

## **Ecumenism and the Church in the Post-modern Era: Historical, Biblio-Theological and Missiological Appraisal**

Emmanuel Orihentare Eregare  
Ikechi Chidi Ekpendu  
Adefemi Samuel Adesina

*ABSTRACT—Ecumenism is a paramount trend in the contemporary church due to the geometrical level of division in Christendom which is contrary to Christ's plan for the church. Scholars over the years have struggled over the attempt at solving the problem of division. Another school of thought see it as a futile exercise as it may not be addressing the real issue of the schism. The question one may ask is, Why? Does it mean that ecumenism has not really addressed the mission that caused the division in the first place? And what can we do to really bring about unity if we really want it? Can the recent thrust for unity of the Christian churches in Nigeria be based on conformists' or non-conformists' views on ecumenism? In this work, attempt will be made to do a critical historical, biblical-theological, as well as a missiological evaluation of the schisms and ecumenism in the history of the church. Attempt will also be made to suggest possible solutions to actualizing the desired unity within the church of Christ. Therefore, this paper concludes, among others, that there is need for Interdenominational conferences of the conformists and the non-conformists to share their beliefs frequently based on Bible alone until all denominations agree.*

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Emmanuel Orihentare Eregare (dr.eregare@gmail.com) is with History & International Studies Department, Babcock University, Ogun State, Nigeria. He is a Nigerian by nationality.

Ikechi Chidi Ekpendu (iyke\_ekpendu@yahoo.com) is with Religious Studies Department, Babcock University, Ogun State, Nigeria. He is a Nigerian by nationality.

Adefemi Samuel Adesina (asadesina@gmail.com) is with Religious Studies Department, Babcock University, Ogun State, Nigeria. He is a Nigerian by nationality.

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## **I. Christ, Ecumenical Initiatives and Overt Schism**

As Jesus was about to end his ministry on earth, he expressed his desire for the church as he prayed for his disciples. In his prayer, he said, “Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through your name those whom you have given me, that they may be one as we are” (John 17:11). Soon as he left however, division began even right before the last of the apostles. Over the years the church became seriously polarized, so much that leaders and theologians began to think of how to bring the church back to the unity that was eluding the church. It was this that gave rise to the birth of ecumenism which was to put away what was becoming a pervasive schism in the church.

## **II. The Ecumenical Phenomenon in the Christian Church**

According to Todd M. Johnson and Peter F. Crossing (IBMR, 39:29), the world denominations in 1800 was at least 500, by 1900 it became 1,600, by 1970 it was 18,800, while by the year 2000 it became 34,200, and by January 2015, it became 45,000. As Nnebedum (2009) says, there are thousands of denominations in 238 countries and there is a net increase of around 270 to 300 denominations every year. There are 8,196 denominations within Protestantism alone. In fact, the above scenario is captured in the words of the Vatican II 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 as affirmed still by Flannery (1988). Based on Ndiokwere’s (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 the universal to the particular, the headquarters to the grassroots, division and disunity have continued to the present time 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.

### **III. 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, 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 17th 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 verses 20 and 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 engages the mind is, What kind of “oneness” or “unity” was Christ praying for? Is it physical or spiritual?

The prayer of Jesus in John 17:21 was 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.

The concept of oneness implies one and the same or the only one (Lk 12:52; Ro 3:30; 1 Cor. 12:11). The transliteration of the Greek word ‘en’, is 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 favor unity in the same spirit and truth in Jesus Christ based on the Bible. It is never on uniformity in diversity. Mathew Henry added that ‘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.

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

According to an online 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.

Achunike (1995) states that ecumenism is both a movement and 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 perspective: to him, ecumenism refers to the movement towards co-operation among Christians. Ecumenism simply refers to Christians of different Christian denominations working together.

“Ecumenical”, according to Webster’s dictionary, refers to unity in a context “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 (Wikipedia, 2012). Other available sources claimed that the source of ecumenical initiatives came from the Roman Catholic Church. For the Roman Catholic Church’s ecumenism signifies 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).

Webster’s dictionary sees ecumenism as “the furthering of religious unity among different Christian faiths”. It is initially all about meeting other Christians and getting to know them so that they could arrive at a better understanding of their religious positions. (Church, 2012). 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.

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 II 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.

## **V. The Origin of the Modern Ecumenical Movement**

Vissert (1982) asserts that 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 accept 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 feet 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 reintegratio*) 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 different forms of intercommunication were carried out. However, in the 21st 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.

## **VI. Objectives of the Ecumenical Initiatives**

Tachin (2009) stated that the objective of this convergence of churches around the world as one body was to influence world governments in seeking mutual understanding and peaceful relationships between nations. Kaigama (2006) says ecumenism is out to seek a movement towards co-operation among Christians by creating an avenue by which Christians of different Christian denominations can work together. As a Christian phenomenon, ecumenism seeks to promote co-operation and better understanding between religious groups or denominations. No wonder Eregare (2013), citing Lana (1987), affirmed explicitly that the concept of ecumenism was to make all denominations no strangers 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 heirs of God's church on earth in Christ. Eregare (2013) further stated, that "ecumenical initiative is to aim at truth, justice and unity of the body of Christ or Christian churches or denominations." (p. 207).

## **VII. The Conformists Need for Ecumenical Movements**

Gotan (2010) claimed that Christ's prayer to His heavenly Father at the Last Supper has never more urgently needed to be answered than today. Never before in Christian history has there been more desperate

need for the ecumenical movement. It is not only that divisions in Christendom have multiplied almost beyond counting. It is the sad fact that there is such widespread de-Christianization of once Christian cultures in the modern world. In unity there is strength; disunity is weakness. For the Christian Church, the challenges to ecumenism are many. Perhaps Nigeria has had a large share of these challenges as a result of her political history and missionary enterprise. The seeds of discord and division were already sown by the early missionary bodies. With time these seeds have germinated and grown and the present generation of African-Christians and non-Christians partake of the ugly consequences of the bitter rivalries among the Churches. This has become so pronounced in the areas of proselytism, education and politics. Hatred, unhealthy rivalries and competitions, which characterized interdenominational competitions since the beginning of Christianity in Nigeria, are still with us today. These are even more visible in the aggressive proliferation of new church movements, as Christian bodies have continued to splinter and divide.

A deepened understanding of the Church, on the other hand, cannot but stimulate a Christian person to participate in the ecumenical movement, to contribute to its progress towards a conclusion which today is neither near nor predictable. But as Christians all over the world, we all agree and affirm its urgency. The ecumenical obligation is in this period of the history of the Church an integral part of the development of the faith. The search for unity constituted one of the characteristic aspects of contemporary Christian history as reported by Uzukwu (1992)

According to Ndiokwere, (1994), there is an urgent need for the ecumenical movement to foster unity among Christians all over the world and in particular on purely religious Africans grounds. There are many such ecumenical organizations, councils, unions or associations. For example, World Council of Churches (WCC), All African Independent Churches (AAIC), Evangelical Churches of West Africa (ECWA) has under its organization and umbrella all the 'Churches', which formally were under the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM). Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Pentecostal Churches, Aladura Churches and the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) existed in the past. There are many in the present time which provide a useful forum for fostering unity and progress among members. In dealing with non-members or other world problems, such organizations stand in the most advantaged position for taking a united action or decision. Perhaps Christianity in Nigeria will benefit immensely from such a Church body or council.



Visigh, (1986) attested that the desperate need for ecumenical movements has to do with the aims and objectives of such movements; it is believed that through ecumenical movements, the Nigerian Church will be able to achieve the following:

a) Christians will aim at advancing together in their sharing in the reality of the mystery of Christ and his Church. The aim of the sharing, in turn, is to enable Christians to discern the common elements in their different ways of approaching the (revealed) mystery and of translating it into their thought, life and writings.

b) Christians must learn to give common witness to the mission which Jesus Christ committed to his Church. The mission of the Church is to evangelize. This mission is always hampered when Christians do not speak with the same voice, especially on doctrinal issues even sometimes in matters of discipline and on social issues.

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

For some few Christian churches, it is believed that if there must be ecumenical initiatives, they must be based on the coming together of all Christian denominations that were since the notable era of schism in Christianity and in the 11th century experience to a single Christian church. This foundation must have the features of the Church of Christ and the Apostles and not acclaimed self-imposed denomination nor acclaimed contemporary vicar of the Church of Christ in Rome (cf Rev. 14:12). 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 that 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 4th, 5th and the 6th centuries set in the era of compromise when the pagan practices came into the church. This was the era when 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 falling away of the Christian church from the truth of the Gospel (p. 208).

Nwoamah (2012), a New Testament Scholar, asserts that the replica of 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 is referred to as “Dark Ages” (534 A.D. - 1560’s A.D). The Bible was pushed aside; the era was accompanied 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 who vehemently exposed the error and apostasy of the church with the aim to lead the church back to Jesus. This ushered in the era of the Reformation (1560 A, D-1790 A.D.) It covered the period of transformation of the church when 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 books of Daniel and Revelation sparked the greatest religious awakening. Biblical revelation has it that the true church, in which should be a base for unity, is any church that keeps the ten commandments and has 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, “Cursed be that love and unity for whose sake the word of God must be put to stake!” Hugh Latimer, as cited in Eregare (2013), 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 Adventists (2005) negate that the concept should return back to a Bible-based foundation or Theology.

### **IX. Impacts/ Challenges of the Ecumenical Movement in Nigeria.**

The ecumenically based association in Nigeria is the Christian Association of Nigeria. Since the formation of CAN, despite her laudable goals in her 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 CAN has made some positive impact. CAN has been able to impact 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 Society of

Nigeria, g) National Ecumenical Centre, and h) Media Service Centre Kaduna (MSCK).

Uzukuwu, (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? Had the Churches in Nigeria 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) queried that if we are to accept the bitter truth, we may have to accept the fact that Ecumenism in the 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 the disappointing conclusion that the Nigerian Church is ripped apart with rivalries and 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 an accurate census 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. "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.

Uzukuwu (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 a "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.

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.

### **A. Basic Causes for the Divisions**

**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 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 cigarettes, 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 associations 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 an 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 Protestants' 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.

## **B. The Challenge of Ecumenical Unity**

An important question in the minds of the watchers of ecumenical movements as well as ecumenism enthusiasts is, is ecumenism really achieving its purpose? As the vision of Ecumenism stresses,

1) Ecumenism is not focused only on overcoming barriers to ecclesial communion but also on realizing genuine community among all humans under God;

2) Show greater awareness of how racism, sexism and other forms of injustice and discrimination divide both church and world;

3). Pay as much attention to cultural as to confessional differences;

4) Show greater willingness to claim diversity as constitutive of Christian community; and

5) Speak not only of communion service to those in need but of the shared struggle for social transformation in response to the gospel" (Kinnamon: 1997, 9). As Vissert Hooft succinctly puts it, the actual formation of the World Council of Churches [which remains the front face of ecumenism], which came by the initiative of the Church of Constantinople in 1919, the reason for forming the "league of churches" is for the purpose of "fellowship and cooperation between churches" (W. A. Visser't Hooft: 1982, 1). The question one may like to ask is, has the church realized genuine community among God's children? Or has it been able to create fellowship and cooperation between churches? Since over a century of the official inauguration of the ecumenical structure, it appears the church has not archived the unity that Jesus prayed for and

the church has since sought. An important angle to the question is, what has made the church not to be able to achieve the desired unity? And, what are the factors that are challenging the realization of the ecumenical goals?

Obviously, several efforts have been made, structures have been put in place, and meetings have been held and resolutions passed, yet the church seems to be getting deeper into disunity. The question is, is the movement moving the church to unity? If not why not? To most contributors, the biggest reason is that the main cause of the division has not been addressed. As the history of ecumenism shows, one of the main causes was theology. The major issues that brought about controversy starting from the second century through to the fourth were the **Trinity** and **Christology**. On the Trinity, it was the issue of the *Filioque* (Latin word meaning "the Son").

Ecumenism began as a little mustard seed with the then Christian world, when all churches were gathered to resolve disputes. The reason for the gathering still persists even today. Today, while many Christians may not care about what anyone believes about the nature of God, or even whether Christ is human or divine, there are, however, some theological or ecclesiological teachings that still cause division and still matter to many. For example, Seventh-day Adventists believe the only biblically appropriate day of worship is the Seventh-day of the week, while others may argue that it really may not matter which day of the week anyone may choose to worship God. Another issue may be whether all churches are God's church, or whether God has only one church though he may have his own people in other religions or denominations. With such divisions like these, ecumenical unity may be difficult to attain.

Taking the Seventh-day Adventist Church for example, the church does not only believe that the Seventh-day Sabbath is the only biblical Sabbath, the church, contrary to many other denominations' position, also believes Sabbath is going to be the dividing line between the last day people of God and the world.

In her work, *Selected Messages*, Book 3, Ellen G. White, a prominent figure in the Seventh-day Adventist Church says:

Sabbath is the issue that divides the world. The Lord of heaven permits the world to choose whom they will have as ruler. Let all read carefully the thirteenth chapter of Revelation, for it concerns every human agent, great and small. Every human being must take sides, either for the true and living God,

who has given to the world the memorial of Creation in the seventh-day Sabbath, or for a false sabbath, instituted by men who have exalted themselves above all that is called God or that is worshiped, who have taken upon themselves the attributes of Satan, in oppressing the loyal and true worshippers who keep the commandments of God. This persecuting power will compel the worship of the beast by insisting on the observance of the Sabbath he has instituted. Thus he blasphemes God, sitting "in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God" (2 Thessalonians 2:4) (see SM, Book 3, 424).

Not only is it going to divide the body of Christ at the end of world history, Ellen G. White also says it will be the issue in the final conflict. She wrote:

The Sabbath is the great test question. It is the line of demarcation between the loyal and true and the disloyal and transgressor. This Sabbath God has instructed, and those who claim to be commandment keepers, who believe that they are now under the proclamation of the third angel's message, will see the important part the Sabbath of the fourth commandment holds in that message. It is the seal of the living God. They will not lessen the claims of the Sabbath to suit their business of convenience.--Manuscript 34, 1897 (See also SM, Book 3, p. 423).

If the Seventh-day Adventist Church so holds the Bible Sabbath as sacrosanct and says it is still relevant to all Bible believing Christians, and that it will be the dividing line, then unity of the church in the ecumenical sense may remain a mirage for a long time. Except churches come to a theological round table, apply the same hermeneutical tools, and together hold the Bible in high esteem, unity may remain delusional. The result will be that ecumenism will continue to be a mere theory rather than a practical tool for the contemporary church. The only way to unite therefore is for the church to bring doctrinal harmony and the expected unity will become a reality. Without the unity of theology and doctrines, it may be impossible to gain the kind of unity that the church seeks after.

## **X. 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, 5; Gal 3:27-28; Eph 4:12. The advent of Schism as far back as the 11th century brought the emergence of the concept of ecumenical initiatives which has thrived to bring unity to the separated body of Christ since the mid-eleventh century based on theological and non-theological issues. 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 have been the remarkable identity of the early church have 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 11th 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 :12). The concept should be based on a back-to-the-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 of ecumenism has 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 the Bible Society of Nigeria, and National Ecumenical Centre. Even though there are numerous achievements under the umbrella of Christianity, yet this study postulated that the concept of ecumenism in Nigeria is not exciting. There are 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 21st century has left everyone



with the fact that it is impossible for one to have an 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 a 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 worldview 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 bases in the case study of Nigeria, it is expedient for the World Council of Churches, Christian Association of Nigeria and any ecumenical union 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 the 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, uphold what is sound, and form a true and uncompromising foundation for unity.

- If the Catholic Church is the mother church in which other churches or "estranged churches" must come back to be united for a common front for unity of theology, it is essential that her theology and tradition be re-examined and should not differ from the church of Christ and the Apostles in the New Testament and even in 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 interdenominational conferences of the conformists and the non-conformists to share their beliefs frequently based on the Bible alone until all denominations will agree.

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