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Support for making Pauline henotic unity the fulcrum of Christian ecumenism in Nigeria

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Author:
Prince E. Peters[1,2]

Affiliations:
[1]Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

[2]Department of New Testament Studies and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Prince Peters,
prince.peters.195254@unn.edu.ng

Paul uses the word ἑνότης twice in Ephesians (4:3, 13), and quite strangely, those are the only two places where the feminine noun features in the whole of the New Testament. In the two passages where they appear, they both relate to invisible unity, the unity of the Spirit that produces a common faith and knowledge of the Son of God – εἰς τὴν ἑνότητα τῆς πίστεως καὶ τῆς ἐπιγνώσεως τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ. Such unity suggests that ecumenism amongst Christian denominations is not only a possibility, it is also a necessity as far as we all profess one Christ. This unity is however far from ecclesiological unionism. Considering that the church appears weak from the outside when its diverse lines of doctrine, sacraments and ministerial ethics are emphasised. This suggests that a reasonable antidote would be the emphasis on the philosophy of unity amidst our diversity especially to the hearing of non-Christians.

Contribution: This study makes firm the belief that Christianity is formed on divergent traditions that produced various strands of practices, which in turn produce different Christian sects and denominations, and a reverse is not possible. It then suggests a bonding in faith through the invisibility of *henotic* unity, which the pericope suggests. This will help the church to amass a stronger defence politically and structurally against rival religions and social organisations even in the midst of doctrinal differences.

Keywords: ἑνότης; Nigerian church; Ephesians; church unity; ecumenism; henotic.

Introduction

Diversity of traditions, which unfortunately created distinct groups in Christianity, is not a 21st-century problem. Its origin dates back to the beginning of Christianity.[1] Practices in Christianity differ in part or in whole from one another (even the so-called heresies arose out of a historical root in Christian traditions [Meeks 2021:n.p]), and those 'different practices' are what have kept Christianity diversified up to today. There is no doubt that Christianity has seen 'numerous denominational splits throughout history' (Rhodes 2015:18). This is because of variegated interpretations given to the New Testament text, which is basically where the tenets of belief and the articles of faith reside.[2] In its efforts to maintain orthodoxy, the church initially divided on catholic and heretical sides,[3] and as time progressed, the catholic line continued to degenerate into more sects.[4] Such degeneration got to a point within the medieval period where open attacks were meted out in other to stop mass movement from the church.[5] Holy warriors were trained to hunt

1. Nnebedum (2009:2) interprets the unity and love of brethren in the early church as synonymous with unity of the visible church. However, against his insinuation, various brands of Christianity existed right from the beginning of the movement. These brands believed and taught as many diverse Christian traditions as there were Christian communities. They included but were not limited to the Jewish law-observing Christians, the gentile-accommodating Christians, the John the Baptist Christians, the Gnostic Christians, the Pauline Christians and so on; see Attridge (1998), Hendrix (1998) and Koester (1998).

2. Punt (2002:122–142), speaks of *enscripturalised identity*, which entails the use of language and literature (in the context of his study, New Testament text) in the construction of reality. Such realities would include 'to declare war and to proclaim peace, to justify oppression and to support struggles for human freedom, to legitimate human excesses and to provide the stimulus for human development' (p. 123). This passes the New Testament text as flexible enough to sustain multiple but variegated interpretations. Douglas Estes sees contemporary variegated biblical interpretations as affected by the adoption of literary criticism in biblical study. This method, according to Estes, has as one of its approaches *rhetoric*, which existed long before the writing of the New Testament; this refers the problem to the earliest part of Christianity and in fact beyond. See Estes (2017:1–36), Punt (2013:113–132) and Smith (2015:175–194).

3. The triumph of the idea of a catholic church was to unite the two elements of which the Christian church was composed: (1) the prevailing notion of Christianity in Palestine, which was characterised by a decided leaning to the Old Testament and which suffered the new spirit to remain enveloped in the old forms of Judaism; (2) the independent Pauline development of Christianity amongst the pagans. This unity towards Christian catholicism was severally broken down by the party of Jewish Christians (zealots according to the pharisaic spirit) and Gnosticism (Torrey 1847:342).

4. It is said that '[w]hen the Reformation began in the sixteenth century, the Roman Catholic hierarchy predicted that once Christendom began to split, there would be no end to the fragmentation' (Lutzer 1998:15). Since the reformation, the Roman Catholic Church has witnessed several splits from its roots.

5. A distinction must be set here between the Catholic Church and the Roman Catholic Church. For the former, it is meant exactly as the church fathers used it, not in opposition to *protestant* but in opposition to *sectarian*, 'which pertains to a part of the Church that has separated itself off from the worldwide Church and, to some extent, from the world itself' (Mcbrien 1994:1); by the latter is meant the Christian church with its headquarters in Rome.

heretics (Coffey 2017:101–114; Fanning 2009:1–31; Whalen 2015:1–18); an inquisition court was set to judge and burn the guilty, and even the Jews – whose religion is distinct from Christianity – were hunted and persecuted, both in the medieval period and during the Holocaust (Fredriksen & Irshai 2008:977–1034; Munson 2018:9). These moves did not seem to stop the downward movement of the church's segregation, as the church continued to split till today. New biblical teachings based on varied textual and dogmatic interpretations kept driving people to seek the truth about Christ; this was accompanied by the collapse of rigidly organised priestly ministry, especially within the evangelicals. People had access to the Bible and because they could read it and interpret it, the church was never to return to what the evangelicals and people outside Christianity would prefer to call 'the Dark Ages' (Ellerbe 1996:41). As the church divides along doctrinal and dogmatic lines, so also do the Christians (Ellerbe 1996:2). It got to the point where people became the public enemy of each other, especially when they did not hold the same beliefs as their countrymen, who unfortunately were also Christians; this is called 'intra-Christian conflict' (Hunt 2015:10–46; Peters 2020:1–9). Wars assumed continental and even intercontinental magnitude, and men were enlisted to fight wars that have remote links to religion. Christianity's earliest dominance of the West enabled it to decide a number of things, including who became a world power and who drove the economy (Ekelund, Hébert & Tollison 2011:1–18; Ekelund et al. 1996:3–201). This inadvertently introduced the bourgeoisie and the proletariat classes in European Christianity (Ward 1921:274).

At the importation of Christianity into Africa, and by extension Nigeria, the divisive tendencies in Christian religious thought and the class distinction of the economically powerful and subordinate groups spilled over, too. Today in Nigeria, the Christian religion has kept people more divided than ever. It does not seem to have been the original intention of Jesus to have a divided church or to allow the church to divide anyone else. This division is simply a case of multiple traditional understandings and interpretations of Christian beliefs and thought. Paul therefore made a call in the studied passage for the unity of 'faith' and 'knowledge' of the Son of God. This unity of faith is a call to Christian ecumenism, and Christian ecumenism is a concerted effort to sheath the dogmatic sword and tolerate other's beliefs within Christianity only because all brands of Christianity properly understand the irreversible variegation of the visible church and the invisibility of the church's bond towards unity.

Ecclesiological debilitation: An attack on ἑνότης

The 'church' is considered 'as the communion of believing saints, which the Holy [Spirit] […] gathers through the gospel – קָהָל, מִקְרָא, עֵדָה, συναγωγή, ἐκκλησία, *communion sanctorum, congregatio vere credentium, coetus fidelium*' (Mueller 1934:541;

Peters 2020a:1). This situates the church not as a particular denomination but the all-inclusive Christian body despite its denominational affiliation. Structurally, the strength of any organisation is dependent on the strength of its leadership; this indicates that the weakness of an organisation (say the church) stems from the weakness of its leadership. The inability of the church to agree on major Christian doctrines goes beyond minor denominational tags and the psychological differences they convey. It reveals the distinctions church members from various denominations place on fellow members from other denominations in part because of psychological differences they have from one another. In fact it hinges on the teachings stemming from variegated traditions whose root is in Christian antiquity. Whilst this is regrettably an irreversible situation, it has gotten worse in the hands of current denominational managers.[6] This indirect social class distinction that occurs in the church – just as it does in secular organisations – creates a fundamental problem in organisation science (see Côté 2011:56). This takes the form of challenging the acquisition and exhibition of sound moral rectitude amongst members of that organisation (here church members). It has direct connection to the church's weakened foundation around the world, especially in Africa and precisely in Nigeria. However, the fact that Jesus prayed for the unity of the church and Paul preached it (Chang 2007:2; SDA 2016:2) makes the matter an indispensable situation, one that is both a necessity and a possibility. This unity does not speak of the dissolution of the various traditions that create diversity in Christianity (uniformity) but rather tolerance of these diversities (SDA 2016:10), whilst the church unites under the theme of its hidden head, Christ (see Littlejohn 2019:2), who is the invisible bond creating henotic unity. This is the true definition of ecumenism.[7]

In fact, it is a common practice these days to refer to the unity of the church as a litmus test for the belief in the unity of the Trinity (see Mendy 2010:66–85; Niebuhr 1946:371–384). The unity of the Trinity is understood as a prototype of the unity already instilled in the church by the Trinity themselves, towards which the church should work. Kärkkäinen (2002) may be thinking in the same direction when he opined that:

> [I]t is not the task of the ecumenical movement – or any other human organisation for that matter – to create unity between the churches, but rather to give form to the unity already created by God. (p. 85)

This 'form', which is the duty of the church, especially its leaders, makes the subject of the unity of the church of utmost importance.

The seriousness behind church growth and its management presupposes a serious approach not just to the day-to-day affairs of the church but to the selection of church leadership. This is made clear when we consider that the church thrives in an atmosphere of a united front rather than the reverse.

6.A Vatican II Council document states: 'many Christian Communion present themselves to men as the true inheritors of Jesus Christ … but they differ in mind and go in different ways as if Christ himself was divided' (Flannery, *Vatican Council II: Decree on Ecumenism, Unitatis Redintegratio*, p. 452).

7.This opinion corroborates the idea expressed by the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (2016:3).

The enthronement to ecclesiastical positions of persons whose historical knowledge of the roots of the church's diversity is shallow (novices) is the first step in the ladder to segregation and the application of personal sentiments over the collective interest, especially the unity of the church. Such church workers (usually members of the fivefold ministry), who lack proper training in understanding the peculiarity of the church's distinctiveness, assume (and even teach in order to bias their followers) that their denomination and its dogmatic predispositions represent all there is to know about historic Christianity. These kinds of church workers (depending on the tradition that produced them) easily classify other brands of Christians as practising a corrupted form of Christianity or classify them as unorthodox and outside the apostolic succession. This is exactly the opposite of the kind of church leaders that Paul spoke about in the pericope of study (verses 11–13), whose efforts in discipling the church would eventually produce *henotic* unity. Note that the greatest division that Christianity has witnessed to date is the Great Reformation, which divided the church between Roman Catholicism and the Reformed church.[8] It is likely that the leaders of the Reformation originally had no intention of forming a separate Christian movement but rather of reforming the church from within (see Van Wyk 2010:216). Luther is said to have initially planned not to open a new church but to purify the one, holy church (Lohse 1995; Van Wyk 2010:216). Calvin, as repulsive and offensive as his language towards the Roman Catholic Church was not willing to compromise unity with the church in Rome (Van Wyk 2010:216). This explains the powerful roles the church leaders played in entrenching *henotic* unity as Jesus wanted.

Invisible or visible unity – which does ἑνότης represent in Ephesians?

Verses 3 and 13 control the exegesis of Ephesians 4. Other verses in the pericope need citing. Whilst the full pericope of the studied text dwells on unity of the church, Ephesians 4:11 explains the agents through whom the supposed unity comes, the members of the fivefold ministry. They are meant to καταρτισμός [perfect] the ἁγίοι [saints] so that these saints can do the work of service, whilst this work of service builds up the body of Christ μέχρι [until or as far as] *henotic* unity is attained. This verse reveals the responsibility of the clergy in promoting *henotic* unity because they almost exclusively hold the power of communicating Christian teachings that build faith and knowledge of the Son of God. The clergy is given the responsibility of καταρτισμός *as far as* (μέχρι) *henotic* unity is the focus. This adverb μέχρι, so far as it indicates the *terminus ad quem* of the idea conveyed, expresses first-hand that the unity of which Paul preaches about, of which Christ also prayed (unity that belongs to the church's sanctification), has been given by the Father.[9] Such a fatherly gift manifests

itself in the (Holy) Spirit, whose responsibility is to keep the unity of the church (Mendy 2010:66–85). This is possible for him to achieve amongst Christians, despite the great number of denominations they belong to on their own understanding, which expresses individual, conflicting doctrinal beliefs. Such people, who accept this Pneumatological work, though they belong to different visible churches, populate one united, indivisible and invisible Church (see Lange 2011:7). This highlights that *henotic* unity is not a visible unity, which suggests unionism,[10] but unity of the spirit amongst individual Christians, who are the church.

Paul's terms for cosmic and *henotic* unity

There exists another genus of Ephesian unity motifs that is not *henotic*. This kind of unity does not suggest the oneness of Spirit in faith to the Lord Jesus as ἑνότης entails; it rather talks about the unification of all things under Christ, what has technically been called *cosmic unity*.[11] This genus of unity finds kinship with *henotic* unity only in the sense that the latter belongs to the corporate expression of cosmic unity, through the agency of the Godhead (see Turner 1995:138–166). The verb ἀνακεφαλαιόω in Ephesians 1:10 represents this kind of unity. Its translation as 'to bring back into unity' has been justified by Turner (1995:148–149). According to him, the New International Version follows an exegetical tradition that interprets the verb to mean 'bring under one head'. He believes that this should probably be rejected because it would incorrectly suggest that the verb derives from the noun κεφαλὴ [head] rather than from κεφαλαιον [main point, summary].[12] Turner provides quite a number of convincing arguments that suggest the tradition upon which his translation of ἀνακεφαλαιόω stands is correct. With the understanding that there is much going on in the case of cosmic dualism,[13] the war between good and evil, between light and darkness, between God and Satan and the writer of Zechariah giving the assurance of the day of the Lord, it gives the impression that whilst the world has been torn away from a Creator united in himself, whose original intent in creation was the harmony of all things, visible and invisible

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8. The Great Reformation was not in fact the first schism in Christianity. History still records the Great Schism of 1054, which has been referred to as 'the prequel and foundation for one of the most significant consequences of the Great Schism which was the Protestant Reformation' (Cox 2018:55).

9. Lutzer (1998:6) says '[*a*]ll true believers are members of Christ's body, which is indivisible. Paul did urge us to "preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"

(Eph 4:3), but it was not organizational unity that he had in mind. The unity of the Spirit exists amongst believers despite their doctrinal differences. That we should maintain it, but not create it, was Paul's plea'.

10. Sometime in Nigeria, the Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian churches formed a church union 'after the "South India scheme"' (see Adebayo 2015:6). Such unionism saw to the establishment of Trinity Union Theological College Umuahia and Christ Church Chapel, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, amongst others. However, the union did not last for a very long time, hence Trinity College, for example, has gone into the hands of Anglican communion alone.

11. Timothy van Aarde sees cosmic unity in Ephesians as missiological. His interpretation is that the cosmic unity of Christ is to manifest his manifold wisdom of bringing all things under him by filling all with all. In his words, '[*t*]he verb πληρουμένου is a participle indicating that the "filling" or "completion" is God's plan rather than the cosmos being conceived is an empty space that is being filled' (Van Aarde 2017:297).

12. Turner explains that 'this interpretation was championed by H. Schlier, "κεφαλὴ, ἀνακεφαλαιόομαι", *TDNT*, Vol. III 1965, 681–682, and adopted in the commentaries by Schlier and Barth, but there on the grounds that Jesus is described as "head" over all things in 1:22' (Turner 1995:139)

13. Monism, not dualism, suggests that the universe forms an ultimate harmonious unity. Dualism itself, so far as it speaks of theodicy – like in this article – 'rejects this final harmony, insisting that good and evil are utterly and irreconcilably opposed to one another and that their duality can be overcome only by one destroying the other' (Hick 1985:15).

in himself – this is the idea portrayed by Jewish scriptures at least – understanding cosmic unity in Ephesians would properly start not from Greek philosophy but from the Old Testament scripture.[14]

Be that as it may, cosmic unity – even though it is necessary for the fulfilment of God's eschatological mandate – does not conform to the unbiased situation to which unity is attributed in this study. Reference is made therefore to the invisible *henotic* unity, which upholds brotherly love and engenders sweet fellowship with one another even in the face of irreconcilable doctrinal differences. This assertion corroborates Constable's view about Paul's primary purpose in writing the book of Ephesians. In his words:

> Paul's frequent references to the church as a 'mystery' (divine secret), previously unknown but now revealed, identify the apostle's main purpose in writing, as having been the exposition of the mystery of the church (1:9; 3:3–4, 9; 5:32; 6:19). His emphasis on the church as Christ's body, in which both Jewish and Gentile believers are one, suggests that Paul wrote to promote unity in the Ephesian church and in the universal church. The emphasis on the importance of love is also strong. More than one-sixth of Paul's references to 'love' in his 13 epistles occur in Ephesians. This also shows that he wanted to promote Christian unity in the church. (n.p.)

It is important to think of cosmic unity as a necessary inclusion especially in the present age, considering the eclectic position of God in ecclesiology, which is more or less a predestination factor. It seems therefore reasonable that the world, in its dualistically opposing nature, is set so by the Uncaused Cause, who, it is likely, sits behind the wheel that determines the effects of the cosmic reality and who has even masterminded its ultimate end. Then, it is also evident that amidst so many cataclysms, he has placed such cataclysms as the means of achieving cosmic unity (see Turner 1995:140). Whilst Paul speaks of God's will to achieve cosmic unity, he also emphasises God's plan to bring all Christians into a like mind despite the Christian tradition they follow. This *henotic* unity (which looks like a part of the cosmic unity, through the Godhead [Turner 1995:138]) does not seem achievable by any move towards uniting the body into one doctrine or ecclesiological forum, but was exemplified by Paul using the human body, which though diversified operates as one (see Rm 12:5; 1 Cor 10:17; 1 Cor 12:12–27).

Overview of the ecumenical situation in Nigeria

The prediction has been made that 'by the dawn of the 22nd century, in the year 2100 … the geographical heart of the Christian churches will be located in northern Nigeria' (Kobia 2005:n.p). Whilst such predictions may materialise,

Christianity in Nigeria is currently grappling with some major challenges. Surprisingly, the same northern Nigeria to which this forecast points is where the greatest threat to the existence of Christianity in Nigeria, and indeed West Africa, currently emanates from (see e.g. Iwuchukwu 2010:48–65). This is one of the challenges to Christianity in Nigeria. Furthermore, all over Nigeria, the problem with Christianity's diverse traditional and ecclesiological background seems to have beset the religion like a military siege. Because the exegesis here suggests that denominationalism is not a challenge to ecumenism,[15] but rather, neglect of the Spirit that binds Christians together (see Mendy 2010:66–85), it becomes imperative to emphasise invisible unity through the Spirit rather than visible unionism through ecumenical councils.[16] Paul's emphasis on unity from Ephesians 4:3 is unity (oneness) of the Spirit (Nixon n.d.: 229); this emphasises rather an agreement in the common leadership of the Spirit (Mendy 2010:69), something that has been obviously lacking in Christian ecumenist movements. Ecumenism in Nigeria has met with several failures (Nnebedum 2009:2) (this may be the case all over the world). In fact, it has been referred to 'as a futile exercise as it may not be addressing the real issue of the schism' (Eregare, Ekpendu & Adesina 2017:51). The focus on the visible church with the aim towards unionism that was mistaken for ecumenism was the cause of this failure. Ecumenism through the lens of Ephesians 4 does not try to produce a unitary doctrine for the multifaceted church or to make the church conform to one ecclesiological pattern, standard or headship; rather, its aim is to maintain the already variegated Christianity, whose only uniformity is the faith and knowledge of Christ, which stems from one (Holy) Spirit. This is where Nigerian ecumenism has missed it.

Conclusion

Henotic unity is best described in this study as the unity of the Spirit that produces a common faith and knowledge of the Son of God. This means that the only fruitful effort to ecclesiological unity is the one achieved through the Spirit's teaching of faith and knowledge of Christ in all Christian denominations. Such unitary responsibility has the ability to make all Christians in Nigeria overlook the fact that they belong to different denominations and instead see themselves as tailored by the Spirit to be like Christ. If Nigerian Christianity is to achieve any meaningful ecumenism, it must adhere to the voice of one Shepherd, who fortunately speaks through one Spirit and not through one ecumenical or ecclesiastical head.

14.According to Turner (1995:140), Stig Hanson pointed 'to a wide interest in the topic in the Greek philosophical world, arguing that, in general, Greek thinking from the pre-Socratics to the first century discerned some type of 'unity' behind the visible diversity of substances and beings that make up our cosmos and into which (according to most schools) they would finally be resolved. If the nature philosophers located this unity in some primordial *substance* or *element* (for Thales it was water; for Anaximenes, air), Heraclitus traced it to *divine fiery flux*, and the Eleatics (Xenophanes, Parmenides) to the highest (aboriginal) *god* – a view developed (in quite different ways) by Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and the neopythagoreans.'

15.'Ecumenism' is used here and in previous mentions as a noun (*oikoumene*) that implies the principle or aim of uniting different branches of the Christian faith. See Hornby (2000:370).

16.Nnebedum (2009:1) speaks on the constant erection and registration of new churches in Nigeria as 'an aberration and a bastardization of what Christianity stands for'. Whilst his opinion emphasises the idea of ecumenism as tailored towards halting further breaking of the already broken walls of Christianity (i.e. the physical multiplication of Christian denominations), he however accepts that Christian unity must strive towards the essentials of Christianity. This is a good example (and indeed a wrong approach) of the concept of ecumenism by viewing the church as a visible entity. No wonder the Roman Catholic Church, which is said to have spearheaded ecumenism in Nigeria, 'has not yet recorded any landmark achievement in this area. And this becomes a big puzzle for her to solve' (Nnebedum 2009:2).

Acknowledgements

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