

**DENOMINATIONALISM: IMPLICATIONS ON THE CHRISTIAN FAITH**

**BY**

**Kenneth Osarodion Osarumwense, PhD**  
Department of Christian Religious Studies  
Faculty of Arts and Education  
Benson Idahosa University  
Benin City

**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the influence of denominationalism on the Christian faith in Benin City. The study is essential due to the mutual exclusivity among Christian groups, which undermines the credibility of the gospel and obstructs evangelisation efforts in the region. The employed methodology is phenomenological. The data indicate that denominationalism is driven by doctrinal disparities and interpersonal disagreements among Church leaders. Church leaders are advised to acknowledge that denominationalism complicates the promotion of the gospel and raises questions regarding the motives of Christian leaders. A significant obstacle faced in this endeavour is time, financial resources, and the reluctance of respondents to disclose information they consider sensitive. Nevertheless, meticulous efforts were undertaken to obtain the requisite information for the task. Nonetheless, meticulous efforts were undertaken to obtain the requisite information for the task.

**Keywords:** Christians, Conflicts, Division, Disunity and Denominationalism

**Introduction**

The term "the Church" in Scripture was not thoroughly defined in earlier dispensations, but rather presumed to have always been among the ancient Israelites (Bradbury, 1973). Notwithstanding the recognised institutional and administrative disparities from the New Testament, there exists a congruence between the church of the "Old and New dispensation," both clearly demonstrating the unity and faith in God by the congregation and a singular sheepfold (Ephesians 4:4-6). Christ the "Messiah" offers salvation to all of humanity through faith, from the inception to the conclusion of time, and endeavours to assemble "saints" from diverse cultures, regardless of their geographical location, to safeguard and maintain them as a holy and blameless church selected for eternal life. Since the inception of the Old Testament period, a community of believers has persisted, and this collective faith has progressively developed, finally forming the basis of the church. The church fundamentally constitutes a community of believers, which has existed from the inception of the ancient dispensation and will persist on Earth until the end of time (Berkorf, 1986). Furthermore, I

declare unto you that you are Peter, and upon this rock, I shall establish my church, and the gates of Hell shall not triumph over it. And I shall bestow upon you the keys to the kingdom of heaven... (Matthew 16).

Following Peter's confession, Christ foretold the establishment of His church and indicated that Peter would be granted the honour of facilitating the access to redemption for diverse ethnic groups. This event occurred on Pentecost, when the opportunity for salvation was extended not just to Israel but also to Samaritans and Gentiles (Acts 2: 38 – 42). Consequently, the church has been institutionalised as the “Body of Christ” from the apostolic era to the present. It is essential to note that the early Christian Church originated as a singular entity, identifiable with the assembly of individuals to whom Peter delivered what is considered the inaugural apostolic sermon on Pentecost (Acts 2). The church, as disclosed by Christ's Apostles, is flawless. Nonetheless, the individuals constituting that Church are flawed. Even in the New Testament, the human embodiment of the Church was far from exemplary. Weakness and imperfection persisted in the post-Apostolic Church. The issues emerged largely due to the wide cultural and religious backgrounds of the early Church's new recruits, including Greek philosophy, paganism, and other mystery cults. Shortly, the message of Christ began to be interpreted in many ways, resulting in the heart of the Christian message being either veiled or denied. The phenomenon of syncretism, characterised by the amalgamation of diverse deities into a singular belief system, exacerbated the situation as individuals selectively appropriated elements from numerous ecclesiastical traditions in their efforts to comprehend and interpret Christian doctrines (Usman, 1999). The narrative concerning the apostolic inception and proliferation of the early Christian Church, the church's persecution, the appropriation of the church by Roman authorities, the ascendance and predominance of Catholicism, and the Protestant Reformation, collectively resulted in divergent doctrines, culminating in the schism between the Latin and Greek or Eastern Churches in 1054 (Adewale, 2006). Consequently, the authority of the Pope was significantly constrained to the West (Ngwoke, 1987).

According to Green (1973), the apostolic preaching/sermon did not proclaim religious duties or moral standards, or even reforming programs but, of a person, namely, one Jesus who was crucified and whom the Christians knew to be alive. To Green, It is crucial to recognize that both the content and the dynamic of the apostolic preaching was the Risen One, whom many

of them known and followed for several years while he had been a carpenter and a rabbi. The bitterness of persecution unleashed on the early church after the death of Jesus Christ, enhanced the gospel to spread beyond the Roman Empire, even to the utmost parts of the world (Adewale, 2006). The crucified Christ, who rose from the dead, about whom the apostles preached, later became divided by later Christians and Paul confronted this issue in one of his missionary journeys (2 Cor.2). What suppressed the early manifestation of a divided Christ was the rise and dominance of the Roman Catholicism. Ironically, the same Roman Catholic domination led to the Protestant Reformation, leading to a rise in denominationalism. The aftermath of Luther's revolt saw the rise of Lutheranism, Calvinism, Anglicanism, Methodism, Wesleyanism, and other denominations etc.

The reality is that Christian Churches continue to divide and subdivide and spread like wildfire to the effect that, the world today stands aghast at the number of Christian Churches in the world (Ehianu, 2018). The Early Church Fathers, in combating heresies and divisions among Christians, emphasized ever increasingly the episcopal institution of the church (Ayandele, 1986). In Nigeria, the increase in the number of Bible Schools and Colleges without regulation in Nigeria also contributed to the increase in the number of churches geometrically. Some Bible College students, especially the jobless graduated ones see it as a license to plant/open a church after completion of the college without considering the necessity of God's calling. By this act, churches have been turning to business ventures with different names, missions, and ideas and these general overseers (GOs) have no positive impact on the country's economic growth (Adewale, 2006). Even, it has been observed that four churches sharing the same plot of land with different names or three churches occupying a two-story building, leading to an increase in the number of churches in a street. Hence, the study is concerned if these proliferations of churches, even in Benin City have any implications on Christians' lifestyle, moral and spiritual growth. Specifically, the paper intended to examine some of the causes, effects, and challenges posed by denominationalism on the Christian faithful.

### **Christianity in Benin City/Nigeria**

Conversion of the Benins into Christianity fully occurred after 1897 (The first Benins who embraced Christianity were members of the entourage of Oba Ovonramwen who was exiled to Calabar and amongst whom was one of his Oloi (Queen) Arokuna.k.aAyosere),

(Aisien, 2001). This development was largely facilitated by the deposition and deportation of Oba Ovonramwen (the King of Benin) in 1897 and the seventeen years interregnum which was characterized by the absence of the monarchy. During this period, the Benins' indigenous political titles, which had religious and ritual functions that were dispensed by the Oba along with political patronage, became obsolete and less materially rewarding. They were not affected by the economic dislocation in Benin and were not restricted in their religious and political identity by the Oba whose political authority, protection, and patronage had sustained their activities, (Egharevba, 1974).

When the Benin kingdom was conquered in 1897, the territory was put under Niger Coast Protectorate administration, one of the three administrative organs that the British set up between 1850 and 1880s to facilitate British colonization activities in the area that became known as Nigeria, (Dime, 1997). The Niger Coast Protectorate administration had expected the Christian Missionaries to rush into Benin territory and establish schools, which they would later assist financially and morally, (Egharevba, 1974). Only the Society of African Missionaries (SMA), a part of the Roman Catholic Mission, which secured land in 1899 seized, but failed to move in because of personality conflicts among its top clergy. Because of disagreements and funding problems in some of the Missions, no mission entered Benin territory till 1900 (Egharevba, 1974).

### **Denominationalism and Missionary Activities in Nigeria**

Denominationalism is an act of denomination of a religious body comprising several congregations (Michael, 1990). The freed slaves from Sierra Leone and Abeokuta encouraged missionary enterprises. Many churches from the British Isles and America sent missionaries to the coast and interior of Nigeria. The Anglicans under the Church Missionary Society (CMS), were the first but the Niger Expedition came in 1841 but, failed (Dime, 1997). The missionary thrust into Nigeria began around 1841. This marked the beginning of the quest by European missionaries to re-establish Christianity in Nigeria after the initial thrust to Benin and Warri in the mid-west of Nigeria but, failed in their efforts (Dime, 1997). These missionaries,, the Church of England, Church Missionary Societies (CMS), the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, a committee of the English Methodist Conference; the Foreign Mission Committee of the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland; the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Catholic Convention of the United States; and the Catholic

Society of African Missions (Societe des Missions Africaines, S.M.A) of France (Dime, 1997). The period 1841 to 1891 was considered by Ajayi as the seedling time in which the seeds of the burgeoning Christian faith were sown in preparation for the great Christian work and expansion that would follow in the era of British colonial rule, (Ehianu, 2018). The competition for converts among denominations and missionary enterprises in Nigeria has led to various issues:

Denominations and missionaries have employed aggressive tactics to win converts, sometimes resorting to manipulative or coercive methods. Denominations have accused each other of poaching members, leading to tensions and conflicts. These competitions have created divisions among Nigerian Christians, fostering a sense of rivalry and competition rather than unity and cooperation (Falaiye, 1992). The competitive atmosphere has hindered collaboration and partnership among denominations and missionaries, thus limiting the potential for joint initiatives and collective impacts. The dominance of foreign missionaries and denominations has sometimes disempowered the local churches, undermining their autonomy and initiatives (Falaiye, 1992).

### **The Reality of Denominationalism among Christians in Nigeria**

Recently, in Nigeria, the proliferation of churches on a daily account is alarming, almost every street in the nation has at least two churches not counting the rooms and parlours (sitting rooms) which are converted into church auditoriums (Ehianu, 2018). The recent mission of the Redeemed Christian Church of God by Pastor Enoch Adeboye emphasizes the vision of five (5) minutes workable distance, there should be a church planting across the nation. "We will pursue these objectives until every nation in the world reaches out to our Lord Jesus Christ." The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few and as such, this is why more and more ministers are required to cater to the huge number of converts (Acts 2). Winners Chapel (also known as Living Faith Church Worldwide) founded by Bishop Oyedepo, launched a new mandate from God to plant 10,000 churches in Nigeria, by 2020 (Ehianu, 2018). He implored twelve (12) Scripture-based areas as emphasis and built these emphases which are known to him as "Pillars of the Commission" into a twelve (12) month church calendar. Each month is centered on one of the pillars - the Word, Faith, Prayer, Vision, Wisdom, Praise, Consecration, Healing, the Supernatural, Success, Prosperity, and the Holy Spirit. But as the number of churches increases so also is the crime rate which ought

not to be, and these call for spiritual awakening and re-examining the motives behind some of these church leaders. This proliferation of churches has no positive impact on the socio-economic growth of the country, rather brings negative effects on the nation. Unscrupulous exhibited by some denominational leaders makes the public doubt the motives of some denominations or if churches have been turned into business ventures. The Government, seeks the opportunity to implement taxes on the church like any other business company in the nation which will confirm churches to be business organizations (Adewale, 2006).

The competition that arose among missionary enterprises in Nigeria had in most cases led some denominations and missionaries to neglect African cultural sensitivity, imposing their Western cultural expressions and practices on the African communities, the issue of polygamy which is incompatible with the teachings of the Gospel (Falaiye, 1992). The drift from polygamous life among Christians in Ibo-Land was an attempt to denounce their social prestige in the community, it was debasing to Christianity (Falaiye, 1992). To most converts, it constituted a blatant inconsistency with their espousal of the Christian teaching of monogamy. It was difficult for the converts to reconcile this practice of the white man and their cultural beliefs and practices. These missionaries' imposition of their own cultural and religious values was an affront to African local customs and traditions (Moore, 1996). He added, they failed to contextualize the Gospel, presenting a westernized version of Christianity that did not resonate with African cultures.

Moore, further asserted that, upon these practices of the Roman Catholic missionaries, Christianity tends to stifle or extinguish the characteristics and culture of the Africans, he added, in the name of the so-called Christianity, the Africans will lose the original qualities of their race; there will be many deracines on whom we shall build an uncertain Christianity. While these scenarios of mutual antagonism among churches in Europe subsisted, there also arose new challenges among Christians in Nigeria, intra church conflicts emanated, secessions of factions were created among members, and existing churches formed independent church groups. For instance, in 1917, the United African Methodist Church was formed out of the Methodist Mission, (Falaiye, 1992). Reasons often adduced for this development, the need for adaptation, racial discrimination on the part of foreign clergy, and conflict over control of the decision-making process in the church. The reality of these conflicts among church leaders was, Churches continue to divide and subdivide, enabling it

to spread like wildfire to the effect that, the world today stands aghast at the number of Churches on the earth planet.

The Benin Baptist Church in Benin City, witnessed a schism around 1932-34 on the issue of polygamy, with Christianization in Europe, monogamy was adopted as a mode of marriage rite in the church (Uwagboe, 2000). It thus became an offense to have more than one wife at a time, this was alien to the African culture and these early missionaries in Africa were not ready to accommodate polygamy. Many who had more than one wife were denied of baptism or barred from holding important positions in the church (Duval, 1928). The former pulled out of the church to form another parallel Baptist denomination, known as the Central Baptist Church in Benin City. It became obvious that. Indigenous Churches in Nigeria seceded primarily in opposition to European control (Uwagboe, 2000). The African Church as a separate denomination from the Anglican Church in Nigeria, was founded by J.K Coker as a result of “inhuman treatment meted out on Bishop Johnson” by the missionaries (Ayandele, 1986). The secessionist group that was led by some Yoruba Laity out of the American Baptist Mission in sympathy with Rev. Ladejo Stone, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was politically motivated to form another church denomination. It was in opposition to the American missionary leadership, (Collins- Travis, 1995). The Ebenezer Baptist denomination that started around 1888, along Campbell Street in Lagos, made their exit from St. Paul and St Jude Catholic Church which were purposely organized against the Anglican Mission leadership (Ayandele, 1986).

### **Effects of Denominationalism on the Christian Faithful**

The differences in faith as manifested by different Christian denominations can be explained by the existence of differences in Christology. Today, thousands of churches scattered throughout the world, ‘another Jesus’ is preached, rather than the real Jesus Christ of God whom the scriptures present. The spirit of denominationalism has led to the creation of numerous Christian denominations, often with comprising interest, causing division and fragmentation among Nigerian Christians, (Ehianu, 2018). He further stressed, it reveals a lack of commitment by some missions, prioritizing political involvement and personal spiritual satisfaction over missionary engagement. However, denominationalism as noticed, both unites converts and divides them apart, creating a sense of separation and fragmentation within the broader Christian community, limiting the effectiveness of witness and mission

((Moore, 1996). Moore, further concluded, denominationalism leads to confusion and uncertainty about the Gospel at the expense of the converts, which may lead to spiritual immaturity and superficiality. Ultimately, the impacts of denominationalism on the Christian faith depend on how individuals and denominations navigate these complexities, seeking to balance diversity and unity, truth and love amongst others.

### **Perception of the Public on Church Denominations**

Some Nigerians view denominationalism as a source of division and disunity among Christians, hindering a united front against social and economic challenges (Uwagboe, 2000). To them, the proliferation of churches has led to confusion, authenticity and legitimacy of the church leaders are questionable (Collins-Travis, 1995). Some concluded, it has led to an unhealthy competitive atmosphere, with churches prioritizing numerical growth and financial gain over spiritual development (Duval, 1928). The absence of central authority has led to concerns about accountability and the abuse of power within these denominations (Moore, 1996). Public perception of the proliferation of denominationalism in Nigeria reflects both the benefits and drawbacks of this phenomenon, highlighting the need for greater understanding, cooperation, and accountability among Christians (Osarumwense, 2020)

### **Effects of Denominationalism on the Missionary Enterprise**

A lot has been written on missionary enterprises and rivalries among church leaders in Nigeria. Thanks to the pioneering works of Ekechi, Enweren, Ngwoke, Okeke, and several others. These writers unanimously decry the harm of denominational rivalries to the task of evangelization. Unfortunately, not much has been done on the threat of denominationalism on the Christian faith which is the sole responsibility of the church as the “bride” waiting for her “groom”. Thus, a proliferation of churches becomes a re-occurring decimal among Christians and continues to inflict debilitating blows on the growth and development of the church (Osarumwense, 2020).

### **Efforts to Mitigate the Impact of Denominationalism by Ecumenical Bodies in Nigeria**

The Christian Council of Nigeria, through possible channels, has devised various means to encourage and establish unity among Christian denominations in Nigeria, the aim is to foster and promote a sense of oneness among shared Christian faith. It has addressed



stereotypes and misconceptions that emanated over the years through strife and personal conflicts from different denominations thus, promoting a better understanding and acceptance of each other (Osarumwense, 2020).

Despite all these strides recorded by the ecumenical movement in Nigeria, doctrinal issues within and outside different denominations are major obstacles that prevent the ecumenical movement from achieving its national goals of “Christian Unity” (Osarumwense, 2020). He further assert, the supreme authority of the Bible as the basis and source of Christian faith and practices is often assumed to be watered down by ecumenical emphasis on unity. The ecumenist spend more time on issues of the ‘church unity’ at the expense of the New Testament teachings, “there shall be one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:16), “that they may all be one” (John 17:21) and “that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me” (John 17:23). Consultations on ecumenical debates on the effects of the denomination on the Christian faith and growth has increased, especially on issues of the mission of the church on earth. The main purpose of the church’s merger is to emphasize oneness and weakness which has globally suffered the blow of church division through denominationalism for a long time due to differences in doctrinal issues, succession of leadership, and personal interest (Ehianu, 2018). Hence, the purity of the church and its mission in the world is watered by church leaders as perceived by the public.

### **Formation of Ecumenical organizations**

Today, the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), was founded in 1976 (non-denominational), is an umbrella organization containing numerous Christian denominations in Nigeria, (Ehianu, 2018). It represents non-Catholic churches in Nigeria and is one of the five blocks that constitute the Christian Association of Nigeria (C.A.N). CCN’s National Constitution with little modifications was adopted as the constitution of the Edo State Chapter of Association. Any church seeking membership in the ecumenical body must be protestant in its doctrine and usages (Ehianu, 2018).

### **Objectives of Christian Council of Nigeria**

- i. To keep in touch with the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches

- ii. To preserve comity among churches and missions

CCN provides a forum for members' churches to cooperate in various projects relating to pastoral education, and joint owners of schools, and institutions. Their aim is to foster and express unity and fellowship of Christian Churches in Nigeria, which will further enhance the realization of its oneness with the church throughout the world (Ehianu, 2018).

Also, the Christian Association of Nigeria (C.A.N) is an association of Christian Churches with distinctive identities, recognizable church structures, and a system of worship of one God in the trinity of the Father, Son Holy Spirit. This association makes Christ the center of all its works and promotes the glory of God, by encouraging the growth and unity of the churches, and by helping them to lead the nation and her people to partake in Christ's salvation and all its' fruits (Ehianu, 2018).

### **Bible Society of Nigeria**

The Bible Society of Nigeria was founded on 8th February, 1966. It was the pioneering efforts of the late Dr. Francis Ezeogo Akanulbiam, the first indigenous Governor of the defunct Eastern Region. DrIbiam had initiated a consultation with representatives from different Churches and denominations in Nigeria on the need to form a national Bible Society. It was the unanimous decision of that meeting that 'The Bible Society of Nigeria' was formed which consequently led to its inauguration in 1966 (Ngwoke, 1987). Their objectives are;

- i. Translating the Bible into various Nigerian languages
- ii. Encouraging ecumenism by promoting dialogue and cooperation among different Christians
- iii. Distributing the Bible to many parts of the country. These efforts aimed at promoting Christian unity by providing a common source of inspiration and guidance for all Christians.

### **Conclusion**

An attempt has been made in this paper on the effects of denominationalism on the Christian faith in Benin City. A history of the conception of the church, starting from the Apostolic

Era, the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church, denominationalism during the Reformation period, the present-day proliferation of churches in Benin City were discussed. Denominationalism has had a profound impact on the Christian faith, both positively and negatively. Promoting diversity and adaptability, allowing Christianity to evolve and thrive in different cultural contexts. Providing a sense of community and belonging for believers within specific denominations. Despite these positive indications, it has also created divisions and fragmentation within the broader Christian community, leading to conflicts and disagreements over doctrinal differences. Sometimes, prioritize denominational identity over shared Christian values and unity. Thus, the paper recommend that:

Leaders from different denominations should create the spirit of “unity” across other denominations and avoid competition for new converts. Churches like the Roman Catholic Church, Anglican, and Presbyterians should stop the monopoly of the mission fields in Nigeria. Issues of interdependent parts among denominations should be managed and corrected by ecumenical bodies in Nigeria, to avoid denominationalism, rather the Risen Christ message should be preached through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. There should be mutual and full recognition of disciplines melted out upon churches that violate the corporate union of the ecumenical body.

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