

## UNDERSTANDING THE 'ONENESS' IN CHRIST'S PETITION: AN EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF JOHN 17:21-23

BY

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### ***Abstract***

*The concept of 'oneness', commonly understood in terms of unity is not a novel issue in contemporary existence. From the family as the smallest unit of the society to other institutions, both in the secular and religious contexts, the quest to be one or united has always been obvious. Sadly enough, it has remained one of the most difficult feats to be fully achieved in human existence. The Christian Church as a religious institution has equally been on this quest right from its emergence in Nigeria till date. Hence, till this present time, one is justified to ask; is the Christian Church one? Christianity apparently exists in denominations and of course has been so right from its advent in Nigeria. However, it is undoubtedly true that it is a religion that*

*has its foundation on the person of Jesus Christ in line with his lifestyle, actions and teachings. John chapter 17 contains one of the most passionate prayers or petitions seen in the New Testament Bible. It is a prayer made by Jesus Christ himself towards the conclusion of his earthly ministry. It is a prayer accompanied by his crucifixion. In verses 21 to 23 of this chapter as recorded by John, Jesus Christ emphatically and thrice repeated the clause; “that they may be one”. Considering the level of division seen in the Christian Church today, one may begin to wonder if this prayer is yet to be answered. This paper aims at using the tools of exegesis to analyze John 17:21-23 with the hope that understanding the nature of “one” meant by Christ would go a long way in fostering tangible unity amongst contemporary Christians in Nigeria both inter-denominational and intra-denominational wise.*

**Key words:** Oneness, Petition.

## **Introduction**

Overtime, personal observations from the authors suggests that the present day Christian denominations in Nigeria are far from being one. The authors have witnessed many occasions where Anglican Christians openly assert that the Roman Catholic faithful will never make heaven and vice versa. Even within a particular denomination, problems of disunity accruing from bitterness, hatred and rancour abound. This could probably be because like some scholars noted, the Christianity brought to Nigeria and Africa at large is a divided Christianity. But be that as it may, there is the

Christian Bible as the guiding manual for right Christian living.

Communal consciousness has always been part and parcel of African moral values. Traditional Africans are known for togetherness. They are a people who always seek the common good of each other. Hence unity of the community remains paramount in the day to day affairs of the community. Even with the advent of Christianity, teachings on love for one another are constantly emphasized. Unarguably, people do hurt others from time to time but not without recourse when confronted. However, as time progresses, selfishness and unhealthy competitions are infiltrating the African societies with individualism gradually replacing communal living.

The above picture is becoming the lot of the Christian Church in modern times; a time when Christian denominations have kept on multiplying uncontrollably. In fact, proliferation of the Church has become a norm. Undoubtedly, Jesus Christ upon whose lifestyles and teachings, Christianity was founded is a prophet and a true one at that. He must have foreseen what we are experiencing today and took it upon himself to earnestly pray for the ‘oneness’ and unity of the people who are following his ways. It was not a lengthy prayer; “that they may all be one” (John 17:21-23). Apparently, he knew that this oneness or unity would lead the world to believe and continue to believe in him. It is a prayer in which he shares one of the most overlooked tools of evangelism even amongst Christians.

With a careful look at this prayer as rendered in John 17:21-23, through an exegetical lens, the paper hopes that more insight would be gained in understanding and appreciating the true meaning of the 'oneness' Christ prays for. The work will also venture into an assessment of the ecumenical movements in Nigeria thus far to ascertain the efforts they have made in upholding the unity of the Church. It still attempts to make possible recommendations which will greatly contribute in championing the unity of the Christian Church in Nigeria. It is in the opinion of the writer that even if all the various denominations cannot be operating with one doctrine, there can be a tangible unity in diversity; not just any kind of diversity, but a more solidly unified diversity.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of clarity and coherence, it is pertinent that the key concepts in the topic of this paper be explained.

#### **Oneness**

The concept of oneness as used this paper simply points to unity. It is not to be misunderstood as uniformity rather a unity that dominates even in the midst of diversity; a form of together that does not give room for any form of superiority claims or discriminatory altercations or utterances.

#### **Petition**

Petition as used in the paper is best understood as a prayer, supplication or an entreaty. In as much as a

petition could be in written form, the focus here is on the verbal petition; prayer said by Christ to his father in John 17 where he made known his desire for the Church to be one and united.

### **Theory of Social Unity by Claud Franklin Clayton (1916)**

Clayton (1916) in the formulation of his theory of unity attempts a review on the origin and nature of the human society. Here, he observes that the evolutionary origin of man suggests that right from the onset, man has always lived in groups. While citing Ellwood, he submits that life-process was essentially social from the start, because in at least the fundamental biologic phases, the activities of individuals were necessarily coordinated noting that it was on this purely biological level, then that society first appears.

Specifically, in his theory of Social Unity, Clayton (1916) asserts that;

The belief in the unity of society is not new. It is probable that the theory of social unity grew out of the common sense perception of certain broad uniformities in human relationships, suggesting a general underlying unity which conditions, directs, and regulates the method of living together. But the development of special theories of the unity of society came about mainly through attempts to justify forms of political and social coercion, rather than through actual analysis of the social process itself. It accordingly happens that the elaboration of such theories

follows more or less definitely, broad stages in the development of human thought. It is not necessary to the present purpose, nor is it intended, to trace the genesis of these several theories. However, it may be in place to make brief note of the main types (p.35).

He therefore goes further to present the different stages of these theories as follows;

- i. The first grew out of what we may term the metaphysical stage of thought. The early attempts of social groups to find a sanction for social coercion took the form of "laws" handed down from the gods. Group control was given a purely metaphysical and arbitrary sanction. This theocratic conception of social unity ran parallel to the theory of government, and was doubtless designed to afford a theoretical foundation for social compulsion.
- ii. The second or legalistic stage of the theory of social unity was founded on essentially the same idea as the first. The headship of the king is substituted for the headship of God. While the legalistic or contract theory of social unity is classical in origin, it owes its development and application to modern society to that school of seventeenth and eighteenth century political philosophers of whom Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau were the leaders. This theory was revived in a period of political and social ferment. Individualism was seeking to triumph over formalism and authority. The contract theory, therefore, was developed with a legalistic and executive reference and sought by emphasizing the intellectual elements in human relationships to exalt

- the individual and reduce the social bond to the nature of a contract.
- iii. The legal and individualistic theory was replaced by a biological and evolutionary interpretation of society. The comprehensive statement of this view was given in Spencer's theory of the Social Organism. His elaborate division of society into regulative, distributive, and assimilative functions was simply a more or less comprehensive biological analogy. So eager and intense as the effort to refute the intellectualistic interpretation of social development and drive home the idea of the evolutionary and organic nature of the society that upholders of theory of the social organism lost sight of what the theory was for. Much that was written, therefore, ran in the form of meaningless analogies.

These several stages of thought were it to the particular purpose in hand, could, of course, be shown to have been necessary features of the life of the particular period. However, all that is in point here is to note that these several theories of social unity - Metaphysical, Legalistic, Biological - represent the application of derivative conceptions to the social life.

This shows that from whichever angle one tries to view it, naturally, humans were made to function in unity and not individually. Clayton also made mention of the unity of the society as psychical. Here, he views it as the product of mental interaction in humans. In his words;

## **Ecumenical Movement**

Undoubtedly, numerous scholars have documented their opinions and views on the concept of ecumenical movement in the world and Nigeria in particular. A good number of them however, appears to be on the same page in appreciating the effort of the movement thus far in uniting the Christian Church under one body both internationally and nationally. The research is not ignorant of the fact that Christian ecumenism came into play to foster the unity of the Church under one umbrella but the still challenges and questions the extent of this unity in practicality over the years amongst the various Christian denominations that exist.

Mepaiyeda (2018) in his work on ecumenical movement obviously attempts to trace the origin of what he calls “ecumenical efforts in their local and global context”(p.62). He carefully notes that;

The Church in Nigeria as a worshipping community was not created by Nigerians. The Church came into existence through the missionary enterprise of missionaries from Europe and America but unfortunately this was brought in different shades and leanings, which made adherents of the Church in Nigeria, belong to one denomination or another. But Church leaders noticed the competition for converts among the churches. Hence attempts were made very early at unity and co-operation. That apart, the threat of Islam and political bigotry in religion in Nigeria made it all the more necessary and urgent for all churches to come together to

present a united front to challenge the common opponents of Christianity which threatened the survival of the Church in Nigeria (p.63).

The above assertion clearly presents the reason why denominationalism was inevitable in Nigeria. It also explains that ecumenism came to bring the Church together in order to withstand her common enemies that might pose as threats to her survival. While all these are true, the question still lingers as to how far the church has been able to survive these opponents with the garb of ecumenical enterprise. The author here, apparently does not concern himself with this issue in his work.

### **The Nature of Christian Ecumenical Movements in Nigeria**

It may not be absolutely out of place to assert that majority of the Christian religious leaders and their congregants in Nigeria are yet not properly educated and informed on ecumenical matters. There is every need for a wakeup call (which of course this study aims at) towards the consciousness that the petition made by Jesus Christ; “that they all may be one” (John 17:21-23), may never become a reality until every Christian faithful or believer (both clergy and the laity) works consciously towards this oneness. Just as Anokwulu (2016) presents it:

If Catholic priests have open disposition for ecumenical unity, their congregations would most likely be disposed because the flock follow their shepherd if they are leading them in good pastures. One could say the same

to our Separated Brethren. Usually, we experience the enthusiasm among leaders of denominations to come together for common ecclesial issues, although the outcomes of the gatherings most often do not possess the theological and ecclesiological approaches that would help to minimize differences and increase commonalities among the sects. The reason is not that they do not want it but because they lack the experience and expertise to help themselves (p.66).

This is clearly the current nature of Christian ecumenism in Nigeria and remains a matter of great concern. The churches or different Christian denominations in Nigeria cannot continue going in divisible ways and expect to win common battles coming from other opposing religious groups. The need for the success of Christian ecumenism in Nigeria remains non-negotiable. Anokwulu (2016) equally agrees that:

The churches in Nigeria are so many. It is true that many of them are not aware of the universal ecumenical documents produced. Many are not aware of the proposed theological foundations for unity. The greatest challenge in Nigeria would be how the existing ecumenical bodies, like Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Church Council of Nigerian (CCN) could begin to open up to these ecumenical truths and invite experts in these areas to help enlighten the leaders of churches on these ecumenical bases (p.66).

This being the case, effort will be made in the following sections to expose some of the Christian ecumenical

movements in Nigeria and the principle guiding them as well as how they have impacted Christian unity in Nigeria till the present day.

### **Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)**

Apparently, Nigeria has a number of ecumenical bodies that work at different places with different visions and approaches but for one goal which is the proclamation of the gospel, its defense and encouragement for unity of the church in Nigeria against the enemy of the cross. These include Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) and Tarrayyar Ekklesiyoyin Kristia Nigeria. Focus here in on CAN.

Tachin (2022) notes that, the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) came into existence before the Christian Association of Nigeria. The Christian Council of Nigeria held its conference in 1970 where it called for justice and peace in Nigeria. This is because, at this time, the political and religious bigotry in the country was eating deep into the Nigerian system to the point of causing disintegration. He hints that the Christians were subjected to prejudice in every aspect of life. Some representatives of the World Council of Churches attended this conference to show the solidarity and connectivity between this local council and the international council. The Christian Council of Nigeria in its conference emphasized justice and reconciliation in response to the needs of the victims of the civil war. The Christian Council of Nigeria eventually gave birth to the Christian Association of Nigeria that is bigger in scope and operation.

Furthermore, Tanko (1991) observes that the formation of Christian Association of Nigeria was in 1976 which embraced all Christian churches in Nigeria in response to the need for unity among Christians in Nigeria for common action on issues affecting them. In his words:

CAN is made of five (5) blocs which are Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), Tarrayyar Ekklesiyoyin Kristi a Nigeria (TEKAN)/ Evangelical Church Winning All(ECWA), Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN)/ Christian Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (CPFN) and Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC). Through these blocs of all denominations have avenue of belonging to this national umbrella ecumenical body. Irrespective of here wide coverage, CAN is not a member of World Council of Church (WCC).CAN also serve to checkmate the moral and spiritual life of Nigeria and propagate the gospel that works to harmonize the various social classes and ethnic groups in Nigeria. It was put together “to address the politico-religious imbalance towards which the Nigerian nation tilted” but its full force was forged in the furnace of religious violence in Nigeria in 1985 by the attempted Islamization of Nigeria into membership of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC). The importance of CAN has been to unite Christians in Nigeria against religious violence that is meted out to Christians and non-Christians (p.45).

A closer study of all the roles of CAN as stated above, does nothing but begs the question of whether CAN is fulfilling these roles. Certainly, it appears like an irony that the Christian denominations in Nigeria are so divided even when CAN was established to not only ensure unity but to equally guarantee morality amongst the different denominations. It will not be wrong to state that it is high time we all went back to the drawing board. Presently, Christians are being killed in large numbers every day by adherents of another religion in Nigeria. If Christians are truly strongly united in Nigeria, this should not be the case. CAN from all indications, appears to have been politicised therefore, turning her back on its aims and objectives. In the face of CAN, the Nigerian presidential election for the first time was conducted where both the presidential aspirant and his vice were all Muslims; such an irony. Perhaps, another Christian Ecumenical Movement may have to be formed in Nigeria; the one that will focus more on humanity than politics, material gains and unhealthy competitions which are seen amongst its leaders.

### **Exegesis: The Nestle Aland Reading of the Text**

Nestle-Aland presents the text as:

**John 17:21-23** (<sup>21</sup>hina pantes en oosin, kahoos su, pater, en emoi kagoo en soi, hina kai autoi en heemin oosin, hina ho kosmos pisteuee hoti su me apestilas. <sup>22</sup>kagoo teen doxan een dedookas moi dedooka autois, hina oosin en kahoos heemeis en. <sup>23</sup>egoo en autois kai su en emoi, hina oosin teteleioomenoi eis en, hina ginooskee ho kosmos hoti su me apestilas kai eegapeesas autous kahoos eme eegapeesas).

## Presentation of a Working Translation

The proposed working translation is presented as follows:

<sup>21</sup> In order that they all may be one; just as you, father, are in me, I also in you, in order that they also may be one in us; in order that the world may believe that you sent me. <sup>22</sup> Also, the glory which you have given me, I have given to them; in order that they may be one just as we are one; <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me, in order that they may be made perfect into one; in order that the world may know that you sent me and loved them just as you loved me.

## Textual Criticism

A comparison of this text with other variants reveals few textual difficulties. In other words, the text does not have many textual problems. This section would be devoted to the few prominent ones.

In v.21 an obvious problem is seen. Here, the *apparato critic* indicates that some manuscripts like  $\hat{\text{f}}^{66\text{vid}} \text{B C* D W l 547 it}^{\text{a,b,c,d,e(rl)}} \text{vg}^{\text{ms}} \text{syr}^8 \text{cop}^{\text{sa, pbo, boms, ach2}} \text{armgeo}$  has  $w=\sin$ , without  $e/n$ . The exact reading in the verse is testified in vast majority of other manuscripts or witnesses like  $\text{x A C}^3 \text{L D QY 0141 f}^1 \text{f}^{13} 28 33 157 180 205 579 700 892$  which has  $e/n w=\sin$ . Since they are not omitted in the text as presented here, it makes it longer and a more difficult reading. The longer reading is preferred because it indicates the preponderance of ancient, well-distributed evidence. The omission of  $e/n$  in some manuscripts appear to be attempts to correct the original text. Since more ancient texts have similar

reading with the Greek text used and since the text gives a more difficult reading, this study considers it to be closer to the original.

In v.23, ancient manuscripts such as ⲁ A CL W D QY 0141 f<sup>1</sup> f<sup>13</sup> 33 157 180 205 565 579 597 700 1006 1010 1071 1241 1292 1342 1505 Byz all contains the verb *hvga*, *phsaj* the same way it is presented in the text here while other manuscripts like D 0141 892<sup>supp</sup> 1243 1424 1 387<sup>1/2</sup> 1 1016<sup>1/2</sup> 1 1552<sup>1/2</sup> renders it as *hvga*, *phsa*. Apparently, the manuscripts that present it as *hvga*, *phsa* are more recent and may have rendered it so for easier reading. This study still maintains the position that the text of exegesis as presented in the work remains closer to the original text considering the *lectio difficilior* principle and how ancient the manuscript is.

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## Linguistic Analysis of the Syntax

### v.21

*i/na*: “In order that”; the purpose clause that works with the subjunctive verb in Greek grammar. It is used to express purpose or reason for an action.

*e/n*: This is a cardinal nominative neuter singular of no degree. In the text, it is best rendered as ‘one’. It equally functions as an adjective.

*w=sin*: Third person plural, active voice of the present subjunctive mood of the verb, *eivmi*. As used in the text, it translates as ‘that they may be’.

*su*: Nominative case, singular of the second person personal pronoun meaning ‘you’.

*pa,ter*: Vocative case, masculine singular of the common noun, father. It is vocative here indicating an out call or cry from Jesus Christ.

*Pisteu, h|*: Third person singular, present subjunctive mood, active voice of the verb, *pisteu,w*. It means ‘that he, she, or it may believe’ and it also works with the purpose clause ‘in order that’.

*Avpe, steilaj*: Second person singular, aorist indicative mood, active voice of the verb, *avpostellw*, which means to send. However, in the text, it is best rendered as ‘have sent’.

## **v.22**

*Do, xan*: Accusative case, feminine singular of the common noun glory. From the text, it is best understood as ‘the glory’ in accusative form.

*de,dwka,j*: Second person singular, perfect active indicative mood, of the verb, *de,dwmi* which means ‘to give’. In the text, it reads, ‘given to’.

*de,dwka* : First person singular, perfect active indicative mood, of the verb, *de,dwmi* which means ‘to give’. In the text, it reads, ‘given to’.

**v.23**

*evgw.* : Nominative case, singular of the first person personal pronoun which means I.

*teteleiwme, noi*: Nominative case, plural participle perfect tense, passive of the verb, *teteleiw* which means ‘to make perfect’ or ‘to fulfill’. In the text it expresses ‘to be made perfect’.

*ginw, skh* : Third person singular, present subjunctive mood, active voice of the verb, *ginw, skw* which suggests ‘to come to know’, ‘to learn’, ‘to know’, or ‘to realise’.

*hvga, phsaj*: Second person singular, aorist tense, active voice of the verb, *avga, paw* meaning ‘to love’. In the text it expresses ‘have loved’.

**John 17:21-23: Theological Reflections and Hermeneutical Approach/Application**

Marshall (cited by Ekpunobi, 1999) notes that Hermeneutics is “the attempt to understand anything that somebody else has said or written” (p.7). Richardson (1969) however, in his view suggests that: “It is the science and art of interpretation” (p.154). It is the study of those principles that should guide our work of interpretation, in other words, it is “the study of all that goes into interpreting the Bible” (Pratt, 1990:1). In the view of Harvey (1964), Hermeneutics literally means to make clear or to interpret. It is the inquiry concerned with “presuppositions and rules of the interpretation of human expression, usually a written text” (p.117).

Hermeneutics in its simplest form is a concept which equips a scholar with the appropriate tools for the interpretation of the scriptures. Thus, while exegesis is the study of the texts' meaning, hermeneutics encompasses both what the text meant and what it means.

Thus far, a lot has been said concerning the text of exegesis (John 17:21-23) in this study. Nevertheless, this section is dedicated to sampling more ways through which the text could be understood for easier application as it has to do with achieving true oneness amongst Christians in Nigeria.

Tasker (1960) observes that in that final passage of John 17, Jesus prays for those who will believe in Him through the ministry of the apostles. The focus here as he notes, seems to be on unity, stressing that the petition was already expressed by the Son for the apostles in v. 11. In his words:

Here again it is to be an extension of the unity between the Father and the Son. Jesus prays that they may all be one in relation to each other, as well as that they may be one in relation to God. But what kind of unity is really implied here? It is a supernatural unity (p.191).

This is to say that this type of unity supersedes any form of unity the mind of man conceives. However, despite its supernatural form as interpreted by this author, it is still achievable by man. Carson (1991), obviously in agreement with the above interpretation avers that: "This

is not simply a ‘unity of love’. It is a unity predicated on adherence to the revelation the Father mediated to the first disciples through his Son; the revelation they accepted” (vv. 6, 8) and then passed on” (p.560).

### **Conclusion**

The application of John 17:21-23 as a solution to disunity in the Christian Church in Nigeria is socio-religious based as well as culture based. It has been established in this study before now that communal consciousness has been and continues to be one the values in African Traditional society even before the arrival of the Western Christian Missionaries. African are people who work and move in unity and oneness in whatever they do. Thus even in the African Christian faith practice, it should not be difficult to display this same oneness. The only way to achieve this is when the Christians in Nigeria begin to focus more on the denominational doctrines and liturgies they share in common and give less or no attention to those doctrines that differentiate them. If Christianity even in Nigeria recognizes Trinity, it should be the point of convergence even when trivial matters may try to break the movement. The ecumenist must have to embrace as well as uphold this as a principle. The prospect is as simple as Christ presents it; “In order that they all may be one; just as you, father, are in me, I also in you, in order that they also may be one in us; in order that the world may believe that you sent me. Also the glory which you have given me, I have given to them; in order that they may be one just as we are one; I in them and you in me, in order that they may be made perfect into one; in order

that the world may know that you sent me and loved them just as you loved me.” (v.21-23). It is all about unity and not about uniformity. However, it could be concluded that this prayer has been answered but yet it awaits manifestation in the practical lives of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigerian Christians to whom Christ has given all the glory to bring it into manifestation. This oneness is the compound one and not the mathematical or numerical one. M. Okoye (personal communication, August 23, 2025), in his response, equally believes that Christian unity in Nigeria can only be achievable with the understanding of the compound one. He insists that there can never be a time we would achieve uniformity for all the churches but then, unity is very much possible.

### **Recommendations**

The researcher at this juncture thus recommends the followings.

A return to the proper application and use of biblical texts in tackling human issues of which the challenges facing the Christian Ecumenical Movement in Nigeria remain an obvious case, harsh economy, quest to make more money and conquer poverty has blinded all so much that even both the clergy and the laity not exempted.

The Clergy, the laity, experts in ecclesial matters as well as other notable scholars in sociology, anthropology and psychology should intensify efforts towards sensitizing and giving sound reorientation to all the Christian believers within their sphere of influence on the need to

take the business of Christian Unity in Nigeria serious. As stated before now in this study, the prayer of Jesus in the text of exegesis has been answered but then waits for the physical manifestation which can only come through the lives of the human elements it poses another greater challenge to society at large. Thus all human institutions must not take it for granted that if neglected the divisions in the church will certainly transform to division in the society at large.

Focus should be on upholding the unity of will and understanding. The things that unite us as Christians should be sought after. Things like social justice, dignity of the human persons, social teachings, rights of responsibilities, looking out for the down trodden amongst us, equality of all human entity as against unhealthy competitions and unnecessary struggles for recognition, advocacy for all irrespective of denominational differences and advocacy for the poor in our midst etc. Unity here remains the understanding of the common patrimony that all Christians share.

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