace Ecumenical assembly was held at Hague in 1907, though the World Council of Churches held its first meeting in 1948 in the context of the World Wars.

Achunike (1995) states that Ecumenism is both a movement, an attitude of openness towards Christians of different traditions in order to learn from their various experiences and deepen one's own commitment to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. (p. 84).

Kaigama (2006) put the concept in a narrower and more common sense, Ecumenical refers to the movement towards co-operation among Christians. Ecumenism simply refers to Christians of different Christian denominations working together. Thus Ecumenism in reality is usually just the promotion of co-operation and better understanding between religious groups or denominations, without aiming at unity. No wonder, Eregare (2013) as cited in Lana (1987) affirmed explicitly that the concept of ecumenism was to make all denominations no stranger and foreigners to one another, but as relatives, and as being a part of the household of Christ and fellow-heirs, members of only one body, as well as heir of God's church of God on earth in Christ. Eregare (2013) deciphered further that "Ecumenical initiative is to aim at truth, justice and unity of the body of Christ or Christian churches or denominations." (p. 207).

### **The Non-Conformist Concept on Ecumenical Initiatives**

For some few Christian churches, it is believed that if there must be ecumenical initiatives, it must be based on the coming together of all Christian denominations that were since the notable era of schism in Christianity and in the 11<sup>th</sup> century experience to a single Christian church. This foundation must have the features of the Church of Christ and the Apostles and not acclaimed or self imposed denomination or vicar Church of Christ 1st century before the era of persecution. Eregare (2013) affirmed that the non-conformists believe that our Lord founded only one church (Eph. 4:5) in the first century. Christ and the Apostle founded the first Christian church which grew with incredible speed. He posited further'

After the era of the Apostle, came the era of persecution and martyrdom. The Roman Empire tried to stamp out Christianity. Only God knows how many of His children were beheaded, burned, fed to lions, or slain by the sword. The 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and of the 6<sup>th</sup> century sets in the era of compromise when the pagan practices came into the church. This was the era of the Roman Emperor, Constantine and his armies were baptized into the church, the true biblical Sabbath was transferred to Sunday mixing paganism with Christianity. There at that time occur the fallen away of the Christian church from the truth of the Gospel (p. 208).

Nwoamah (2012), a New Testament Scholar, asserts that the replica of the Christ and the Apostle's church according to 1 Tim. 3: 15, refers to "The custodian of the truth, the teacher of the truth and the defender of the truth, against all enemies of the Gospel" (p.26). According to Eregare (2013), the era of Apostasy came between is referred to as "Dark Ages" 534 A.D. - 1560's A.D). The Bible was pushed aside, There accompanied it with great backsliding and tradition superseded the teaching of the Bible which can be either described as fornication or adultery. Thus set in the coming of Wycliffe, Huss, Jerome, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and Knox which vehemently exposed the error and apostasy of the church with the aim to lead the church back to Jesus and the Church. This ushered in the era of Reformation (1560 A, D-1790 A.D.). It covers the period of transformation of the church when the spirit-filled men shook the world with their messages. This phenomenon brought the era of revival from (1790-1840). The expansion of foreign mission was given birth to by the British and American Bible Societies. A study of the book of Daniel and Revelation sparked greatest religious awakening. Biblical revelation has it that the true church in which should be a base for unity is any church that keep the ten commandment and have the faith of Jesus Christ (See Rev. 12:17; 12:9; Jer. 6:2; Ex. 20:3-17; Rev. 19:10) Eregare (2013) added that Martin Luther posits that "Cursed be that love and unity for whose sake the word of God must be put to stake!" Hugh Latimer added further that "Unity must be according to God's Holy word, or else it was better war than peace. We ought never to regard unity so much that we forget God" Simply put, ecumenism should not be the coming together or promotion of different denominations with differed theological differences for better understanding or accommodation of sister churches. Seventh-day Adventist (2005) negates that the concept should be based on back to Bible based foundation or Theology.

### **Catholic and Protestants on Ecumenical Relationships**

As interdenominational rivalries and fragmentation of already splintered Churches continue to deepen, the newly founded ones apart from the Catholic Church devise clever means of separating from parent bodies while assuming autonomy. The word 'new' is added to distinguish the 'old' from the "new"; New Church of Christ, New Church of God Mission, New Assemblies of God Mission, New End of Time Gospel Mission, etc. The type of relationship existing between Catholics and the other Protestant denominations cannot be said to be cordial.

#### ▪ **Politics**

According to Ndiokwere (1940), Catholics and Protestants are usually divided on political issues, like Islamic religion and politics; the Protestant Churches are more closely linked with politics and political institutions worldwide. While Catholics have been told to shun politics and the Catholic clergy banned from active participation in politics, Protestants are generally well groomed in politics and always outmanoeuvre Catholics in political matters. The ugly implication of this situation is that the Christian Churches together are never in the position to assume a common stand on issues of political interest which have moral implications for the Christian masses.

#### ▪ **The Clergy and Ecumenism**

Buhlmann (1976) affirmed that there is also no doubt that the leaders of all Christian Churches have a key role to play in any ecumenical movement worthy of the name. But unfortunately, the attitude of the clergy toward ecumenism does not offer any reasonable cause for optimism. In most cases the clergy are even more divided than the laity. It is a common place to find a Catholic Priest and a Protestant Pastor living and working in the same town that have not known or visited each other. Often, it is only at public gathering that they exchange greetings, in a hypocritically brotherly embrace and kiss of peace. The Catholic clergy are more socially inclined "outgoing", friendly and open than their Protestant counterparts. While the Catholics take alcohol and cigarette, the Protestants ban anything alcoholic; hence it is difficult for them to socialize together. Ibebuike (1989) added that generally Catholics look down on Protestant Pastors whom they regard as inferior to the Catholic Priests. Many even detest close association between their priests and Protestant pastors.

#### ▪ **Leadership Struggle: Superiority/Inferiority Complex**

According to Ibebuike (1989), most Catholics if not all regard Catholic beliefs and practices as the ones that must be accepted by all, and if ecumenism involves dialogue for all Christian unity in which certain Catholic beliefs and practices



should be suppressed in preference to the Protestant ones, many Catholics would regard any such compromise as abomination. As far as these Catholics are concerned it is the Protestants who should abandon their Church and return to the Catholic fold from which they separated. While Catholics, if they wish could attend Protestant services during thanksgiving occasion and take the protestant communion, Protestants may not venture to approach the altar rails at Catholic celebrations. They are of course reminded that the Holy Communion shared at the Catholic liturgical celebration or Mass is for Catholics only.

### **Impacts/ Challenges for Ecumenical Movement in Nigeria**

The ecumenically based association in Nigeria is the Christian Association of Nigeria. Since the formation of CAN, despite the laudable goals of the CAN in its constitution it has really remained at the level of negotiating with the government to the detriment of dealing with its own internal problems. Though the situation looks bleak, it is fair to take note of areas in which the CAN has made some positive impacts. The CAN has been able to impact the Nigerian society in varied ways. Tanko, (1991), Gudaku, (2011), Leva (2008), agree on the following: a) Church Unity Octave, b) The Christian Health Association of Nigeria (CHAN), c) Joint Statements/mobilization, d) Politics, e) Education, f) Bible g) Society of Nigeria, h) National Ecumenical Centre, and i) Media Service Centre Kaduna (MSCK).

Uzukwu, (1992) recorded that despite the existence of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), are there signs to show that various churches in Nigeria are moving towards unity or at least dismantling the garb of hatred, distrust and rivalry? Are these Churches moving towards closer co-operation and friendship or are they moving farther apart? Are there areas where these Christian Churches can at least have a common stand? Have the Churches in Nigeria have a common position on issues affecting the political, economic and social life of Nigerians? Have the Christian Churches any common ground on moral and social issues like abortion, birth control, unemployment, bribery and corruption, oppression of the poor, management of schools and hospitals? Have we sincere dialogue or confrontation, mutual trust or suspicion and scepticism?

Ozigbo, (1985) quarried that if we are to accept the bitter truth, we may have to accept the fact that Ecumenism in Nigerian Church is not an exciting topic. One does not need to travel a long distance in Nigeria or read volumes of books to arrive at a disappointing conclusion that the Nigerian Church is ripped with rivalries, unhealthy competitions, marked with mutual distrust and skepticism.

There is no doubt that every Christian denomination and sect, from the extreme Orthodox to the Protestant fringe types, have found a safe place in Nigeria. Nigerians have not only divided Christianity, but have literally fragmented it, and are still doing so. Today, it is impossible for one to have accurate census of churches in Nigeria. By the time one finish counting churches on a single street, other people will be establishing new ones on the same street.

▪ **"All Churches are not the same"**

As far as many Catholics are concerned, the Lord's prayer "that they may be one", does not mean that all Churches should be the same. There is a strong fear expressed by Catholics that Protestants might construe any closer union with the Protestant Churches to mean that the Catholic Church is no more "the Mother Church", from which the rest broke away as rebels. If protestants want any type of unity, they should simply in a solemn declaration renounce "Protestantism" and return completely to the Catholic fold. For many Catholics, that is the simple interpretation of ecumenism.

Uzokuwu (1992) postulated that most Catholics alarmed by the proliferation of Christian sects and Churches in Nigeria, strongly insist that "all Churches are not the same" and thus see any compromise with these non-Catholics in matters of faith and practice as "watering down of the Catholic doctrine and practice." They detest any arrangement within any ecumenical movements which will give Catholics and Protestants equal status. For most that is an abomination. Any impression, therefore created in any ecumenical movement that calls on all Christian Churches including Catholics for a round table conference in which "All Churches are the same" will be abhorred by Catholics.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study reveals the motivating factor to the establishment of ecumenical movements in the prayer of our Lord in John 17:11b. "so that they may be one, even as we are one" CF Eph 4:4-6, Gal 3:27-28, Eph 4:12. The advent of Schism as far back as the 11<sup>th</sup> century brought the emergency of the concept of ecumenical initiatives which has thrived to bring unity to the separated body of Christ since mid eleventh century based on Theological and non-Theological basis. The schism of 1054 was between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. The next great division in the Church better Known as the Reformation in 1517 began with Martin Luther of Germany. Based on the trend of events in Christendom today, it is clear that all is not well with the church of Christ after the reformation. The unity and love of brethren, which has been the remarkable identity of the early church has been replaced by persistent divisions.

Similarly, the non-conformists to the Nigerian thrust for oneness claim that if there must be ecumenical initiatives, it must be based on the coming together of all Christian denominations that were since the notable era of schism in Christianity and in the 11<sup>th</sup> century experience to a single Christian church. This foundation must be upon the Solid Rock; Jesus Christ and not on any acclaimed or self imposed denomination or vicar Church of Christ. It must be on a church that based her teachings on law and the testimonies of Christ (Rev. 14 :). The concept should be based on back to Bible based foundation or Theology. Simply put, ecumenism should not be the coming together or promotion of different denominations with differed theological differences for better understanding or accommodation of sister churches.

Further, the Nigerian experience and ecumenism have attained some levels of uniformity in the areas of education, providing joint health services, Media Service center, Joint Statements/mobilization, thrust for politics under the umbrella of Christianity, establishment of Bible Society of Nigeria and National Ecumenical Centre. Even though, there are numerous achievement under the umbrella of Christianity yet this study postulated that the concept of ecumenism in Nigeria is not an exciting concept. The issues of rivalries, unhealthy competitions, marked with mutual distrust and skepticism. Similarly, there is no doubt that every Christian denomination and sect, from the extreme Orthodox to the Protestant fringe types, has found a safe place in Nigeria. It is further established that Nigerians have not only divided Christianity, but have literally fragmented it, and are still doing so. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has left everyone with the fact that it is impossible for one to have accurate sample of churches in Nigeria. By the time one finishes counting churches on a single street, other people will be establishing new ones on the same street.

The conformists approach of accommodation of non-Theological basis of unity can be seen to be uniformity in the concept of oneness while the non-conformists' approach championed by the Seventh-day Adventist worldviews is based on unity since there is a common pedestal upon which it operates For the facts established thus far, the researchers postulated these following suggestions:

- If the concept of ecumenism is bleak from the Theological and non-Theological basis in the case study of Nigeria, it is expedient for World Council of Churches, Christian Association of Nigeria and any ecumenical unions to do a re-examination or cross-examination for her foundations.

- If the non-conformists should say ecumenical initiatives should be of one church and should be based on Bible and not on any other, it is pertinent that the other ecumenical bodies across the world should take a cursory study at the phenomenon and devise a means to dialogue, upholds which is sound and form a true and uncompromising foundations for unity.
- If the Catholic Church is the mother church in which other churches or "estranged churches" must come back to be united into for a common front for unity of Theology, it is essential that her Theology and tradition be re-examined and should not be differed from the church of Christ and the Apostle in the New and even the Old Testaments preceding prophecies.
- If the concept of ecumenism appears to be illusive based on evidences of her thrust, then there is need for an Interdenominational conferences of the conformists and the non-conformists to share their beliefs frequently based on Bible alone until all denominations will agree.

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