

TOWARDS PROMOTING UNITY IN THE FACE OF DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES AMONG CHURCHES IN NIGERIA THROUGH THE INSTRUMENTALITY OF CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

The growth of Christianity in Nigeria is often hampered by poor handling of doctrinal differences among denominations. Instead of coming together to fight the common enemy, vicious comments are aimed at one denomination or the other, which has not helped the influence of the church in the country, whether politically, economically, socially or religiously. The questions that readily come to mind are: is it possible for churches in Nigeria to arrive at a common ground despite doctrinal differences? If yes, how can it be carried out? This paper explores these issues and concludes that it is possible to achieve unity among Christian denominations in Nigeria despite doctrinal differences through the instrumentality of the Christian Association of Nigeria.

Keywords: Doctrine, C.A.N, Denomination, Nigeria.

Introduction

Doctrinal differences are the divergent views, beliefs and modes of operation of various Christian denominations. The phenomenon of doctrinal differences is a pertinent subject matter in church history and dates back to the Early Church. Historically, several heretical groups emerged out of the early church. In an attempt to defend one doctrine against the other, many fell victim to creating worse teachings than they intended to defend, such as Docetism, Gnosticism, Pelagianism, Marcionism, Ebionitism and Arianism, among others.

In recent times, what we know as Pentecostalism, one of the fastest-growing Christian movements in Nigeria, if carefully examined, can also be argued to have emerged out of doctrinal differences and has led to several clashes of interest between one denomination and the other. While diversity is a good thing, disunity within the Christian fold betrays the benefits of diversity, which hampers the growth of Churches in Nigeria, as each argues to show why her denomination is more accurate or spiritual than the other.

The question that warrants an answer then is, can the doctrinal differences among these denominations be better managed or simply put, can we arrive at a common ground on doctrinal differences? It is this question that this article seeks to answer using the instrumentality of the Christian Association of Nigeria (C.A.N), a means for achieving unity despite doctrinal differences in Nigeria.

Doctrinal Issues in Christianity with Respect to Nigeria Churches

There is no gainsaying that issues regarding doctrinal differences in Christianity have historical roots such that it is always arduous to separate the history of Christianity from its doctrinal development. It is from this perspective that Francis Wernick¹ posits that division and disunity have marked the history of the Christian Church from at least the end of the first century.

The period between Emperor Constantine's toleration to the Lutheran Reformation of the Late Medieval era saw Catholicism at the peak of Christendom. The period following World War I experienced a surge of Christian Sects in large numbers due to doctrinal differences². However, Inja³ argues that since Christianity emphasises right belief (orthodoxy) as against right practice (Orthopraxis), several divisions in the Christian faith find their roots, not in orthodoxy and the controversies surrounding it.

Delving into the history of the Church, Calvin⁴ and Noll⁵ recall that during the time of Emperor Constantine, Christians disagreed with one another on many important points in the Scriptures to the extent that the Emperor had to call for the Christian leaders of the time across the empire to a council at Nicaea in 325 AD. This was the first major council of the Church that clarified several salient doctrinal matters, including the Church's position on the doctrine of the Trinity issues regarding the Virgin Birth and the Divinity of Jesus Christ. It was also at this council that written documents from the deliberation were called the Nicene Creed, which became a popular Creed used during the administering of the Eucharist till date.

Several other councils, like the second great Council of Constantinople in 381 AD which expanded the Nicene Creed in a larger statement of faith that would be recited, followed to deal with other doctrinal matters as they unfolded within the Church. Moreover, the influence of Emperor Theodosius in the fourth century and the theology of Bishop Augustine of Hippo cannot be undermined, as they stood to defend the course of the Church as regards doctrines.

Gonzalez⁶, in acknowledging this, affirms that for many years, the questions about Jesus' humanity and divinity proved an ongoing source of controversy, and this was further incensed as many Christians from many areas of the world drew on the philosophical traditions of their cultures to reflect upon their questions. This led to the marked difference between Christian leaders of the Latin West and those of the Greek East. Invariably, this great schism divided Christianity into two major strands, i.e., the Western Christianity, which includes the Catholic and the Protestant Churches and Eastern Christianity, which consists of the Orthodox Churches, respectively.

Looking at Nigeria's geographical space, hundreds of Churches emerged due to doctrinal differences, but sadly, till now, new ones are emerging. However, Philip⁷ argues that although Nigeria has numerous numbers of Christian groups which claim allegiance to or hold different ideological inclinations, they can all be grouped into three categorisations: the Catholics, the Protestants and the Pentecostals.

According to Patrick⁸, the constant debates among these categories of Churches in Nigeria over the differences in orthodoxy and orthopraxis have all but restrained and subjugated all the efforts to provide the Church with a unified front to perform its primary duty of providing succour to the Nigerian society, which is in dire need of the Church in terms of wisdom and counsel. This has invariably affected the growth and development of Nigerian society, as it has led to the creation of unnecessary rivalry, hatred, envy and spiritual barrenness for many decades. This position is also supported by Agunwa⁹.

In tracing the history of doctrinal differences among Nigerian Churches, Enwerem¹⁰ notes that there was, at the beginning, a lack of national togetherness or unity among the Christian Churches in the 1960s, even though there were some interactions among them. He further explains that during this period, there emerged three blocs of Christianity, namely, the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) in the South, the Christian Movement in the North and the United Roman Catholicism, which held Episcopal conferences, each of which converge at least once a year and spoke with one voice. It was not until the 1980s that the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) emerged.

Several denominations emerged out of these Churches, and it was not long before quite a few factors, like issues revolving around the Sacraments, teachings on Faith and Grace which revolve around Martin Luther's Sola Scriptura, Sola Fideus and Sola Gracia, and the Sales of Indulgence, Women Ordination and Infant Baptism among many others led to the doctrinal controversies in Nigeria. This has affected even the voice of the Christians as regards their input in determining the religious and political landscape of the nation, which invariably influences several decisions and sectors like finance,

education and health, to mention just a few. There is a need for a common ground that will acknowledge the doctrinal dichotomy present in Nigerian Churches and create a platform where unity can be achieved even in diversity.

A Brief History of the Christian Association of Nigeria

The Christian Association of Nigeria (C.A.N) is an umbrella body of Christians and a movement joined by almost all denominations in Nigeria; this organisation continues to stand against injustices and corruption. It is currently headed by the Most Rev. Daniel Chukwudumebi Okoh, the General Superintendent of Christ Holy Church, also known as nation builder, while Rev. Joseph Daramola serves as general secretary. C.A.N was established in 1976 to counter the growth of political Islam, and it came to prominence in the mid-1980s during the debate over Nigeria's membership of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC).¹¹

Christian Association of Nigeria is made up of five blocs, namely, the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC) and the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) or Fellowship of Churches of Christ in Nigeria¹². The Christian Association of Nigeria, which has its headquarters in the Federal Capital Territory in Nigeria¹³, also has Women and Youth wings, respectively and a National Executive Council consisting of 105 members (which elects the president) and a General Assembly of 304 (which ratifies the president's election)¹⁴.

The objectives of the Christian Association of Nigeria (C.A.N) revolve around the promotion of understanding, peace and unity among the various people and strata of the society through the propagation of the Gospel and act as liaison committees by means of which its member-- churches can consult together when necessary to make a common statement and take common action. Also, the Christian Association of Nigeria (C.A.N) aims to act as the watchdog of the spiritual and moral welfare of the nation. Also, it seeks to serve as a basis of response to the unity of the Church, especially as contained in the pastoral prayers of Jesus Christ in John 17:21, that they may all be one. It is because of these objectives that C.A.N embraces almost every church or church organisation that professes to follow Christ¹⁶, thereby creating a platform of unity in diversity for several denominations in Nigeria.

The Role of the Christian Association of Nigeria (C.A.N) in Promoting Unity in the Face of Doctrinal Differences among Churches in Nigeria

All Christians in Nigeria believe in the tenets of the Bible; however, they often interpret Biblical tenets differently, resulting in doctrinal differences. Hence, there is a need for unity where all the Churches can be brought together without feeling neglected or vilified. This is where the Christian Association of Nigeria comes in, with its various aims and objectives in creating and serving as a platform to achieve a common ground on doctrinal differences among churches in Nigeria, where everyone feels appreciated and can have a say on pertinent issues that concerns morality, governance and religion in Nigeria.

In consonance with its objectives, it is imperative for the Christian Association of Nigeria to make it a point of duty to ensure that segregation and doctrinal biases are far from its fold. The organisation conducts interdenominational services to mark national events at different times of the year. This has often created a unifying point for all Christians across all denominations in Nigeria to call on God and pray for the peace of the Nation. The gesture portrays to the Christian community that C.A.N. does not criticise, overlook or disrespect their doctrinal differences. Rather, C.A.N is providing a platform where their diversity could be put to use for the betterment of the Gospel and that of the nation.

Furthermore, the Christian Association of Nigeria has shown over time that it could achieve a common ground on doctrinal differences by ensuring adequate representation and involvement in Nation building and welfare of the Christian community, even with doctrinal differences among Churches. Through this

commitment, C.A.N is always ready to respond to any attack aimed or carried out against any Church under it, regardless of doctrinal differences among member churches. To the Christian Association of Nigeria, any hurt on any of its members is an affront to all. This has helped secure help for Churches that seem weak (young, growing churches) and needed the help of the stronger ones (the established churches).

The leadership of the Christian Association of Nigeria also evinces how the organisation has been playing a vital role in ensuring that common ground is achieved despite doctrinal differences within Churches in Nigeria. The election of the presidents and vice presidents of the organisation has been employing a rotational system since its inception; no denomination is seen as the almighty or the only denomination to lead. This is also evident in the election of the current president of C.A.N, The Most Rev. Daniel Chukudumebi Okoh, the General Superintendent of Christ Holy Church and other executive members¹⁷. The organogram of the Christian Association of Nigeria does not allow the president, a Pentecostal minister, to enforce his church doctrines on the other members of the organisation, and this is also the same with the vice president, who assists him. Instead, they are to uphold the objectives of C.A.N. in ensuring that the unity of the Christian community is achieved even in diversity.

In addition, instead of focusing on the things that divide churches, the Christian Association of Nigeria has often portrayed its commitment to ensuring that Christ is the centre of all its practices and actions. This tends to showcase C.A.N as an association of Christian Churches with a distinct identity, with recognisable church structures and a system of worship of one God. This provides a safety net for all member bodies. On this basis, member bodies of C.A.N are allowed to exercise their doctrinal autonomy within their jurisdiction, except in things contrary to Christianity.

From the foregoing, one can assert that the Christian Association of Nigeria evince two normative values, namely, diversity and unity. It is these two values that were instrumental in forming the biblically-based motto of C.A.N, which is "That they all may be One" as coined from John 17:21. Therefore, it is not surprising that it is this prayer of unity in diversity that forms and informs the modus operandi of the Christian Association of Nigeria.

While it is true that Church denominations are based on disagreements over the interpretation of scriptures, in addressing one of the banes of Christianity in Nigeria with respect to the inability of the different denominations to be flexible and considerate in their dealings with one another, the Christian Association of Nigeria has done quite a good job in ensuring balance and discipline. C.A.N has shown, over the years through its actions and reactions, flexibility and capacity to implement changes as and when needed in order to help foster the unity of the Churches in Nigeria. This is without sacrificing its more permanent spiritual character, which is founded on the belief in one God and in Jesus Christ as His only begotten Son, who was sent to the world for the redemption of mankind.

The Christian Association of Nigeria preaches love, equality, oneness, peace and justice; C.A.N holds that believers are called with the responsibility to love one another first (cf. 1 John 4:11-12) and also to be united as one in Christ (cf. John 17:21-22). This drives the organisation's focus in being Christocentric, and anything different from that is vehemently eschewed.

Conclusion

This article has been able to prove that achieving common ground on doctrinal differences among Nigerian Churches is not an impossible task due to the instrumentality of the Christian Association of Nigeria. While differences persist among churches, C.A.N has been able to meticulously channel the areas of similarities between member churches and utilise them in bringing them together towards the same purpose for the propagation of the Gospel of Christ in Nigeria. Issues regarding the Bible as

being the primary authority for all Christians, the sovereignty of God, the divinity and humanity of Christ and the priesthood of all believers are upheld. In contrast, the ones that raise arguments like infant baptism, penance, and purgatory, among many others, are carefully avoided.

Therefore, it can then be asserted that if we aim to arrive at a common ground on doctrinal differences among churches in Nigeria, the practices of the Christian Association of Nigeria should be emulated. Even though the member churches under C.A.N represent a rich diversity of cultural backgrounds, traditions, and different structural and political establishments, they are all committed to close collaboration in Christian witness and service. Hence, through the Christian Association of Nigeria, we saw that diversity is not overlooked but recognised. Even amid diversity, unity is seen as possible and pursued.

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