Ecumenical Challenge in the Third Millennium

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Abstract: Ecumenical movement is a Christian attempt to unite the fragmented Christian denominations, which has not materialized. From this failure, this paper aimed at finding out the ecumenical challenge in the third millennium. This study followed a qualitative approach that employs content analysis of historical data. It described theological and hermeneutical themes in five sections. The first section gives a brief working definition of three theological terms, millennium, third millennium and filioque controversy. The second section focuses on the description of the ecumenical movement in the third millennium. The third section gives a hermeneutical understanding of biblical teaching on unity. The fourth section presents the contrast between the biblical teaching on unity and the concept of unity in the ecumenical movement in the third millennium. The last section presents the challenges that face the ecumenical movement in the third millennium. Base on the findings, the study concludes that the challenge that faces the ecumenical movement is disregarding the biblical concept of unity and neglecting doctrinal differences among Christian denominations. Therefore, the study recommends that unity should be sought in accordance with biblical truth; moreover, the quest for unity should focus on solving the doctrinal differences among Christian denominations.

Keywords: Ecumenism; third millennium; denominations; unity, ecumenical movement.

Introduction

There is a red light in the ecumenical movement in the third millennium because there is still divisions among churches. (Kasper, 2009). This is against what Rausch (2017 had indicated that after Vatican II, the ecumenical movement would show a tremendous progress whereby the long experienced division among Christian Church would get reconciled. Trends show that different dialogues in the process of seeking unity resulted in agreements between churches, and these churches moved closer in a full communion. In this case, pastors and church members from one Christian denomination were able to transfer their religious belonging to another denomination without questioning their ordination or baptism (Fortin, 2019). Moreover, Rausch (2017) comments that friendship emerged between Catholics and Protestants who formed goodwill in the Lord. Most importantly, the long

schism between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church seemed to disappear.

Despite the progress experienced during Vatican II, the Christian Church has remained in fragment. The third millennium experiences the spirit of hesitation. Cardinal Walter Kasper (2011), President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Church Unity (2001–2010) observed that ecumenism lost Christian unity after the Vatican II. He particularly reported, the previous ecumenical enthusiasm of the decade after the Second Vatican Council has gone; many peosple end up asking: does it still make sense to engage in this issue?

Consequently, the quest for seeking Church unity has not materialized. The Church has not come as one as it was one before the great schism of 1054 AD. From this failure, what could be the challenges of ecumenism in the third millennium?

Research Design

This study followed a qualitative approach that employs content analysis of historical data. Neuman (2006) defines content analysis as a technique for gathering and analyzing content of a text. This study dealt with words, meanings and ideas or themes as source of data. The study attempted to describe theological and hermeneutical themes in five sections. The type of data under analysis emerged through purposive sampling, meaning everything discussed here has a historical inference to ecumenical challenges in the third millennium.

Definition of Terms

This section gives a working definition of theological terms such as millennium, third millennium, and fillioque controversy.

Millennium

The term *Millennium* emerged from Latin. It is a combination of two words *mille,* "thousand" and *annum,* "year" (Dederen, 2000). The word in a theological context describes the thousand years of Revelation 20:1-10. The Greek counterpart of the word millennium is *Chilias,* which also means a period of a thousand years.

Third Millennium

From the light of the word millennium, the word third millennium means third generation of thousand years. The contemporary generations of 21st century is in within the third millennium since two millenniums elapsed at the end of twentieth century. In this case, the working definition of the term *third millennium* in this study focuses on the contemporary period of the 21st century, which started in 2001.

Filioque Controversy

Fillioque is a Latin word, which means *and from the son* (Dederen, 2000). Scholars added the word to the original Nicene Creed purposely to explain the relationship between the persons of the Godhead. This addition changed the original understanding for it claimed that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son contrary to the previous understanding that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father only. Menelaou (2017) comments that this discussion divided the church into Western Christianity and Eastern Christianity and it remains an issue under dispute within the two camps. Being the source of great schism of which the ecumenical movement seeks to resolve, this term relates to this study

Ecumenical Movement in the Third Millennium

The word *ecumenism* emerges from the Greek word *oikoumenē,* which signifies the completely inhabited world. We can simply understand the ecumenical movement as the initiatives of bringing the whole world together in religious matters. The earliest initiatives were the great councils during the patristic period like the Council Nicaea (325), the Council of Constantinople I (381) and Council of Chalcedon (451), to mention a few. These councils sounded ecumenical because of their involvement in solving divisions that threatened the Catholic (Universal) Church (Nelson & Raith II, 2017).

Apart from the initiatives to guide the church in the first millennium, the church experienced great divisions in the second millennium from the East-West schism of the eleventh century and the Reformations of the sixteenth century. These divisions emerged because of doctrinal disagreements. While *filioque* controversy steered the East-West schism, reformers of the sixteenth century were not satisfied with such doctrines in the Roman Catholic Church as Papal Supremacy, indulgence and Justification. These doctrinal disagreements divided the Christian Church into different Christian groups with distinctive doctrinal standpoints. The main groups within these divisions include the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern and Western Orthodox Churches, the Protestants, the Evangelicals, the Reformed Churches and Pentecostals.

At the beginning of the 20th century, ecumenism stands as an attempt to bring all Christian groups into a unity of one Church of Christ to respond to the mission of God in counteracting secularism (Gulley, 2016). According to Nelson and Raith II (2017), the main agenda in the modern movement, first initiated by the Edinburgh conference in 1910, sought to discuss missionary activities in the world. Later on, the missionary societies became large and they formulated international bodies known as "Faith and Order" and "Life and work" movements. Towards the end of the second millennium, ecumenism turned at pushing on Faith and Order and Life and Work of which the former focused on doctrinal issues and the later dealt with missions, sacraments and church authority (Smit, 2003).

In the third millennium, ecumenism turned its focus from doctrinal teaching and the church authority issues that seemed to divide the church; instead, it sought the visible unity of the Church towards the

renewal of humanity (Smit, 2003). The World Council for Churches (WCC), held at Geneva 1990, magnified the need for Christian response to human situations. A document (WCC, 1990) outlined the situation of the present world dangers, hopes and anxieties of which the Church needed to address. The document insisted that the church holds the issues together in proclaiming God's saving purpose for all humankind. In this case, the call for unity of the church was justified in the context of ushering the kingdom of God and healing the spiritual bankrupt that faced the world.

In connection to the seeking of common concerns of evangelizing the world, Kasper (2009) pointed out that the Augsburg Council (2000) successfully eliminated the controversy between Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches and the churches agreed on the substantial content of the common witness to the world. Consequently, Lorke and Werner (2013) observe that the statement of Chavannes-de-Bogis Conference outlined that the main agenda of ecumenism focused on fellowship and togetherness in religious activities. In support of this concept, Smit (2003) commented that faith and order always insist that struggles towards the unity of the church, common witness, and service in the world should be held together.

From the World War I experience, Life and Work concept of ecumenical movement aimed at advancing justice in the world (Shillito, 1926). Ecumenism, under this umbrella, focused on ethical issues that needed attention. According to Smit (2003), the movement had to make the collective efforts from the churches to face social, political and economic challenges in the world. This concept appeared during the Life and Work Conference of the year 1925 in Stockholm. The conference ruled out that the sins and sorrows, the struggles and losses of the Great Wars were too strong for the divided Church (Shilinto, 1926). In response, South African Archbishop Tutu (1994) alluded that apartheid was too strong for a divided church. From this observation, the interest of church unity under Life and Works focused on ethical issues than ecclesiological and doctrinal concerns. On this ground, Life and Work adherents observed a need to address social issues despite doctrinal divisions. From these trajectories, ecumenical movement in the third millennium feels indebted to address these issues in a Christian common ground. Therefore, a need for churches to join hands to tackle violence and promote peace in all areas of life such as social,

political, economic and ecological issues (Medrano, 2016). Moreover, the prospect of ecumenical movement in the third millennium focuses on pilgrimage towards Justice and Peace (Gardân, 2016). This prospective encourages people to come together in opposing all divisions of race, gender, age or culture to promote justice, peace and to uphold integrity of creation.

Stressing on peace and Justice, the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, which took place between 25th October and 9th November 2013 at Busan, South Korea, aimed to combat social problems by promoting peace and justice (Koslowski, 2016).

The common quest for combating social problem appears in the three models of the contemporary ecumenical trend. According to Daniel et al. (2012), the three models focus on social issues rather than doctrinal issues. The first is the Roman Catholic model, established in the Vatican II of which the church is unwilling to change its traditional dogmas. The intention of Vatican II was not so much in fever of changing its unique dogmas such as infallibility of the pope, Mary's Immaculate Conception, salvation through the Church, but aimed to explain the Roman Catholic teachings in a contemporary manner. The second model is the Orthodox churches' understanding of ecumenism, which focused on the movement that excludes changes in basic doctrines. The second model is the Orthodox churches' understanding of ecumenism, which focused on the movement that excludes changes in basic doctrines. The third model is concerned with mutual recognition of ministries and all believers in each place in witnessing and service. These models do not show any possibility of reconciling doctrinal differences, but on the contrary, seeks to find what can bring all Christian onboard. In fulfilling this quest, ecumenical movement came up with a common project of social endeavors, which focuses on justice, peace and the integrity of creation (Daniel et al., 2012).

Therefore, regardless of doctrinal differences, the church attempted to embrace the mission of God in serving humanity.

Biblical Teaching on Unity
Unity is a biblical necessity of the church. Both Old and New Testaments teach that God's people should have unity in accomplishing the mission of God (Jug 20: 8,10; 1Sam 11:7; Ezra 3:1; Neh 8:1; Psalm 133:1; John 17:11, 23; Acts 2:44-47; 4:32; Eph

4:13). In this regard, Erickson (1958) identifies the following four kinds of unity among Christian Church believers.

Spiritual Unity is concerned with all Christians committed to the serving the same Lord. In such unity, Christ is the head. All believers unite by the love of God. These believers regard church unity as essentially spiritual and emphasize purity of doctrinal belief and lifestyle as criteria for membership.

Mutual Recognition accepts and recognizes that each denomination is a legitimate part of the family of God. On this ground, believers are free to transfer their belonging from one congregation to another without restrictions. Moreover, preachers and church official of one congregation may officiate in another congregation feely without restrictions.

Conciliar Unity refers to different organizations that come together purposely to accomplish common goals. These organizations come together in attempt to join their efforts in accomplishing their purpose. In this fellowship, each denomination retains its own identity and continues with its own unique traditions within the cooperation.

Organic Unity refers to the introduction of an organization of more than one entity, of which the entities surrender traditional identities. This unity merges congregations and allows joints of membership and ordination.

Apart from the stated kinds of unity within the Christian Church, the scripture teaches unity from the beginning of the creation account. The Trinitarian God created and brought the formless earth together in harmony and tranquility (Genesis 1:2; 26; 30). God created the first human beings and put them together in a unity that reflects the Trinitarian unity (Gen 2:24). A strange unity between the serpent and humanity interrupted the intended unity during the fall of man. God's first response to this counterfeit unity was to counteract the unity and put enmity between the offspring of the woman and the offspring of the serpent (Gen 3:15). From this beginning, two kinds of unity emerged: the holy and the unholy unities. According to Klingbeil (2014), the tower of Babylon story brings to view an unholy unity in the history of humankind, which appears in Genesis 11. In this attempt, humanity planned to work in a coordinate way against God's divine attributes and

prerogatives. The author specifically pointed out that,

> The sense of making a great name is a divine prerogative, not the result of human design and efforts. The tower builders not only tried to erect a structure reaching heaven, they also intend to do so on their own steam, and openly defy the divine command to be fruitful and to multiply the earth (p.110).

From this attempt, God disordered their communication to stop them from their own man made effort to unite at the cost of lapsing the mission of God to spread out and fill the earth. Accordingly, God chose Abraham and detached him from his family for the sake of mission. From him, God established a holy nation. This nation was holy unto God to stay away from unity with other nations that did not worship the true God. Therefore, God forbade intermarriages with them (Deut 7:1-10). However, those who gave themselves to the worship of the God of the Israelites were assimilated in the holy nation as in the case of Ruth (Ruth 1:16-17; 4:10-12).

Observing the Old Testament trend on unity, Klingbeil (2014) concluded that God allowed unity with the prerequisite of the worship of God of Israel. He categorically said, "Integration or unity is positive only if it does not come at the expense of recognizing JEHOVA as the supreme deity or sacrifice the truth claims of a *Thus says the Lord of Israel.* God's special mission for Israel as His people was not to be surrendered" (p. 113).

Most importantly, Israel as a nation united by the worship of JEHOVA of which each member had to observe two related institutions of temple and law. These two institution, as recorded in Deuteronomy 12, distinguished Israelites from other nations. The temple centered their worship and the law served as a unifying factor (Bromiley, 1958).

In connection to the Old Testament teaching on unity, New Testament reports that Jesus taught that the proclamation of the gospel would bring multitude to His church, and finally there would be one flock and one shepherd (John 10:16). Emphasizing on unity, Jesus in John 17: 20, 21 prayed for the pf in the biblical perspective. Beginning with biblical nature of unity resent and future believers to have unity so that the world might believe. He prayed,

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me (NIV).

Contextual analysis of this passage focuses of the unity among Jesus' disciples who accepted the truth and those who would believe the gospel through the message of the disciples in the future. Speaking on Jesus' prayer on unity, Erickson (1958) commented that the Lord expressed a concern for the welfare of his followers. The unity between the Father and the Son was a model for the unity of believers with one another. Moreover, Gulley (2016) commented that biblical unity among Christians appears in a saving relationship with the God of truth in whom the love of God and the love of truth unite them. Therefore, Jesus' prayer for unity focused on the truth, which consists of keeping God's word.

The Apostolic church followed the Christ's model of unity that is rooted in the truth found in scripture. The prayer of Jesus in John 7: 21 echoed in the early Apostolic Church. The scripture reads; "All the believers were in one heart and mind, no one claimed that any of their possession was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all" (Acts 4:32-33). This unity shows that oneness characterized the believers in the truth and with the purpose of proclaiming the gospel to the world.

Moreover, Apostle Paul taught that believers need to seek unity, unity that binds their faith in the Trinitarian God (Ephesians 4:3-6). For Paul, all ethnic groups were brought together for Christ's sake and became heirs of the kingdom according to the promise (Galatians 3:29). Therefore, the New Testament unity should reflect the Old Testament model that assets that God's followers unite in truth for accomplishment of the mission of God. Apostle Paul reports this kind of unity:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called ... forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:1-6).

Unity in the biblical sense is centered in the truth and mission. Therefore, unity cannot materialize without agreement on basic truths of the word of God (Erickson, 1958). In this case, biblical unity applies to God's followers who have decided to follow the truth of the gospel found in scripture.

Biblical Teaching of Unity and Unity in the Ecumenical Movement

Having observed the nature of unity in both biblical and ecumenical movement views, this section discusses the ecumenical concept of unity and the nature of unity in the biblical perspective. Beginning with biblical nature of unity, scripture tells that God does not always accept unity among humanity. He does not approve every attempt of unity among humanity. Any unity that overlooks the mission of God to humanity may not be in harmony with the will of God. For instance, God did not permit the unity during the Tower of Babel because it did not follow God's mission.

The scenario of the Tower of Babel unveils that God was not pleased with the initiative. He reacted by dividing those who worked together against him. Another scenario is intermarriages of Israelites with pagan nations (Deut 7). God ordered the killing of all pagan nations as an emphasis of against unity that overlooks His mission.

Thus, God's nature of unity exists in His mission to liberate humanity from sin. This unity requires human response to the voice of God in all aspect of life. This includes the call to worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:23) of which doctrinal issues take a predominant aspect of unity (John 8:32). Right understanding of the will of God is what unites God's followers. Jesus said that the unity that brings people to one fold focuses on calling the outsiders to join the genuine group that is focused on the everlasting gospel (Revelation 18:1-4). He specifically said, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16). In connection to this call, Klingbeil (2014) comments;

In both the Old and New Testaments, God's people do not exist in splendid isolation, but always seem to be in dialogue with others. However, this

dialogue does not happen on the terms of diverse or current political or cultural agendas, but rather on the terms of the revealed will of God (p. 129).

On the other hand, Ecumenical movement in the third millennium presents unity as movement that seeks to liberate humanity from injustice and inhuman treatments (Kobia, 2005). Social and political aspects are the predominant focus of the ecumenical unity in the 21st century. Kobia further argues that doctrinal issue is not the only cause of a divided church, but the divided church is the reflection of a divided world. This view assets that ecumenism does not focus on doctrinal issues. Displeased with the concept of unity in the contemporary ecumenical movement, Weber (1984) directly condemned the WCC for its tendency of downplaying the necessity of doctrinal agreement and evangelism while stressing on social and political actions in Christ's name.

Furthermore, the contemporary concept of unity among ecumenical adherents is the quest of uniting all Christians in combating injustice, restore peace and fight for the unprivileged. This fact is further supported by Kasper (2011) who assets that; "spiritual ecumenism means ecumenical collaboration in serving the poor, the sick, the jobless, the homeless, the lonely, the outcast and the suffering of all kinds" (p. 22).

After having analyzed biblical views of unity and the concept of unity endorsed in the ecumenical movement in the third millennium, the difference comes out explicitly. This difference lies on doctrinal concerns. While scripture teaches that unity should consider the truth of the gospel, ecumenism, on the other side, opines to unite Christians in confronting social issues. While Scripture teaches that biblical unity prepares people for salvation (Rev 18:4), ecumenism seeks to bring people together in proclaiming justice and peace, which may not necessarily prepare people for salvation but may succeed in liberating people from political oppression. Consequently, the concept of unity in the ecumenical movement in the third millennium might bring together different religious groups with different doctrinal standpoints to proclaim peace, justice while confusion of doctrinal issues lies at the center of the unity.

Challenges that Face Ecumenical Movement in the Third Millennium

Ecumenism seeks unity among Christian denominations. This quest establishes that there are diverse opinions on how these churches view Christianity. Church history reveals that doctrinal issues were the main contention that brought divisions in the early Church. Monarchianism, Sabellianism, Docetism, Arianism, Apollinarianism, to mention a few, were the main issues that threatened the unity of the Church (Allison, 2011). The unity existed when the church addressed these issues in different ecumenical councils of the early church. On the contrary, there is scarce clue regarding social contention that threatened the unity of the church. In fact, there is no specific ecumenical council of the early church that addressed social issue that could divide the church (Schaff & Wace, 1900).

More specifically, the contemporary division between the Christian church and Orthodox Christianity is a result of doctrinal contention based on the filioque controversy of the eleventh century. This controversy continues to be an obstacle to ecumenical movement. Again, during reformation, the Roman Catholic changed the doctrinal dogmas and finally protestant churches emerged because of contentions over doctrinal issues. In this case, the quest for restoring unity should not overlook the basic cause of divisions. In an attempt to unite the diverge Christian church, ecumenical movement concentrates on establishing sociological aspects as key instrument to bring churches together.

Despite initiatives, that ecumenism has put in place, seeking unity through social agenda, there are several challenges in this third millennium. Foremost, different religions that are required to come together have the right of religious freedom. Different religions have different ways of exercising their beliefs. For instance, religious practices such as ways of worship, places of worship, use of images and rituals differ from one religious group to another (Simarmata, 2016). Therefore, unity among these groups with diverse doctrinal views requires more efforts to reconcile the differences on doctrines.

Along this observation, ecumenical movement quest for unity might unite Christian in response to social issue, but this kind of unity yields religious differences. On that case, unity that focuses on addressing social pitfalls may not unite doctrinal

differences. Simarmata (2016) affirms that religious differences have been the source of violence and suffering, and these conflicts result from religious fundamentalism and fanaticism. On the same note, Küng (2007) commented that, peace among the nations depends on peace among religions, which requires dialogue between religions. This thought suggests that, seeking peace without solving religious differences may not materialize because the church overlooks the source of contention.

In connection to this challenge, Daniel et al. (2012) observed that Euro-American Theology in the ecumenical movement tends to dominate. At the same time, there is difficulty in expressing the piety and theological articulation in churches of the Third World Countries and superficiality of theological analysis within the movement. This domination directly recants the unity among Christian of the west and those from developing countries.

Other challenges of ecumenism in the third millennium concern denominational conflicts over doctrinal issue like biblical authority, salvation, and other ethical issues like gender and sexuality. Different denominations view the identified doctrinal and ethical issues differently. These differences have become an obstacle on ecumenical movement since every denomination seeks to maintain its own unique traditions. In the same vein, Evangelicals have always insisted that unity in fellowship cannot be possible if there is no agreement in basic truths (Erickson, 1958).

For Evangelicals, ecumenism has many challenges such that any union with groups that fail to hold their basic understanding of doctrines such us supreme authority of the Bible, Christology, the Parousia, and Soteriology will not be possible. Meaning that, the unity with other Christians on doctrinal teachings is not possible because there are unreconciled differences in Christian living, based on biblical foundation for each group. Ecumenical movement has focused on nonessentials; therefore, Evangelicals suspect that the members of the unity who may not be genuine Christians (Erickson, 1958) will undermine their doctrinal standards.

The evangelical position seems to suggest that ecumenical movement in the third millennium is a utopia phenomenon since the Roman Catholic Church holds true to her doctrinal beliefs and advances herself as the real body of Jesus Christ on earth while the evangelicals reject the Roman Catholic's claim (Gulley, 2016). While Roman Catholic claims to be the real body of Christ on earth, evangelicals reject the claim. Therefore, ecumenical movement does not move to its maturity until one of the two parts compromises her doctrinal beliefs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Unity is a biblical necessity for the Church of Christ on earth. Both Old and New Testaments teach that unity is the prerequisite in the worship of God. On the contrary, any attempt of unity that works against God's divine attributes and prerogatives may not materialize. Speaking on unity, Jesus in John 17:20, 21 prayed for his present and future believers to have unity which consists of keeping God's word.

The concept of ecumenical movement in the early stages was to seek unity in evangelizing the world. This initiative changed during the third millennium whereby, ecumenical movement focused on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation. This initiative does not consider the biblical unity that Jesus prayed for. Moreover, it does not focus on solving doctrinal differences among Christian denominations. This study recommends that unity should be in accordance with the biblical truth. Moreover, the quest for unity should focus on solving the doctrinal differences among Christian denominations.

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