

DEFORMING REFORMATION: TOWARDS ECUMENICAL PEACE EDUCATION

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Abstract

The study aims at curtailing church division in Christendom set in motion by the 16th century Lutheran Reformation. From the perspective of ecumenism, it sees the reformation as a development that deformed the church through its introduction of secession in the church. The methodology is an analysis of existing information from Christian literature. Poor response to the renewal that Luther wanted to introduce into the church and his later objection to catholic teaching on salvation, indulgence, church authority, the Eucharist and so on constitutes the overview of the reformation in the paper. The paper sees the unity of the trinity, Jesus prayer for the unity of his followers and Pauline teaching on the body of Christ as the biblical background to Christian unity. It depicts the formation of churches that came with the 21st century Pentecostal revival and the current upsurge of ministries as offshoots of injustice and lack of fair hearing similar to that which occasioned the Lutheran reformation. It notes the fact that separating churches spread their doctrines and gain legitimacy through educational campaign. The paper calls attention to the need of an ecumenical peace education for the promotion of Christian unity in the world. It argues that though the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) have made outstanding progress in mobilizing Christians to co-operate and carry out joint actions, their inability to address the traditional division in the church has faulted their ecumenical intent. Finally, the paper advocates ecumenical peace education characterized by inclusion of peace education in school curriculum, online media ecumenical peace education and training of ecumenical peace personnel to serve as agents of peace building among Christians in different localities as the way forward.

Key words: Deforming Reformation and Ecumenical Peace Education

Introduction

The 16th century is one of the eras highly celebrated in Christianity. It saw the birth of a movement that infused new energy into the Church. The movement is that which is commonly referred to as the 'reformation.' The reformation introduced a novelty that led to the birth of new churches, doctrines and leaders in Christendom. Apart from unresolved polemics between Christian religious groups, the crisis that accompanied the reformation led to a large scale war in some parts of Europe. The pogrom in Europe spilled to mission areas in other continents of the world. Different brands of Christianity emerged from the reformers with attending consequences. Today, the unity of the church as the body of Christ is completely lost. Different attempts to restore it seem to be a futile effort. This article title "Deforming Reformation: Towards Ecumenical Peace Education" is another attempt to inspire thought and action that will hopefully lead to concerted effort at restoring the unity of the Church. The study will start with the clarification of important terms. An overview of the reformation will be carried out. The biblical background to Christian unity will be explored. A critical analysis of the deforming reformation and ecumenical peace education will be advanced. The study will end with conclusion and recommendations.

Clarification of Terms

Deforming Reformation

Deforming and reformation are words used side by side to express the division that the Lutheran reformation of the 16th century introduced in the body of Christ, the church. To deform means to deface something, while reformation means bringing about changes in a system. The reformation was a movement that sets out to bring renewal in the catholic practice of Christianity. It was an internal movement championed by a catholic priest to transform his church. Instead of the positive changes that the reformation sets out to bring, it ended up putting in place crises that have introduced an endless circle of church proliferation, thus making it in the context of this paper, a 'deforming reformation.'

Ecumenical Peace Education

The adjective ecumenical presupposes interdenominational initiative that encourages greater cooperation between Christians and their churches. Peace education is an educational system that promotes the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help people either to prevent the occurrence of conflict, resolve conflicts peacefully, or create social conditions conducive to peace (Peace Direct, n.d). "Peace education seeks to change the mindsets with the hope of promoting understanding, respect and tolerance, so that there would be understanding in our differences. Peace

is not the absence of war but the presence of justice” (Laba, 2016). In this study, Ecumenical Peace Education constitutes a teaching and learning program designed to promote peace and unity among Christian groups.

Overview of Reformation

Two great movements gave the 16th century its distinctive identity. The age is reminiscence of the renaissance, a secular movement that emphasizes on the power of reasoning. The renaissance encouraged scholarship in ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. Side by side the renaissance was the Lutheran reformation. It was the first most radical religious movement that brought a twist in the one directional operation of the church.

The reformation was a religious, political, intellectual and cultural upheaval that splintered Catholic Europe, setting in place the structures and beliefs that would define the continent in the modern era. In northern and central Europe, reformers like Martin Luther, John Calvin and Henry VIII challenged papal authority and questioned the Catholic Church's ability to define Christian practice. They argued for a religious and political redistribution of power into the hands of Bible- and pamphlet-reading pastors and princes. The disruption triggered wars, persecutions and the so-called Counter-Reformation, the Catholic Church's delayed but forceful response to the Protestants (History Com Editors, 2021).

Many historians date the start of the Protestant Reformation to the 1517 publication of Martin Luther's “95” Theses (Burton, 2017). The document carried objections to the practice of indulgences (History Com Editors, 2021). The main aim of the Reformation was to purify the church by getting rid of the endemic corruption in some of the practices in the leadership and to promote the belief that the Bible, not tradition, should be the sole source of spiritual authority. Though these ideas were not themselves novel in the church, however, Luther and the other reformers became the first to skillfully use the power of the printing press to give them a wide audience in Europe and later in the whole world (History Com Editors, 2021).

Although Luther hoped to spur renewal from within the Catholic Church, in 1521 he was summoned before the Diet (council) of Worms on trial for heresy under the authority of the (very Catholic) Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. “At that council, the emperor declared Luther to be an outlaw and demanded his arrest” (Burton, 2017). He was excommunicated from the church he has been serving because of his divergent views. Faced with the threat of possible murder, Luther was sheltered by Friedrich, elector of Saxony. Under the care and protection of Friedrich, “Luther translated the Bible into German and continued his output of vernacular pamphlets. When German peasants, inspired in part by Luther's empowering “priesthood of all

believers,” revolted in 1524, Luther sided with Germany's princes. By the Reformation's end, Lutheranism had become the state religion throughout much of Germany, Scandinavia and the Baltics” (History Com Editors, 2021).

Although Luther started the Reformation, he is just one of the many reformers whose legacy lives on in different Protestant traditions. “Switzerland saw the rise of John Calvin (whose own Protestant denomination, Calvinism, bears his name). John Knox founded the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Each denomination of Protestantism had its own specific theology and approach. But not all Protestant reformations were entirely idealistic in nature: King Henry VIII famously established the Church of England, still the state church in that country today, in order to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn” (Burton, 2017).

One thing that is common among early Protestant groups is “Luther's original objections to the Catholic Church — theological ideals” (Burton, 2017). The most important of these ideas is that “salvation happens through faith alone. In other words, nothing — not indulgences, not confession or penance, not even good works — can alter the course of a person's salvation. For Protestants, salvation happens through divine grace received through faith in Jesus Christ” (Burton, 2017). The next idea is “that biblical Scripture, and a person's individual relationship with the Bible, is the most important source of information about God and Christian life. (This is in stark contrast with the Catholic Church, in which a wider body of church teaching and church authority play a major role.)” (Burton, 2017). Today, about “900 million people — 40 percent of Christians — identify as Protestant around the world. Of these, 72 million people — just 8 percent — are Lutherans. But Lutheranism has still come to define much of the Protestant ethos” (Burton, 2017).

Biblical Teaching on Christian Unity

The world unity is neutral until it is given goodness or badness by something else. If Herod and Pilate are unified by their common scorn for Jesus (Luke 23:12), it is not a good unity. But if Paul and Silas sing together in prison for Christ's sake (Acts 16:25), this is a good unity. Therefore, it is never enough to call Christians to have unity. That may be good or bad” (Piper, 2015). Christian unity from the biblical point of view is a together that is built on the praxis of love as exemplified in the oneness of the trinity. Jesus in no way intended his church to be fragmented. Though he foresaw the division, he preached and prayed against it. In the New Testament, the message that “we are one not because of a common polity or a common belief but because we are all Christians” (Macloed, 1985) is clearly spelled out. Jesus in the New Testament expressed the idea of unity in a variety of ways.

We are all members of the body of Christ (1 Cor: 12, 13ff). We are all branches of the vine (John 15:1ff). We are all members of the household of God (Eph. 2: 19). We are all fellow-citizens with the saints (Eph. 2:19). We have all been given to Christ (Jn. 17:24), born again by the Spirit (Jn. 3:3), and indwelt by the triune God (Jn. 14:23). We all have God for our Father (1 Jn. 3:1), Christ for our Shepherd (Jn. 10: 1ff), and the Holy Spirit for our Comforter. This spiritual unity, an undeniable and irreversible fact, constitutes an unconditional obligation. Because we are united at this level, we owe one another, simply as Christians, recognition, assistance, love and co-operation. We have no right to insist on some other condition. We are one in Christ, we may offend against this unity, but we cannot undo it. We only incur the reproach of factiousness and schism (Macloed, 1985).

Jesus willed that the unity of the Church must be a visible and concrete reality. That is what He meant when he prayed "that they all may be one, that the world may believe that Thou hast sent me" (Jn. 17:21). The love Christians are called to express to one another is the one that the world could see and be impressed. This presupposes care for one another (Acts 11:29), co-operation in evangelization (Phil. 1 :5), having the same public assembly (Heb. 10:25), mutual consultation (Acts 15:1ff) and respect for universal church practices (1 Cor. 11 :33ff) (Macloed, 1985).

Deforming Reformation and Ecumenical Peace Education

The formation of new churches on a regular basis to scramble for new members with existing ones has become an entrenched and a seemingly normal practice in the world. The most biting development is the daily claims of prophetic oracles by some so-called men and women of God to induce followers or members to do their biddings. This is accompanied with a gospel that promotes economic prosperity to the denigration of salvation of souls preached by Jesus Christ. The aftermath of this form Christianity is the progression in crimes. This form of counterfeit Christian practice is often traced to the liberation brought about by the Lutheran reformation of the 16th century. From ecumenical binoculars, it will not be wrong to say that the reformation introduced crises that have deformed and not reformed the church as the body of Christ. That is why the title of this paper partly reads, 'deforming reformation.'

To unite Christians and once again chart a divine course of action after the example of Jesus Christ, there is the need for ecumenical peace education.

Peace education is the process of acquiring the values, the knowledge and developing the attitudes, skills, and behaviors to live in harmony with oneself, with others, and with the natural environment. A culture of peace and non – violence goes to the substance of fundamental human rights, social justice, democracy, literacy, respect and dignity for all, international solidarity, respect for worker's rights, children's rights, equality between men and women, cultural identity and diversity, indigenous peoples and minorities rights, the preservation of the natural environment to name some of the more obvious thematic (Iroegbu, 2018).

The reformation and its attending practices were propagated through an educational campaign. The early reformers established schools to teach their doctrines in Europe and mission areas. Since the separation with the Catholic Church was not a peaceful exercise, the educational system was garlanded with stereotypes that planted a culture of hate and violence in both sides of the divide.

For 30 years, Northern Ireland was scarred by a period of deadly sectarian violence known as “the Troubles.” This explosive era was fraught with car bombings, riots and revenge killings that ran from the late 1960s through the late 1990s. The Troubles were seeded by centuries of conflict between predominantly Catholic Ireland and predominantly Protestant England. Tensions flared into violence in the late 1960s, leaving some 3,600 people dead and more than 30,000 injured (Roos, 2021).

To rework the process, there is the need for peace education. Since Christians all trace their roots to Jesus Christ, the study of scriptures in this regard should focus towards unity in Him. This presupposes an ecumenical based biblical education that will unveil and better inform Christians on their oneness and unity in Christ (Iroegbu, 2018).

The fragmentation of the church is due to conflicts that generated over time among Christians and were poorly managed. In some cases, the conflicts assumed a violent dimension. For example, the Assemblies of God leadership crisis in Nigeria led to violent clashes between members in different states of the federation. Some members broke out and formed their churches, while others have migrated to other churches. This development has left behind unhealed historical memories that continue to act against all attempts of Christian unity (Nnochiri, 2018).

The church though preaches justice, is one of the institutions that suppresses and deny fair hearing to its followers, particularly at the hierarchy. The Lutheran

reformation metamorphosed into a movement because Martin Luther was denied a fair hearing. Rather, he was hastily condemned. A similar development led to the spread of the Pentecostal revival of 21st century. Today, different ministries are popping up and are gradually mutating towards becoming church associations in many places. A system that abhors divergent views cannot grow because nothing new is coming inn (Burton, 2017).

Church division started with the ideas in the human mind. It was a process that developed out of dissatisfaction with the existing Christian teaching and practice. The Catholic Church's teaching on indulgence and the corruption that bedeviled the hierarchy was repulsive to Martin Luther. The concentration on church authority to the denigration of the Holy Spirit was an eyesore to the protagonist of the 21st century Pentecostal revival. Some ministries are born out of the Pentecostal system because of abhorrence of the overbearing gospel of economic prosperity. To correct and checkmate division in Christendom, the revolution has to start from the mind (Heinonen, 1990).

Conflict is part of the dialectics or thesis and anti-thesis interaction that leads to growth in every human society. The glory and progress of every system lies in its ability to properly manage conflict and use it as a stepping stone to progress. Perhaps, this calls for an educational system that manages conflict and transforms it to growth. The church seems to undermine such a peace driven educational system. The result is the consistent birth of new and conflicting doctrines and sects in the body of Christ (Iroegbu, 2018).

The Ecumenical movement is a Christian body whose effort is to promote Christian unity. The movement has initiated Christian dialogue that led to the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC), an umbrella body where all churches meet and interact internationally. "At its founding in Amsterdam (Holland) in 1948, the WCC embarked on a journey to deal with many rampant issues at that time such as racism, political and refugee issues in Europe" (Magezi, 2021). It has as its priority the cooperation of churches in fighting against all forms of evil against human dignity and well-being. The evils include threats to social justice and the environment. This means that the organization has less concern for traditional church divisions. "For the WCC, Christian unity is about cooperation and solidarity amongst Christians in issues relevant to Christians around the world" (Magezi, 2021).

In Nigeria, the need for Christian unity led to the formation of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN).

On 27th August 1976 the (then) Federal Military Government, under Gen. Obasanjo invited several Church Leaders of diverse

denominations to Dodan Barracks, Lagos. The Government's sole purpose was to hold a discussion with the Church Leaders, on the National Pledge and the salutation of the National Flag, which the Government intended to introduce into the Nation's Primary and Secondary Schools. The Church Leaders did not object to the introduction of the two items provided and on the condition that reading and reciting the National Pledge and saluting the National Flag would be preceded by the usual Morning Devotions, during which the Staff and the Students of each school worship their Creator and offer Praises and Prayers to Him (CAN, n.d).

Immediately after the meeting the Church Leaders spontaneously decided to go to the Catholic secretariat in Lagos. At a meeting there, they arrived at a decision to form an organization which would provide a forum where they could regularly meet and take joint actions on vital matters (CAN, n.d). Since then, CAN have been able to organize Christians to co-operate in the opposition of government policies that oppresses and downplay their values, carry out joint prayers for the needs of individuals and the nation at large and co-operated in carrying out sensitization and awareness campaign on different diseases. It is the umbrella body for Christian dialogue with government and members of other religions for peaceful co-existence in the country. However, just like the WCC, CAN have not given attention to the traditional division of the church (CAN, n.d).

The WCC and CAN as ecumenical bodies are expected to work towards restoring the organic unity of the church as the body of Christ. However, the proliferation of churches and the inability of Christians to have the same teaching on biblical beliefs and practices shows that the ecumenical movement is yet to make a significant move towards restoring Christian unity (CAN, n.d). The ecumenical movement needs to look in-depth, come up with an educational program and forge an understanding that will bring Christians together. This presupposes a concerted effort to address differences that keep and continue to tear Christians apart. For the ecumenical movement to make a radical break-through, no aspect of Christianity should be left untouched. Thus, ecumenical peace education is a portent that can transform the checkered relationship of Christians through changing the mindset (Heinonen, 1990).

Conclusion

Having discussed the reformation from the perspective of Christian unity, it pertinent to posit the following as a conclusion

- i. The reformation was a renewal that was not tolerated by the leadership of the church. That is why it led to the fractionalization of the body Christ, making it

- the 'deforming reformation.'
- ii. The early reformers used educational campaign to present their ideas. The refusal of the church to address their grievances in an educational debate but rather used power led to the imbroglio that resulted in the Lutheran secession.
 - iii. The WCC and CAN as ecumenical bodies have not given attention to ecumenical peace education. Probably this is one of the reasons for the progression in the formation of new Christian assemblies.

Recommendations

The following suggestion suffices as the way forward in the study.

- i. WCC and CAN should train specialists on peace education. Their services as agents of ecumenical peace building and conflict resolution will hopefully help in addressing the differences that keep dividing the church.
- ii. Since most of the conflicts in the world often reflect religious coloration, ecumenical peace education should be made part of the school curriculum at all levels of education in the country.
- iii. The media seems to be the strongest world power that is why it is the target of every ideology and system. WCC and CAN should create online media hubs for addressing differences among Christian through an educational peace process.

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