Ecumenism and Biblical Interpretation: Nigerian Experience in the Operation of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)

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ABSTRACT

Christianity focuses on the ministry of Jesus Christ, a belief in one God his father who through the power of the Holy Spirit raised him from the dead. Aspects of this focus differed among its adherents at some stage resulting to diversity in teaching and worship. Division set in and continued no-stop leading to issue of denominations of Christian churches. This has over the years been a big challenge to Christianity in all the nations. Denominations are so mindful of themselves, and myopic in their versions of doctrines and teachings that undue questions, suspicious and scepticism about one another dominate among their members. The situation has degenerated to rather alarming proliferation of denominations. The utmost effect is that denominations competing with one another for popularity, and trying to defend their positions, coupled with quest for membership, are often led to subjective and incorrect biblical interpretations. The paper critically analyses global ecumenical development and movement over the years, which in Nigeria metamorphosed into the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), and points out their flaws and inadequacies. It also gives the history and analysis of bible interpretations, identifying fundamentalist interpretation as its major challenge. It therefore proffers a way forward to an effective ecumenism, projecting biblical interpretation as being at the centre of it all. It finally calls for a new attitude towards and a new appraisal of the Church and its text the Bible.

INTRODUCTION

If all the multiple and multiplying Christian denominations in existence today do not believe in Jesus as one Lord who prayed for unity of believers in him (John. 17:21), then several explanations would be adequate to the clearly manifest division in Christendom today. But all the denominations believe in Jesus as one Lord who wills for the unity of believers in him. Around the two poles one Lord that wants unity and a disunited group of believers in him, is played out the drama of contradiction that we have in Christendom today.

Questions on the disunity among the Christians and all possible proffered answers appear to be only leading to absurdity. And in the whole mess of religion that the situation presents, one recognizes the basic fact that reality contradicts belief and expresses this in existential and non-logical terms, presenting pictures and scenes rather than reasoned premises: A confession that there is only one authentic Christian church and every denomination claiming to be that, with even efforts in convincing others to admit that.

On this backdrop the study highlights the issue of Christian unity presented as both a lack and a need in the church. It sees ecumenism as the efforts on going in the churches toward addressing the anomaly of disunity. It examines the issue of unity in the context of Christian text in the hands of the church with the aim of throwing open its connection with the past and present yearning towards unity within Christianity. The paper further points out the one-direction-nature of a long period and serious ecumenical efforts leading to rather insignificant success. It proffers as a way forward, a general review of the present understanding and application of ecumenism globally and particularly in Christian
Association of Nigeria (CAN) and by so doing get into a better appreciation of the importance of biblical interpretation as a useful tool in the hands of the church in enlightening and leading its members toward unity that is in the mind of its founder Jesus Christ.

ECUMENISM

Ecumenism as a word has had a great history and has been variously used to denote, delineate and describe a multiplicity of valences. As time rolled on, the people of Latinum (Romans) began to use the Greek term “oeccumenicus” to indicate political concept. “Ecumenicus” was also employed by them to indicate the totality of people under the Roman Empire (Anih 1987:15). As it is presently used, the word is derived from two Greek words oikoumene (“the inhabited world”) and oikos (“house”). The word was picked up in early centuries of the church, particularly to describe something pertaining the whole of the church (ref. Acts 19:27; Mt. 24:14), the church wherever it is in the “inhabited World”(Brown 1964:18). As a Christian term ecumenism can be traced from the commands, promises and prayers of Jesus (Acts 1:8; Jn.17:20-23). Both adjective ecumenical and other noun ecumenicity are widely used today not limited to the church referring to universality of something.

The common usage of ecumenism as pertaining to Christian unity is what gave rise to a compound term “ecumenical movement”. The term basically “indicates the initiatives and activities planned and undertaken, according to the various needs of the Church and as opportunities offer, to promote Christian Unity “(Brown 1964:19). Anih (1987) throws light into the study by pointing out what ecumenism is not. He cites the 1983 Chicago World’s Parliament of Religions as an activity of mutual interaction between different faith expressions aimed at a synthesis of religions, in which all sects, schisms, denominations and parties would be swallowed up, which is not ecumenism.

Development of Ecumenism

Ecumenism had been brought to the attention of the church at large by the apparent permanence of divisions which all sides hoped would be transitory when they broke out in the eleventh and the sixteenth centuries (Tavard 1965). The intention of Jesus Christ that his disciples should be one “so that the world may believe”(John. 17:21) has ever continued to however stare the Church on the face. The church members ever being pricked by this fact of division have been faced with the burden of possible Christian reunion.

Series of attempts towards dialogue e.g. 1910 and 1913 when there were held, several meetings of Internal Council of Unitarian Workers, would indicate that ecumenism developed through the length and breadth of human history, some time appearing as a movement with aspirations at other times appearing as institution. Ecumenism in the early part of the 20th Century derived much of its impetus from three movements namely: International Missionary Conferences beginning with the Edinburgh Conference in 1910 led by Scottish Churches under J.H. Olddam, the International Missionary Council in 1921 led by an American Missionary John R. Moth, then The Faith and Order Conferences (dealing with the doctrines and practices) beginning with the Stockholm (Sweden) Conference in 1925 (Anih 1987). According to Anih, these three movements gradually were incorporated into the World council of Churches (WCC) in 1948.

Hence with World war II over in 1948 at Amsterdam a number of churches admitting the fact of being divided from one another not only in matters of faith, order and tradition, but also by pride of nation, class and races; made a declaration of their intention to stay together, and called upon Christian congregations everywhere to endorse and fulfill the covenant thus entered in their relations one with another (Vischer 1948 cited by Okeke 1996). Thus began the World Council of churches which
according to Suenens aims to reunite all Christians in their triple and common vocation: witness (martyria) unity (koinonia) and service (diakonia) (1978:2). Suenens however, sees 1948 conference that gave rise to World Council of churches as mere one of the important stages of Christian rapprochement advanced since 1910. He cites as other important stages: Evanston Conference (1954), New Delhi Conference (1961) Uppsala Conference (1968) and Nairobi Conference (1975).

For Brown (1967) Pope John XXIII’s call to aggiornamento (to bring the church up to date) is one of the most ecumenically important events of the last four centuries. The great push towards ecumenism made by Pope John XXIII, the convocation of Vatican II was pursued and carried forward by Pope Paul IV. During and after the council (1962-1965) great zeal and anxiety for ecumenism were shown by the members who used the word ecumenism to refer to the renewal of the whole life of the church, undertaken to make it more responsive to “separated” churches and to the needs of the world. Okeke (1996) thinks, the search for Christian unity was one of the principal concerns of the council. For Brown the ecumenical impact of the council is incalculable (1967:29).

The council’s decree on ecumenism has opened the door fully for the participation of the Catholic Church in the ecumenical movement through which the Spirit of Christ wants to bring all the followers’ of Christ into full unity of the church of Christ (Okeke 1996). For Waliggo (1987) it was a Magna Charta on ecumenism voted on 21st November 1964 by 2054 votes for and only 2 against. With it the Catholic Church became fully involved in the ecumenical movement. He thinks the decree was a landmark in the history of ecumenism in that it was promulgated through the active cooperation of the observers from various protestant Churches invited when the council began. He further points out that since the decree the Catholic Church has moved much further in ecumenism.

Vatican II actually was a factor that moved ecumenism from being more or less a private undertaking in its activities capable of achieving insignificant results to national and international wide a thing affecting the universal church. Almost the Christian churches of every locality are now conscious of coming together at least for a common front in a necessity of a common action. Hence here in Nigeria there is Christian Association of Nigerian (CAN) that from time to time converges for some notable ecumenical activities. The recognition of this group by individual government officials of various Christian denominations is in itself an ecumenical movement.

**Levels of Ecumenism**

Edwards (1994) talks of the cause of ‘unity’ being taken root in that Christians belonging to separate churches are much more aware of often more sensitive to each other, ignoring denomination differences and having a feeling that more unity would be a good thing in many places. On the official platform however, he sees apparent stagnation in ecumenical movement, and few reunions between denominations being achieved or negotiated. This shows clearly the fact of the existence of levels of ecumenism which scholars have identified.

A statement from John Mary Waliggo that “Ecumenism is a large subject and it suffers a lot whenever it is too simplified” (1987:31) makes an examination of “levels of ecumenism” necessary in a serious discussion on the subject. Due to an apparent anxiety of almost all Christians about the disunity in Christianity ecumenism is an unconscious desire of many Christians and so can be easily embraced at a slightest opportunity. The difference is only a question of at what level? Larere (1993) who realises how both themes ecumenism and bible interpretation can be easily trivialized in Christendom and thinks it is necessary to clarify the two themes, cites Julio de santa Ana (1987), who characterizes three levels, three stages and three instances of ecumenism. Larere says Ana thinks experts on ecumenism indeed agree with Okeke (1996) that one of the goals of the Vatican II’s decree on ecumenism was to nurture
whatever would contribute to the restoration of unity among all who believe in Christ. This trend is evident in almost all the documents of the council. He thinks in the first instance that ecumenism is manifested as ecumenical dialogue in which the main emphasis concerns matters of order and doctrine and which takes place at an academic level. His identified three levels are: ecumenical dialogue, fellowship ecumenism and missionary ecumenism. The first two have official purpose, and the last unofficial purpose. Suenens (1975) quotes Michael Ramsey who thinks: the whole (ecumenical) enterprise is the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of truth and the Spirit of love, working in us, uniting us in love and building us in truth. Those are the things that matter. We must avoid binding the Spirit with our stupidity and narrowness and lack of faith (1973:168).

Hence Christians under influence of the Holy Spirit can initiate ecumenical activity or movement, leading to further levels of ecumenism.

**Spiritual Ecumenism**
Perhaps the first level of ecumenism is Spiritual ecumenism that is purely adopted on personal volition and the ground of faith. This is the type of ecumenism witnessed in prayer houses/miracle centres. There is usually no regard for doctrine, dogma, tradition or church structure. All is based on their faith in one almighty and miracle-working God and his son Jesus. Perhaps too for Isichai (1988) this level of ecumenism is the same as charismatic ecumenism, which according to him is distinct from the structural or dialogue ecumenism. For him also charismatic ecumenism is at the grass roots and utilises and practicalizes the fruits of Vatican II on ecumenism.

**Ecumenism on Social Level**
This level of ecumenism is embraced out of sheer necessity i.e. for peace and harmony to move forward in the quest for a better societal living and striving. Here a group sharing common resource, value and structure undertake to set aside religious inclination and affiliation and interact together in view of a perceived goal. Anih (1992) talks of this level of ecumenism as one by which Christian missionaries became convinced that bread and butter were as crucial as the word even while recognizing that man cannot live by bread alone. Segreda (1993) gives an amazing account of ecumenism on the social level in Central America made up of seven countries. There a Pro-Human Rights ecumenical committee was set up to address a dilemma of economic, social and political crises. Various Christian churches and groups, without previous experience, gathered in September 1978 for the expressed purpose of organizing aid. Fifteen churches, albeit with great differences in theological, ideological and denominational orientations came together for a common purpose.

Onwubiko (1999) who thinks that ecumenism has been permanent in the church from the beginning of Christianity also identified two more levels of ecumenism: academic ecumenism and “state protocol” ecumenism. Though each of these levels of ecumenism works towards uniting Christians, its motive is quite indifferent to the prayer of Jesus in John 17:21. It can be viable provided it operated “in the climate of mutual respect” and simply asking each party to recognize the personal identity of their fellowmen (Suenens 1978:ix). Its major law remains the one formulated by the parties.

Concerns and anxieties on ecumenism today in Christendom, however, is not on any one of the above mentioned levels. The one that should be meant is religious ecumenism, one identified also by Anih (1992). In this level of ecumenism both the universal church and the local denominational churches are involved. It is not enough for Christians to encounter one another simply on the basis of the lowest common denominator as that would be according to Suenens “a negation of authentic ecumenism” (1978:12). Suenens further thinks that it could even lead to having a “Christianity with no church, indeed with no baptism, or to a kind of super church with no foundation” (1978:12). Authentic
ecumenism that should be aimed at this level, must address “some of the old settled ways of thinking and acting” (Hurley 1969:9), part of the established order and religious culture in which the personalities of the members of the individual church denominations have grown up and developed.

From the foregoing, it would appear that the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) which is so far the biggest manifest ecumenical movement in the Country falls below religious (authentic) ecumenism. Suenens (1968) talks of fundamental unity in faith which is uncompromising in the unity of churches. For him unity of churches is compatible with pluralism on the liturgical, canonical and spiritual plane. But he thinks it is important to emphasise a common faith as an essential requirement of unity. Every group of persons that claims that name Christian qualifies for membership of CAN. The common faith that is essential for unity (Suenens) must not be something that is merely claimed. There should be a way of verifying and authenticate it. Professional bodies do not admit people into membership by mere answering the profession’s name.

**Biblical Interpretation**

Bible interpretation is a common term for many that read the bible. Many too talk about it and see it as something necessary. Christians generally believe the Bible to contain the word of God for human beings. For that reason many would agree there is need for bible interpretation. What this means is perhaps where the point of contention actually lays. Alluding to this view, Hayes, and Holladay write

Judaism and Christianity have continuously sought to understand their scriptures, to explain their contents, to appropriate their meaning, and to apply and embody their teaching. The manner in which this has been done has varied throughout history. In some respects, however, the history of Judaism and Christianity can be viewed as the history of their interpretation of the Scripture (1982:18-19).

The history of biblical interpretation through the ages identifies and indicates real problems which Christians reading the Bible must encounter. Umoh (2007) points out that the very nature of the Bible itself further complicate the process of finding meaning in the Scripture through interpretation. The Bible is not one single book, but a collection of books composed over a long period of time, by different people, under different circumstances, dealing with an extensive range of subject matter and diverse literary forms. It is not surprising therefore that the readers through the years in their search for such meaning have also approached the biblical text from different perspectives and for different purposes. Umoh laments that within the faith community itself, there are those who believe that the Bible was written by individuals who were directly, immediate and verbally inspired by God, and consequently that the text is literally the Word of God whose authority is absolute and eternally binding. He sees as the other extreme, others who believe that the Bible is not different from any other ancient literature, written by human being in human language and addressing human concerns, so that any attempt to relate the Bible with divine is open to suspicion. Umoh insists, however, that the scripture is inspired, in the sense that the community of faith affirms the reality of this divine – human interaction. Even when the scriptures bear the vestiges of the human exigencies of language and other forms of limitations, they nevertheless reveal elements of the divine and can lead to the divine.

For Fuller (1981) as to how the presence of the Word of God in the Bible with recognition of its human qualities, its error, its fallibility, cultural relativity, and the like, can be. For Umoh the primary task of the interpreter of the biblical text, is to enquire about the meaning intended by the original authors of a text or document. He therefore thinks that it is required that his approach to the text of Scripture be honest and a determined effort to find out the intended meaning of the author for the people and communities of his day.
The Bible is the word of God for all succeeding ages. Hence, the absolute necessity of a hermeneutical theory that allows for the incorporation of the methods of literary and historical criticism within a broader model of interpretation. One branch of modern hermeneutics has stressed that human speech gains an altogether fresh status when put in writing. A written word has the capacity to be placed in new circumstances, which will illuminate it in different ways, adding new meanings to the original sense. The literal sense is from the start, open to further developments, which are produced through the “reading” of texts in new context.

Important in the issue of Bible interpretation is the fourth of four different general positions in reference to inspiration of Brown (1997). This rather intermediate position sometimes designated “centrist” does accept inspiration of scripture making God its author with the implication of inerrancy without removing human limitations. Brown says that the holders of this position maintain that the same providence of God that provided Israel’s salvific history involving Moses and the prophets, endowed Christians with a basic record of salvific role and message of Jesus, is also ever supplying a Spirit that is a living aid to Christians in their on going interpretation.

The advocates of this fourth position of Brown’s four positions in reference to biblical inspiration may well support Okure (2008) who talks of the dynamic character of God’s Word; from the perspective of God and from the perspective of human beings. Okure thinks that in understanding the Bible as God’s word, word should be seen as primarily a medium of communication. What should count, therefore, is the message it communicates and the response it requires. By terminology “divine inspiration of scripture” according to Smith (1968) only denotes the special influence of God upon the human writers of the Bible, such that God is said to be the author of the biblical books. As a guide to the reading of the sacred texts, Suenens insists that

It is important to be aware of the different periods in which they were written. The viewpoint of ancient Israel was not the view point of Judaism in Jesus’ lifetime. Let us remember this when interpreting the texts (1983:15).

He agrees with emphasis of Pius XII (1943) that one cannot simply adduce a biblical text without first seriously examining its literary genre

**Fundamentalist Interpretation**

Generally scriptural fundamentalist is a conviction that the Bible means exactly what it says. Scriptural fundamentalists can therefore be called literalists: those who have a tendency to interpret the Bible literally, word for word. They claim that they need no interpretation or explanation of the Scriptures by anybody, since they would rather believe anything and everything that is in the Bible as, when and where it is (Owan 1993). For them what matters is only the ability to read the Bible provided one understands the language or dialect of its translation.

In its various forms, fundamentalist interpretation accepts only a literal interpretation of the biblical text. For them every statement in the Bible is accepted as revealed truth since the Bible is understood to be literally the Word of God. They insist on the five basic theological principles as the basis of every authentic interpretation. These principles include: 1/ the inerrancy of scripture, 2/ the historicity of the virgin birth, 3/the deity of Jesus, 4/ substitutionary theory of atonement, and 5/ the physical resurrection and the second coming of Jesus. For Umoh (2007) it must be admitted however that a lot of transformation has in recent times taken place within the fundamentalists Christian groups. He further states that some scholars within the circle do not subscribe to mere naïve and simplistic approaches to the study of the Bible.
Fuller (1981) gives three reasons why Christians cannot accept the fundamentalist’s position on Bible interpretation. The primary one is the Christians’ own intellectual integrity that must be protected. With their God-given brains, the German scholars have evolved the historical method. In so far as the Bible is the product of human history, they cannot just leave their brain (their historical critical brains) outside when they come to study the Bible. Secondly, the doctrine of verbal inspiration breaks down; too, because of the countless textual variations in the early manuscripts of the Old and New Testaments on which Christians depend for their knowledge of what the authors wrote. Which text then would be verbally inspired? Such textual complexus like the so-called textus Receptus (“Received Text”) and the so-called Johannine Comma, 1 John 5:7, both of which are not part of the original. So Fuller says that people “are left asking, if the Bible is verbally inspired, which text is it?” (1981:10). Thirdly, there is historical criticism. There are contradictions of fact between the synoptic Gospels and the fourth Gospel. Jesus cleanses the temple at the end of his ministry (just before the passion) in the Synoptic and almost at the beginning of it in John.

For Kemdirim (2003) the central tenet of fundamentalism is a doctrine of biblical authority that affirms the absolute and inerrant theory of Scripture for life, faith and theology. He reveals that today fundamentalism is found in all Christian churches but with different orientations and nuances.

Owan (1993) gives as some concrete suggestions for interpreting the Bible, three practices generally followed even from the very early stages of the Bible namely: the allegorical interpretation, the literal interpretation and the critical interpretation. Analysing them he points out that some particularly difficult passages of the Bible involve allegorical interpretation. For him an allegory is a story having a hidden meaning that does not appear immediately to the reader or listener. He cites St. Augustine’s allegorical interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke, 10:25-35) as a case that comes handy as an example. On literal interpretation which he says contrasts rather sharply with the allegorical. He points out that classical exegetes and biblical scholars would, for instance, go to what the original texts says literally before mounting their various exegetical heights. He laments that where the exegetes and their likes take off from, for more productive criticism, fundamentalists and what he calls “other bible punchers” have come to enslave themselves to the “literal interpretation” of the Bible – word for word. He calls the critical interpretation a specialized type of interpretation commonly associated with the students or experts of the Bible. For him students and experts of biblical criticism make use of biblical languages like Hebrew and Greek, in deciphering manuscripts and determining when the different books were written, to whom they were written, the cultural milieux they sprang from and how their authorship might have been collective or individual and so on.

Impact of Biblical Interpretation on Ecumenism

The two parts of the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, jointly form the text of Christianity and therefore the converging point of Christian faith. Bible sprang from the church and ever impacts on the church. For Suenens (1983) reading the Bible in the light of the interpretation given by the church living magisterium is a necessity. Quoting Tavard he insists “The church implies the Scripture as the scripture implies the church” (1959: 246). It is however, confusing to accept Suenens’ assertion that the scripture cannot be the word of God once it has been severed from the church which is the bride and the body of Christ as that tends to imply that the scripture’s being the word of God is subjective. The New Testament church has its basis on a common faith in the person of Jesus Christ. That faith derived from the Bible and it is as Suenens (1978) holds an essential requirement for unity. Consistence of the common faith depends to a great extent on the correct interpretation of the Bible the common text of Christianity.
The Fathers of the Vatican II had anxieties over the Christians reading and interpreting the Bible. Consequently the council decreed that

It is the task of exegetes to work toward a better understanding and explanation of the meaning of sacred Scriptures, in order that the research may help the church to form a firmer judgement on them. For, of course, everything that has been said about the manner of interpreting Scriptures is ultimately subject to the judgement of the church which exercises the divinely conferred commission and ministry of watching over and interpreting the word of God (N0. 119).

The sense is that a person whose relevant knowledge is confined to a reading of the plain words of scriptures has the tendency of misjudging the church and Christianity in its entirety. Although Enang (2012) would adduce economic interest as many would point to quest for authority, as predominant factor in proliferation and divisiveness in the churches, nevertheless, poor comprehension and wrong judgement of the scriptures would be on top of them all. The handy example is the fundamentalist interpretation of the Scriptures. Believing that the Bible is interpreted literally, word for word, needing no interpretation or explanation from anybody leads to over simplification of faith and of the meaning of church. The complexity of it is that the easy way this leads to division is the same easy way it can lead to ‘unity’. This explains why while ecumenism appears progressive on the other levels, it is manifestly retrogressive on the ‘religious’ level involving magisterium, theologians and leaders of the mainline churches. But the truth of the matter is the revelation of Waliggo (1987) that ecumenism is a large subject and that it suffers a lot whenever it is too simplified. A simple decision to set aside differences in vital matters concerning doctrine and faith, and actively fellowship together for a given common interest cannot be judged to lead toward the unity that Christ prayed for in Jn. 17:21.

Suenens talks or a “hierarchy of truth” and says the fact remains that all truths are not equally central (1978:12). What else that can make a truth central other than one based on the word of God in the Scripture correctly interpreted. Vatican II also rightly speaks of the same “hierarchy of truth” and advises Catholic theologians engaging in ecumenical dialogue to insist on the hierarchy of truths since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith (Article II). Such can only be found in the word of God carefully and inspiring brought out by biblical interpretation. It is precisely to make such truth assessable to the faithful that church theologians and biblical scholars are academically sponsored. That the Vatican II who had Christian unity as one of its chief aims, devoted one of its constitutions to the word of God (Dei verbum), testifies the importance of the Bible toward the hierarchy of truth in Christian faith that is assessed through biblical interpretation.

Ramsey (1973) is quoted by Suenens (1975) as contending that the whole ecumenical enterprise is the Holy Spirit who is the spirit of truth working in the Christians, uniting them and binding them up in the truth. He states that Christians must avoid binding the Spirit by their “stupidity, narrowness and lack of faith”. Fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible would definitely constitute part of the stupidity and narrowness of the Christians as that has the capacity of baring them from the truth of the Holy Spirit active in the church. And it is known that part of functioning of the Holy Spirit is unity in diversity by which he makes his divine presence universally felt.

Ndokwere (1998) insinuates that many Catholics and non-Catholic leaders and followers are not happy that after the more than 30 years of ecumenical movement not much has been achieved towards a better relationship among all the Christian churches. Rather than unity, divisions have continued to grow. But the reason for the sad situation is that ecumenism in its deeper levels is something that borders on faith, faith in one Holy Spirit that distributes different gifts to all, one Lord Jesus that apportions different ministries and one God that accomplishes all in everyone (1Cor. 12:4-6). Obama (2000) says that there
is something like an inauthentic faith which he thinks nothing is more transparent than when expressed. Faith having its basis on a faulty interpretation of a common Bible, the Christian text is inauthentic Christian faith and it is only an authentic faith that can lead to an authentic ecumenism.

**Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)**
Christian Association of Nigeria is indeed the general and manifest biggest effort in Ecumenism made by the Nigerian Christians. In reality it can be said to have sprung up due to a perceived need of the Christians of the nation to come together obviously in response to social, economic, political and even religious challenges in the country burdened with a considerable influences of Islam and African Traditional Religion. Its initial aim was to bring the churches together in order to speak for them, represent them before the government and the Nigerian society (Falaiye 2010).

**The Origin of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)**
The origin of the Christian Association of Nigeria can be said to be the coming together of the leaders of the several Christian church denominations on August 27th 1976. This was at the invitation of the then Federal Military Government under General Olusegun Obasanjo. The venue was Dodan Barracks Lagos. The Government had intended to introduce the National pledge and the Salutation of the National flag into the nation’s Primary and Secondary Schools. The purpose of the meeting with the church leaders was to hold a discussion with them on the matter.

After the meeting with the Government, the church leaders abruptly decided to hold another meeting at the Catholic Secretariat not too far from the Dodan Barracks (Notes on Christian Association of Nigeria 1976). The church leaders at this meeting arrived at a memorable decision to form an organization which would provide a forum for a regular meeting together for the purpose of taking joint actions on vital matters and issues affecting Christian faith and the welfare of the generality of Nigerians. It was agreed that the organization would have as its arms: General Assembly, Zonal Executive Committee, State Assembly, State Executive Committee, Local Government Executive (Omonokhua 2014).

Omonokhua quoting Cardinal Onaiyekan (personal interview) who said it was some church leaders of Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) and the Catholic Church in Nigeria who in 1976 arrived at the decision to form an organization to work together on common concerns. Two other groups of Christians, the “Aladura Group of Churches” and the “Evangelical Fellowship”, joined later making up the four groups within the Christian Association for a long time. The fifth group later also sought for admission and was admitted and identified as “Pentecostals”. Today Christian Association of Nigeria operates on zonal, State and Local Government Levels. Apart from arms mentioned above, it has women and Youth Wings. Its Motto has been “That they may be One (John 17:21).

**The Growth of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)**
It can be said that the initial purpose of founding the organization which was the coming together of the Christians, was carefully sustained by its leaders. According to Falaiye (2010) following its revised constitution of 1988, membership of CAN were structured to consist not of individual Christians or denominations, but of church groups. Accordingly five categories of Christian bodies in Nigeria were recognized. There are: Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN); Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, which includes Catholic Bishops Council of Nigeria (CBCN); Christian Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (CPFN)/ Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN); Organization of African Independent Churches (OAIC); Evangelican Church of West Africa / Tarayya Ekklesiyayin Kristi A Nigeria (ECWA/TEKAN). A remarkable progress was seen in uniting, the Christians in the sense of having common voice in addressing national political social and economic concerns.
This progress was largely due to a strong leadership the association has enjoyed right from its inception. Among its remarkable leaders are: Anthony Olubumai Okogie, Sunday Abang, Peter J. Akinola, John Onaiyekan and Ayo Oritsejafor. They were both courageous and fearless in fighting for social justice and religious harmony and tolerance all over the country. Due to their able and competent leadership a number of remarkable strides projecting Christian unity and religious awareness were recorded in the country. Most prominent among them are the bridge of the rift between Christian and Muslims in the Country and the acquisition of an estate for the organization in Kubwa Abuja the Federal Capital.

In line with its vision and mission CAN has been firmly established in all the states of the Federation from where it further decentralized into zonal and Local Governments Chapters. Each of these chapters in various capacities has at various stages and periods, united to propagate Christian actions and interest. Crusades and Prayer sessions are regularly organized on common objectives. Perhaps what has enhanced the growth of CAN most so far is the Government’s recognition of it. Governments of all tiers appear to take interest in the existence of CAN probably out of political aim. Leaders of the chapters of CAN within the authorities of the three tiers of Government do use vehicles donated by them. Indeed Government recognition is one of most enticing factors that make CAN as an association attractive. Churches that rejected membership of the association at its earlier stage were attracted to change their minds. In some localities the youths and women wings of the association would at times initiate and caring out programmes that do create awareness of Christian presence and Christian unity. In many places the local Government Chapters of CAN have further decentralized into the communities. The impact of such grass root awareness and conscientization of Christian oneness is rather much. This grass root CAN is often useful as a means conflict resolution among Christians of different denominations.

**An Evaluation of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) In Respect to Ecumenism**

On the positive side, here in Nigeria CAN is not only one of the most visible gestures on ecumenism but also has become the basis for talks on that. So far it has done much in sensitizing the nation’s Christian churches of the need to desire and seek unity in outlook. It had broken the old bridges and boundaries between the different Christian denominations that used to often create enmity, rancor and disharmony among persons which in most cases affected family and community ties. It has opened up within the Christian communities the big issues of disunity and unity in the contemporary Christianity. It has taught the Christians the big lesson of solidarity against all non-Christian aggression. It has boasted in the country an enthusiasm in the Christian movement.

This must be appreciated by all with due gratitude to God in his Holy Spirit whose work it is to bring about unity. An engine toward Christian unity has been set in motion. Even though it delays in moving, there is a hope that it will eventually move. When it moves, an acceleration will then be expected and even with desired velocity. CAN by recognizing the identity of every denomination has in itself become a fertile ground for denominations to flourish and enjoy the security of belonging to a group of national status. Yes this has the tendency of leading to the proliferation of churches, and in fact it has, as it is quite evident in the present Nigerian society (Osunwokeh 2014). However, the difficulty of managing diversity that is expressed in all the ecumenical challenges: in models of unity, in faith, and doctrine, is addressed when it is remembered that unity is not uniformity and that it allows for diversity (Salihu 2014).

CAN, however, does not seem to have addressed in any noticeable way unity in faith which for Suenens (1968) is fundamental in the unity of Churches. Although Suenens would see unity of Churches as being compatible with pluralism on the Liturgical, Canonical and Spiritual plane, he thinks it is important to emphasis a common faith as an essential requirement of unity. Salihu (2014) posit ing
*koinonia* as the basis of the church’s ecumenical movement thinks *koinonia* presupposes “proper” Baptism that opens the churches to a pre-existing imperfect unity which is to be perfected in dialogue. He thinks it is difficult to presuppose any existing unity when the Baptism of a church is questionable. Salihu observes that there are many denominations today, who simply baptize in the name of Jesus with the laying on of hands, which he says departs radically from the acceptable form and matter baptism. As Baptism is the basis of a common Christian faith Salihu is in line with Suenens in making faith an essential requirement of unity.

The CAN’s system of membership admission with no other qualifications than a simply claim of being a church has in itself bared dialogue in its member churches. The common faith as essential requirement of unity (Suenens and Salihu) should not be something that is merely claimed. Professional bodies usually do not admit people into its membership by mere answering the profession’s name. Evidence of a substantial knowledge of the profession is required, so that when they convene as members they can interact, deliberate, discuss or argue on a common base, focus, vision and mission of the profession. CAN’s membership is not on individual persons or church denominations but on church groups. This means that CAN has no knowledge of Churches that consist its membership and so cannot screen them. The groups cannot either, as they would be after quantity of churches within them to face the rivalry with other groups. With the informal and oversimplified system of admission into its membership, that result to flocking together churches with articulate, theology and those which lack that, and give little regard to sacramental life, the question of meaningful dialogue on faith is completely out of place. When they meet it will only be to discuss national issues of common concern, to prayer for a common perceived need or threat. What hope is there for real Christian unity?

Salihu (2014), quotes Kuka (1993) saying that Alaba Job who he interviewed on the status of CAN told him that it was an association of Churches not of Christians. Salihu thinks that the implication of this statement is that CAN is a political arrangement within Christianity not an ecumenical one. For him it is apparent that CAN has achieved a lot politically and has been able to mobilize collective Christian action on a number of issues. He, however, insists that unfortunately it has failed woefully ecumenically speaking.

**The Way Forward Towards a Higher Level of Ecumenism in the Operation of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)**

Unity of the churches that should be aimed at has to be a fundamental unity that is compatible with pluralism on the liturgical, canonical and spiritual planes (Suenens 1978). Such unity has to uncompromisingly require a fundamental unity in faith. The motive of such unity must be that the will of Christ (cf. Jn. 17:21) may be realized. It must be “a visible unity” Suenens (1978:8) that has common faith as its essential requirement. The path for such unity leading to “the experience of rapprochement to be fulfilled for each and every Christian, without doctrinal confusion and respecting the necessary loyalties” (Suenens 1978:12) must remain clear and well swept.

Suenens who talks of hierarchy of truth, distinguishes two types: once in the abstract which is the kind that theologians can establish and the other in the concrete which falls within the everyday experience of ordinary Christian. He thinks the questions about the duo must be examined by theologians and are to provide the Christians with an ecumenical tract to explore. It is important to identify an ecumenical tract and tackle the task of exploring it theologically. To simply identify levels of ecumenism already going on and presume a way toward Christian unity is paved defeats the whole enterprise.

Carey (1993) who states that theology is the task of understanding the Christian faith, identifies four tools for it namely: faith, experience, history and critical reason. Disunity in Christianity is a doctrinal
problem. Suenens points an adage: “Doctrine divides, whereas action unites” that ecumenical circles were at a time fond of repeating (1978:14). He points that the conclusion drawn from this assertion was that ecumenism should leave aside questions of doctrine and simply aim at collaboration on practical level. So far most known levels of ecumenical movement around Nigeria particularly in the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) operate on this platform. Vischer (1977) is emphatic in holding that faith is ultimately at stake in ecumenism approached that way. It must be noted that unity of Churches is different from the unity of individual church members. Obviously the ecumenism that is being echoed here in the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) is only on levels other than “religious” hence its inability to move (Ndiokwere 1998:33). One wonders if a Pentecostal CAN executive member who attended a funeral ceremony of a fellow Catholic CAN executive member and stayed outside the church chatting with Pentecostal friend during a requiem mass can be called a Christian brother to him (the deceased). The way out then is that the current ecumenical movement going on in the country under the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) should be raised to a level of “dialogue” (Anih 1992) involving hierarchies and theologians. The focus of such dialogue must be faith, and it must be a commitment – oriented encounter to find out what is indispensable for each other’s existence in faith. Theology must be brought into the dialogue using as tools “faith, experience, history and critical reason” (Carey: 1993:19).

The Christians’ attitude towards the Bible, the Christian text containing the word of God must be reviewed by churches’ hierarchies. In doing this there must be open - minded attitude, humility, docility and scholarship. Carey (1993) believes academic study informs and underpins experience. And as he joins experience with faith, history and critical reason as tools for theology, it is logical to say that study informs and underpins also these three. Biblical scholarship must be engaged so that in the study and application of the Bible there is a distinction and a separation of the dead letters that are mere medium of communication (Okure 2008) from the message that the word of God contained. Fundamentalism across all the Christian churches “with their different orientations and nuances” (Kemdiri 2003:43) must be fought by all church hierarchies.

Teaching and learning programmes like academic seminars and conferences involving various levels or carders of Christians should dominate all ecumenical rallies of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). Interest in ecumenism should not be for one’s church to be recognized by other churches as it is presently almost the case especially with the new generation or African Independent churches. This account for their members being at the forefront in the organization of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) as it more or less accords them security as churches. Sound Christian faith that is both doctrinal, theological and biblical must be aimed at in all teachings and learning during ecumenical rallies. All interests, anxieties and zeal for Christian unity must be based on this.

Congar is emphatic in his insistence that the church should “be the church, nothing else, nothing more, but nothing less” (1976:67). Critical analysis of Congar’s views zero down to asking what should be the ultimate objective of the Church? The answer will be no other than that it is the ultimate salvation of humanity that is the will of Jesus Christ. Consequently the cases of holding to a viewpoint simply to sustain loyalty to hierarchy and status quo, for the motive of sustainable human and material development, or any other social and economic wellbeing must be conscientiously addressed, as they have the tendency of affecting ecumenism and biblical interpretation. Similarly cases like local church pastors being much concerned over sustainable physical development of the churches at the negligence of faith and catechesis, excessive quest for membership and inordinate attention to structures must be noted and evangelized. These also have the tendency to influencing Bible interpretation and compromising correct Christian attitude.
Often one hears distinguished church members in occasions being introduced as founders and co-founders of a church /churches. Interests in being founder of church and sustainer of churches already founded, with little or no recognition to biblical sound doctrines are ant-ecumenical enterprises and ventures that must be checked and condemned by all Christians who are conscious of the present “disunity in the church that distorts its witness, frustrates its mission and contradicts its own nature” (Hurley 1969:23).

The state or civil government should not be allowed to be involved in ecumenical efforts of CAN under its jurisdiction. This is because more often than not the genuineness of its motive may not be guaranteed. Many a time it has its own interest for seeking unity of churches: creating cheap political popularity, easy capturing of the Christians votes during election, peaceful environment in the state and a conducive atmosphere for it to rule. Yes, these are part of the impact and value of the church but they do not constitute primary objective of the church.

The opinion of Hurley (1996) that ecumenism seems to represent a serious threat not only to some of the churches’ old settled ways of thinking and acting but the whole established order, the whole religious culture in which the members of the churches grew up and developed their personalities. He thinks many of the church denominations still feel that ecumenism is a real danger to that incommunicable otherness of orthodoxy, Anglicanism, Protestantism and Roman Catholicism which they consider to be of the very essence of their religious self. This is an ugly trend that must be guarded against in the operation of Christian Association of Nigeria CAN towards unity.

CONCLUSION

Many things have actually led to what is now called ecumenical movement, which in this sense awakened conscience of the Christian church towards its universal aspects and its renewed sense of faith, mission, and service. Ecumenism in modern times represents a movement towards Christian unity. It appears really that unity and disunity are both inherent in Christianity and that Christians have the ready potency for either side. Due to human influence the urge toward disunity is ever high. And due to a perceived need for unity and because Christ established one church, unity has always been one of the church’s principal concerns (Obemeata 1991). Many splinter groups have since broken away from the one church founded by Jesus Christ. Although all these groups profess to be followers of Jesus Christ, they differ in many ways including what they believe. Despite the claims of each to be on the best side, the sense of unity and its necessity keeps springing up now and then.

As Christians have the Bible as a common text of their religion, talks, efforts and striving towards unity have to be closely undertaken in collaboration, reconciliation, reconsideration and harmonization of the denominations’ views with this holy writ. The following view of Edwards has to be noted by all the church denominations and each applying the side of magisterium to its case:

Although the rules of good scholarship are not excluded, it is clear that in the last resort the decisive rules and therefore interpretations are made by the bishops headed by the Pope, to be accepted by scholars along with everyone else (1994:23).

However, if the search for a serious issue of Christian unity must be fundamentally pegged in the Bible, a harmonization and reconciliation of such a view may become necessary.

Hurley (1969) talks of ecumenist’s hope which he thinks has a double aim both related and serving as means to end. The minimal success recorded so far after many years of ecumenical development and
movement across the globe only goes to make one believe Hurley when he says that “the ecumenist is nothing if not a man of hope”(1969:88). Ecumenism should be a hopeful search, using teaching and learning as tools, both of which are instruments the Holy Spirit uses in making clearer the mysterious mind of Jesus Christ for the unity of his church and the salvation of his followers. The search is one that requires heavenly faith, open-mindedness, absolute surrender of self-interest, Christ-like humility and the Bible in its centre.

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