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The Encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan Woman in John 4: 1-42: A Model for Christian Ecumenical Dialogue

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Abstract

The text of John 4 reveals basic principles for Christian ecumenical dialogue. These include recognition of the affinity between Jews and Samaritans in spite of their differences. There is in the exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, an acknowledgment of the peculiarity of their differences and a reciprocal respect for the distinctiveness of their positions. The encounter thus becomes a hermeneutical meeting of the Samaritan's horizon and the Jewish horizon and thus challenges their individual self understanding by enhancing a creative tension which calls for the openness and courage to accept a new self-understanding. The dialogue underscores the essential nature of God and of the worship he deserves against the religious separation inherent in the two parties' emphasis on places of worship and things which though

transient tend to be responsible for the division. This work is an analysis of the text of John 4:1-42 which concludes with the identification of the similarity between the 'Jewish-Samaritan divide' and the relationship between Christian churches in Nigeria. It recommends that for a sincere communion between churches the Trinitarian and Christocentric origin of Christianity must be emphasized above the differences of individual churches. Analysis

1. Introduction

The first statement on Christian unity was made by Jesus himself in John 17; it serves as one the principal pronouncements by the initiator of Christianity on ecumenism. Christ was conscious of possible divisions among his followers and thus acknowledged the threat of division as a possibility in human interrelationship. Christians must therefore not be destabilized by their divisions; rather each communion is called to work towards overcoming them as Christ did with the Samaritans in John 4:4-42. Overcoming division is therefore one of the obvious avenues for Christians to live out their Gospel values.

Important contributions have been made in the interpretation of John 4 but previous scholarly discussions have not specifically assessed its relevance for ecumenical dialogue. In the light of the challenges of ecumenical questions in our locality and in the Christendom a survey of the dialogue in John 4 seems warranted. The text addresses the historical conflict that existed between the Jews and the Samaritans and shows how Jesus considered overcoming it an urgent task and worked towards making it less of a stumbling block to the manifestation of his Messiahship.

This paper identifies the ecumenical dimensions of the text and proposes them for today's Christian ecumenical dialogue. It begins by reviewing the basic religious and theological differences between the Samaritans and the Jews as background study for an understanding of the text, analyzes the passages of the text relevant to the subject of ecumenism and discusses its ecumenical character in the light of how Christian unity can be fostered as an engagement among churches who believe in the Triune God and confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

2. Samaritan-Jew Relationship

Relations between the Samaritans and Jews were complex and thorny before and during the time of Christ. The Samaritans are the people said to have inhabited Samaria in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Samaria was located in the New Testament times between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south. Though the name as indicated is a designation for the inhabitants of Samaria those identified as Samaritans associate their names over and against the geographical labelling with the term *šamērîm* “keeper [of the law].”¹ Josephus however sustains that the label Samaritan is Greek.² The Samaritans sustain that they are descendants of the Israelites of the Northern Kingdom from the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh who survived the Assyrian destruction of Samaria and the deportation in 722 B.C.E. The Jewish version in 2 Kings 17 describes the Samaritans as the descendants of foreigners brought by the Assyrian king Shalmaneser to settle in the region of Samaria as replacements for the Northern Israelites deported to Assyria. A more objective view on the origin of the Samaritans implies that they are predominantly

¹ R. J. Coggins, *Samaritans and Jews* (Atlanta: Westminster John Knox Press 1975), 10-12.

² Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 9: 277-291.

offspring of intermarriages between the Northern Israelites who survived the Assyrian deportation of 722 B.C.E. and foreign deportees from the Mesopotamian regions.

a. Summary of Basic Religious and Theological Differences

The basic religious and theological differences between the Samaritans and the Jews can be summarized thus: the Samaritans do not recognize the Jerusalem temple as the proper place for the worship of Yahweh. They insist that it was at Gerizim that Joshua built the first tabernacle when Israel entered Palestine and Gerizim remained the centre of all Israelite worship until the renegade priest Eli set up a rival sanctuary at Shiloh creating thus two sanctuaries and two priesthoods. The actions of Eli laid the foundation for the religious division.³ They therefore see Judaism as an extension of the heresy of Eli through Samuel, Saul, David, the Judean Monarchy and Ezra with the rival cult moving from Shiloh the first venue for the illegality or counterfeit sanctuary to Jerusalem.⁴ They pride themselves as the preservers of the authentic ancient Israelite faith traceable to the pre-monarchical practice at Schechem.

The Jews on the other hand regard Samaritanism as a heresy derived from the corrupt worship of Yahweh mixed up with the worship of the foreign gods brought into Samaria by the foreign settlers during the Assyrian deportations. They avoid contact with the Samaritans for fear of ritual contamination and thus do not use vessels or dishes used by the Samaritans. They are not allowed into

³ J. McDonald, *The Theology of the Samaritans*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 17.

⁴ W. A. Brindle, "The Origin and History of the Samaritans," *Grace Theological Journal* 5, no.1 (Spring), 53.

the inner court of the Jerusalem Temple and marriages with them are forbidden.

The Samaritans hold to the priestly line of Phinehas who is of the Eleazar family and insist on it as the authentic line of priesthood traceable to Levi against that of Eli (a descendant of Ithamar) who, out of jealousy, used his riches to snatch the high priesthood away from the young legitimate incumbent Uzzi.⁵ They claim to be the more faithful observers of the Torah and in possession of the more authentic wordings of the Torah against the adulterated versions of the Jews. They claim to be the true children of Israel while the Jews insist they are not Jews.

In spite of the differences it is to be noted that the Samaritans are Israelites, and with the Jews worship Yahweh, regard the Pentateuch as sacred and observe the Torah. Like in Judaism they believe in the coming of the Messiah (as expressed in John 4:25) identified as “the Restorer,” a prophet linked to the tribe of Levi based on Deut 18:15. The two groups are brothers and worshipers of the same Yahweh but with walls of bitterness erected on both sides Samaritans and Jews make it evident that “it is not the person from the radically different culture on the other side of the world that is hardest to love, but the nearby neighbor whose skin color, language, rituals, values, ancestry, history, and customs are different from one’s own.”⁶ McKenzie remarks that “there was no deeper breach of human relations in the contemporary world than the feud of Jews and Samaritans, and the breadth and depth

⁵ J. D. Purvis, *The Samaritan Pentateuch and the Origin of the Samaritan Sect* 88. n. 1. (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1968).

⁶ Hatred between Jews and Samaritans <http://www.bible.org/illustration/hatred-between-jews-and-samaritans>/accessed 03/04/14.

of Jesus' doctrine of love could demand no greater act of a Jew than to accept a Samaritan as a brother."⁷

3. John 4:1-42 as a Dialogue

John 4:1-42 is a combination of narratives and discourses which involve principally Jesus and the Samaritan woman (4:1-26), Jesus and his disciples (4:27, 31-38), the Samaritan woman and her co-Samaritans of Sychar (4:28-30), and finally Jesus and the Samaritans in general (4:39-42). The composition of the text runs thus:

- 1-7a Narrative: Departure for Galilee and Geographical sketch or location
- 7b-15 Dialogue: On Water/Estrangement between Samaritans and Jews, and the Identification of Jesus as greater than Jacob
- 16-19 Dialogue: On Husband and the Identification of Jesus as a Prophet
- 20-26 Dialogue: On the Place of Worship and the Identification of Jesus as the Messiah.
- 27 Narrative: Scandal of breaking the wall between women and men.
- 28-30 Narrative: Discipleship of the Woman as the first apostle to the Samaritans.
- 31-38 Dialogue: On Discipleship and Mission
- 39-42 Narrative: On the Effect of the Dialogue

For the purpose of this paper attention is paid on aspects of the dialogue that are ecumenically oriented under the headings Dialogue on Living Water and the Estrangement between Samaritans and Jews and Dialogue on the Authentic Place of worship.

⁷J. L. Mckenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965), 766.

a. Dialogue on Living Water and the Estrangement between Samaritans and Jews 7b-15

Jesus is located in a Samaritan down as he journeys towards Galilee (vv. 1-7a). The detail on his return from Jerusalem to Galilee in relation to Samaria underscores the fact that pilgrims journeying between Galilee and Jerusalem were more inclined to use the shorter route through Samaria. But strict Jews like the Pharisees preferred the longer route up the Jordan valley through the Bethshan gap in order to avoid contact with any Samaritan town.⁸ The impersonal verb *dei* in v. 4 implies the divine necessity associated with the mission of Jesus (see John 3:7,14,30; 9:4; 10:16) and thus underscores the inevitability of Jesus' journey through Samaria. The identification of Sychar with the field Jacob gave to Joseph and the well of Jacob indicates the Israelite patrimony of and link to the area called Samaria and of its inhabitants (see Gen 33:19; 48:22; Joshua 24:32).

“Give Me a Drink”

At the end of the geographic details Jesus is described in section 7b-15 as wearied and therefore in need of assistance; his journey to the well recalls Jacob's journey in Gen 29:2. The request to the Samaritan woman for water is an acknowledgment of the fact that though an adversary the Samaritan possesses that which Jesus, a Jew on the other camp necessarily requires but may not get if their differences are not overcome. The gesture thus becomes on the part of Jesus, as a Jew, an overcoming of the human-made barrier to acquire the most essential element of life which supersedes the divide in value, and an overture which engages the woman, places her in a privileged

⁸ L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, revised edn 1995), 226.

position to offer that which her rival is in dire need of. It turns her into an interlocutor by offering her an opportunity to express herself in a manner that reveals her prejudices as a Samaritan and that of Jesus as a Jew. It was unacceptable for Jews to speak with or have dealings with Samaritans on the one hand, and on the other hand, public conversations with women were under strict rabbinic regulations. The action of Jesus thus becomes an invitation for a dialogue and goes contrary to two socio-religious divides of his time. While the second contravention is highlighted by the reaction of the disciples in v. 27 the first which requires using the Samaritan's utensil is typified in the statement of the woman in 9b "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" and the commentary of the author in 9c "for Jews have no dealings with Samaritans." The statement expresses the schism that exists between the two groups as discussed above and recalls the events of the Assyrian deportation, and especially the consequent Jewish refusal to recognize the Samaritans as Jews. It thus represents the gesture of Jesus as unconventional and eccentric and therefore of religious significance to the fourth evangelist who records the encounter.

"If you knew the Gift of God..."

The reply of Jesus with the emphatic 'you' used of the woman implies that the divide has made it impossible for the Samaritan to recognize the gift of God, the possessor of the gift and dispenser of the living water that procures eternal life (v.14b) which the faith of both communities look forward to. Ordinarily the term 'living water' would mean fresh, running water or life-giving water. The second is implied here; the living water which is something associated with Yahweh in the OT (Jer 2:13; 17:13) is the Holy Spirit (John 7:38-39) and the teaching of Jesus himself. It reflects the new life proper to the activity of the Spirit which Jesus as the Messiah gives.

The message underscores the damaging consequences of the schism; the rupture has become a brick wall that impedes the Samaritans' disposition to recognize the presence of the God in whose name they and the Jews differ, the new life he makes available to them as a gift, and consequently the spontaneity in recognizing their status as a people in need and praying hitherto for their needs. That divine presence and his gift is Jesus himself, greater in the Johannine irony than Jacob and the prophets, the Messiah whose presence is almost going to elude the Samaritans because of their bickering with the Jews.

“Are you greater than Jacob...?”

The woman takes the message of Jesus at its face value (v.11); she misunderstands ‘living water’ as fresh running water and thus makes a logical and material judgment on the impossibility of Jesus providing such running water (see John 2:20). She however, acknowledges that providing it amounts to a miracle and places Jesus in a position greater than Jacob (v. 12) who according to tradition in the Targums of Genesis 28 did something similar at Haran.⁹ The introduction of her question with the interrogative *mē* implies a negative response (cf. John 8:53) and reflects another Johannine irony which in the knowledge of the evangelist and of his readers means a confession that Jesus is greater than Jacob and is the true well of Israel. The question therefore pairs with the subject of Abraham in John 8:53 to affirm the Johannine theme of Jesus' superiority to the great forebears of traditional Jewish religion of Samaritanism and Judaism and therefore constitutes a point of convergence for the two religious communities. The two sets of comparison with the Patriarchs which come from Jews and Samaritans

⁹ J. Neyrey, “Jacob Tradition and the Interpretation of John 4:20-26,” *CBQ* 41, no. 3 (July), 1979, 421-423.

respectively equally prove the common heritage of the two communities for which their division appears absurd. The superiority of Jesus is further elaborated in the contrast between the water from the well of Jacob and the water Jesus gives (vv. 13-14). The water from Jacob assuages thirst only for a while but that of Jesus lasts forever. This contrast implies a supplant; Jesus is not only superior to Jacob, he also supplants Jacob and the other ancestors of the Jewish faith (in relation to God's gift and revelation) with a new gift, a new revelation, a new covenant, and a new cult that overcomes the divide between Jews and Samaritans and brings together the two brothers.

“Sir, give me this water that I may not thirst...”

The insistent engagement in dialogue thus gradually lowers the wall of the schism and reveals to the woman that she too is in need and must be ready to make a request by overcoming the division if she must satisfy her needs. It turns the woman who was initially the possessor into the person in need and thus provides her with the impetus and humility to make a genuine request (v. 15). She becomes the enthusiastic needy who is not equally shy to break social and religious conventions by in turn asking to be given the 'living water' (v. 15b). It proves the reciprocity of human existence and the fact that humankind needs the other; entering into a relationship is an imperative if existence must be realized and effort must be made to remove every obstacle to this interaction. One may be thinking here of the "I-thou" supposition of Martin Buber. The dialogue which earlier revealed Jesus to the Samaritan as greater than Jacob now reveals him as possessing something she needs, he is therefore not just a thirsty journeying and boastful Jew but a person with a gift, and only the readiness to engage him makes this discovery possible. But again she fails to understand and grasp the spiritual sense of Jesus' 'living water' by remaining still at

the category of physical taste (v. 15c). Ironically, she makes a genuine request for a misconceived motive. There is still incomprehension which keeps her and Jesus at parallel levels and therefore the need for further clarifications. This recurring theme of misunderstanding consequent on double meaning is a Johannine literary feature of “double entendre” which emphasizes dialogue as a means for clearing misunderstanding and enhancing proper knowledge (John 3:3-10). The dialogue thus clarifies terms and roles, clears misunderstanding, manifests the relevance of each party and reveals to the parties involved their weak and optimal points and thus reverses and properly establishes roles and positions.

The gradual revelation of the identity of Jesus is further underscored by the ‘dialogue on husband’ (vv. 16-19); the demonstration of perception and insight by Jesus thus leads to the Samaritan woman’s appreciation of him as a prophet (v. 19) who sees and knows all things (see John 1:48-50; 2:24). Her recognition of Jesus as a prophet expressed with the emphatic *ei su* is a step towards a Christological confession.

b. Dialogue on the Authentic Place of Worship John 4:20-26

This section of the discourse is the *crux interpretum* of the text and the basis for the new found role of the Samaritan woman in the enhancement of a dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritans. The woman introduces the very controversial theological subject which stands at the basis of the division between Samaritanism and Judaism about the mount of worship (v. 20). The phrase ‘this mountain’ refers to Mount Gerizim. It raises the question of the genuine place of worship: is it Mount Gerizim where the Samaritan shrine is located or Jerusalem where the temple

is. The proposition recalls the squabbles about rebuilding the Jerusalem temple at the return of the people of Judah from the Babylonian exile, the destruction of the Samaritan temple in 128 BCE by John Hyrcanus the Jewish ruler and the desecration of the Jerusalem temple in AD 6 by the Samaritans. These were events which initiated and deepened the religious schism between the two groups.

“Our fathers worshipped on this Mountain...”

Many scholars have considered this engaging and fundamental remark as an attempt by the Samaritan woman to shift the attention of Jesus away from her private moral life which appears disgraceful.¹⁰ This is an understanding based especially on interpretation of the multiplicity of husbands solely as an indictment and therefore oblivious of the dimension of levirate marriage custom (see Deut 25:5-10, and Gen 38 on Tamar). The Samaritan woman’s discourse on place of worship is consequent primarily on her perception of Jesus as a Jewish prophet (v.19) who she presumes would be in a position to give an objective assessment of the problem and provide an authoritative and decisive response to it. The comment is intense; it reflects the state of the relations between the Samaritans and the Jews, and addressing the problem is of primary importance in any attempt at healing the divide between the two groups. By introducing it, the apparently insignificant Samaritan woman is not insensitive to the difficult relations, which were obvious to all Samaritans and Jews. It is a courageous and credible gesture on her part to raise the controversial subject; it represents her appreciation of Jesus’ desire to cross the boundary which she had earlier cautioned in v. 9 and her new disposition to equally align

¹⁰ R. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-XII*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 177; R. Kysar *John*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1986), 66 ; L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 236.

with Jesus and break that human-made wall. Her observation is equally a taking of position as she indicates by her estimation that the Jews are wrong to insist on Jerusalem as the authentic worship site against mount Gerizim.

“...Neither on this Mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.”

The response of Jesus is totally unexpected: “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father” (v. 21). He speaks of the future as the prophet who the woman thinks he is. ‘The hour;’ *ōra* refers to the Messianic age (5:25-28) when the basis of worship for which the conflict between the two ensues will be realized and an end is put to the choice of location. It makes less sense therefore to quarrel over where worship should take place because it is not essential to the content of worship which is the Father. The Father is more important and attention should be paid on him rather than on the site. Jesus makes a distinction between the essential and the functional or serviceable in religion; it is the functional elements which make for disagreement while the essential unites and when attention is paid to the content (essential) then the division will be overcome. Worship sites are useful, they anticipate in the moment the coming hour of the Messiah; they are serviceable but not indispensable, they must help make visible the object of worship rather than overshadow it. Jesus considers both the Jewish and the Samaritan categories irrelevant and thus makes little sense of the disagreement and renders it nonexistent and unnecessary. In other words; on this issue, “we the Jews are wrong and you the Samaritans are equally wrong.” This declaration by Jesus is entirely unorthodox of a Jew, but the woman’s disposition to engage Jesus on the subject has made it possible to de-escalate and dislodge the tension. The

dialogue identifies the ‘hour’ of the Messiah and the expectation of that ‘age’ as a guide on worship and offers the acceptance of the Messiah as the moment of genuine spiritual union bereft of division (v. 23).

“You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know...”

For the first time in the dialogue Jesus employs the category of distinction between the two groups which the Samaritan had utilized earlier in vv. 9 and 20 and depicts himself emphatically as representing the Jews. The second person plural ‘you’ (v. 22a) addresses the Samaritans represented by the woman while the first person plural ‘we’ (22a) depicts the Jews represented by Jesus. The representational dynamism of the dialogue is thus underscored, and the distinctiveness of its participants as envoys of recognized institutions of unique identities revealed. While in v. 21 Jesus first of all acknowledges the inadequacies of the positions of both institutions; Jews and Samaritans, in v. 22a he points out on the one hand the insufficiency of the content of the Samaritan worship and on the other the veracity/integral dimension of the Jewish worship. Thus is evidenced the benign exchange of punches proper to a genuine dialogue; just as in her observation the woman indicated what she thought was the error of the Jews (v.9) Jesus now criticizes the positions of the Samaritans. The inadequacy of the Samaritan worship is consequent on the limitation of its Scripture to only the Pentateuch, while the veracity of the Jewish worship is identified with the wholeness of its Scripture within which information on the expected salvation is traced from the Law to the Prophets where it is vigorously anticipated and laid out. Salvation thus comes from the Jews (22b) because the Messiah which is going to be accepted by the Samaritans is traced to Judah (Israel) and thus God’s chosen people. Rejecting alignment with the Jews would

therefore amount to “rejecting God’s offer of salvation” in the Messiah.¹¹

The ‘Now’ of the Messiah and the Spiritual Worship

The anticipated change in conventional worship defined by place in v. 21 has come in the ‘eschatological present’ where true worship is no longer about place as it was misconceived but about God as Spirit (v. 24); consequently, worship must take place in spirit and in truth (vv. 23-24). The conflict about worship site is influenced by the concept of a God who is localized and confined to a particular place and people but the ‘hour of the messiah’ outdoes this by the new worship which is a spiritual share in the God who is present to all. The “and now is” of the hour which Jesus pronounces in v. 23 is an in-breaking of the eschatological future which transforms the ordinary present into an eschatological present. It speaks of Jesus no longer as a prophet but as a Messiah (v. 25). The woman’s observation about the Messiah reflects the traditional Jewish and Samaritan eschatological expectation of the Messiah. It pushes the ‘eschatological present’ again to the future, but Jesus insists that it is now; “I am the one speaking to you” (v.26). The ‘I am’ is here, and thus fulfils the joint expectation and inaugurates and confirms the era of unity and nullifies the division consequent on the abrogated worship paradigms.

The Convergence

The Woman’s response to this apparently still uncertain revelation is a return to her hometown as witness through whom that which was originally impossible becomes

¹¹ G. R. O’Day, “The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* vol. 9, ed. Lender E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 568.

possible. The Samaritans come to meet Jesus and invite him to remain with them (30, 40). ‘Staying with’ means to enter into a relationship with and interact with him; the two days of Jesus’ stay with the Samaritans imply further dialogue and the breaking of the wall of division (41). Her mission to the town brings the townspeople to Jesus so that the social barrier is finally broken and the Gospel is brought to the Samaritans. They accept that salvation comes from the Jews in the person of Jesus (a Jew found at the well of Jacob) and make a Christological confession by acknowledging Jesus as the Saviour of the World. The woman thus becomes the first apostle to the Samaritans (28-30, 39-42). Just as the first disciples she left her things and went to announce the news; having thought she had discovered the Christ. The coming of Jesus to the well thus becomes a journey in search of a Samaritan interlocutor who upon recognition of Jesus as the Messiah in the dialogue becomes a witness. And as a witness she facilitates the healing of the division and makes true worship of Yahweh possible.¹²

The Samaritans are convinced by the reinterpretation of Judaism and worship by Jesus and are converted to the new Religion of Jesus (v. 42). He explains to them what it properly means to worship. Because of Jesus’ style, they have become convinced of the irrelevance of their disagreement on the place of worship; they are convinced that salvation does not depend on the place of worship but on Christ and his teachings and must be distinguished from the externals. Like their Jewish brothers they had expected the Christ; his coming reveals their lapses and the undue emphasis from both camps on the place of worship. The expectation of the Messiah which is the obvious area of convergence for the two on which dialogue is initiated

¹² G. R. O’Day, “The Gospel of John,” 565.

becomes also the source for the reconciliation of and a reconciler of their differences.

In relation to the title of this paper this section constitutes the primary link between John 4:1-42 and the theme of Christian ecumenical dialogue. It is the climax or culmination of the progressive revelation of Jesus to the Samaritan woman on which the Samaritans become convinced and confess their belief in him as the Messiah and thus accept salvation as coming from the Jews. The progressive revelation which started first as a 'mendicant boastful Jew, 'greater than Jacob' and a 'prophet' now arrives at Jesus' identification as 'the Messiah.'

4. The Ecumenical Models of the Dialogue in John 4:4-42

Clarification of Concepts: The discourse in John 4 is not a dialogue between Samaritanism and Christianity; Jesus was not a Christian but a practising Jew. It is therefore a dialogue between a Samaritan and a Jew on authentic Judaism over the place of worship, their Scripture, the expectation of the Messiah, their socio-cultural and religious divide and the practising of charity as a thoroughfare across the unessential or in-existent but insistent barrier. I prefer therefore to consider it more as a dialogue that provides impetus to today's ecumenical dialogue without of course negating its contribution to interreligious dialogue. On a lighter note however, it is possible that among the communions that come under Christianity dialogue with some may even translate into interreligious discussion given the gradual gap and enormous disparities that are arising which may prompt the question, are we dealing with Christianity or African traditional religion clothed in Christianity. Some of the models or incentives provided by the pericope on

ecumenical dialogue are discussed under the following headings.

a. Jesus Christ: the Motive for Unity

The discussion in John 4 comes to a climax in the confession of Jesus as the Saviour of the world by the Samaritans and therefore their acceptance of Jesus. The expected Messiah heals the divide between the two groups and brings unity. Jesus Christ is thus the basis for unity and not division and challenges all forms of division among Christians. It is therefore not out of place for the Church document on Christian unity (*Unitatis Redintegratio*) to identify the call for unity as Trinitarian and Christocentric.¹³ Christians have an obligation to come together and avoid pronouncements and actions that emphasize and divide them because they all “invoke the Triune God and confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour.”¹⁴

b. Charity and the Taking of Initiative

The basis for the dialogue is the request for water; charity which when practised would sense the urgency to provide for the other as a necessity that supersedes all forms of differences. The request itself is an acknowledgement of the inter-relatedness of the humankind accentuated even in modern times by the philosophy of existential personalism in its emphasis on the value of the human person and the primacy of interpersonal relationship. It is an invitation to share the treasures of life which are the rights of all humans by overcoming misunderstandings and divisions. Every request for help is and remains an invitation for a dialogue

¹³ K. Whitehead, *The New Ecumenism* (Staten Island, NY: Society of St. Paul, 2009), 30.

¹⁴ Second Vatican Council Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* (November 21, Rome, 1964), no. 1

and the giving of help is a self-communication which indicates the readiness to engage in a dialogue. It is an acknowledgment of the need to enter into consistent enriching and life-giving relationships with the other. It thus recognizes and proposes joint efforts on the part of Christian Churches to alleviate poverty and create a better friendly and peaceful world as possible avenues for unity and the promotion of Gospel values. Charity is Christian and “whatever is truly Christian is never contrary to what genuinely belongs to the faith; indeed, it can always bring a deeper realization of the mystery of Christ and the Church.”¹⁵ If unity must be encouraged and dialogue sustained the Church must always be ready to take advantage of every occasion to make the first approach towards other Christians.

In Nigeria, the fact that the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) was hatched at the Catholic Secretariat in Lagos is a positive response to this challenge to take the initiative. It was founded on 27 August 1976 after a meeting of Church leaders with the then Military Head of State General Obasanjo on the introduction of the Nigerian pledge and salutation of the Nigerian flag in schools. Its aim was to “provide a forum where they (the churches) could regularly meet together and take joint actions on vital matters; especially on issues which affect the Christian faith and the welfare of the generality of Nigerians.”¹⁶

The association has contributed towards fostering Christian unity through joint charitable projects that have helped to better the situations of Nigerians thereby making the Gospel option for the needy a reality. It has worked towards getting the government of Nigeria to review the perennial Moslem-Christian conflict as credible

¹⁵ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 4

¹⁶ Christian Association of Nigeria <http://www.cannigeria.org>

interlocutor on Christian-Moslem coexistence. But as the basis for its establishment reveals, CAN emerged as a Christian political platform for the balance of power in Nigeria rather than a body established essentially for the fostering of Christian ecumenical dialogue. This apparently explains a certain perceived lack of coordinated ecumenical discussions at the level of CAN and on the other hand its fair share of internal struggle among members for leadership and political recognition in government. There is the tendency consequently that the Catholic Church may be tempted to gradually withdraw its commitment to the Association given especially its lack of neutrality on matters of partisan politics and governance, but care must be taken because the events of the Lausanne conference showed that all must be pro-active.¹⁷

There is therefore the need among the churches to establish a body of theologians to take charge of ecumenical discussions aimed at fostering understanding and appreciation of different positions among churches. The Catholic Church has the opportunity to take the initiative today. A part of the reasons why churches continue to multiply is connected with the problem of unemployment; if Christian churches dedicate quality time together on finding solution to poverty and unemployment the atmosphere for genuine interactions and relationship would emerge and the seed of understanding and tolerance would be sown.

c. Uniqueness of the Parties

It is pertinent to acknowledge areas of differences, the distinctiveness of the parties, and not understand

¹⁷ B. Leeming, "Ecumenical Movement" in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* vol. 5, ed. William McDonald (Washington DC: Catholic University of America, 1967), 96-97.

ecumenism as attempt to win the other over, rather an effort among and between Christians to acknowledge and respect the position of the other. Since dialogue cannot take place in a vacuum, there must be a taking of position. It is perhaps this need to come to the table of dialogue with a position and not be indifferent that informs the Church's primary document on ecumenism to make her most insistent traditional claim to being 'the one, true, Church of Christ.'¹⁸ The taking of position therefore offers each party the opportunity to express itself by providing a detailed explanation of its teachings and doctrines with clarity and highlight therewith the distinctiveness of its communion. These are precisely the implications of the observations of the woman in the dialogue regarding the social divide and the disagreement about place of worship. They are equally the implications of the consequent replies of Jesus for which he insists on the veracity of the Jewish worship and the Jews being in possession of the prerogative of salvation.

d. The need for an Imminent Internal Renewal

Jesus acknowledges the inconsequentiality of worship site sustained by both Jews and Samaritans. He reiterates at the same time that Jews worship that which is true, and possess the prerogative of salvation. His position underscores the occasional inconsistencies that sometime exist between that which is fundamentally authentic Judaism and that which comes from the actions of individual Jews who in their practise of Judaism very often exaggerate, misinterpret and cause division. This is primarily his admission of the excesses of his own people the Jews and therefore the need for an imminent internal renewal which he calls for and represents in his teachings and actions. For the internal renewal to take place we must (in the words of the founder

¹⁸ *Unitatis Redintegratio* no. 3.

of the Society of the Sacred Mission at the 'First Preliminary World Conference on Faith and Order) "be prepared to face new questions, not only in regard to the views of others which we have not studied, but even in regard to our own, however carefully we may have thought them out."¹⁹ The Church possesses the revealed truth and is assisted by grace, but the actions of its members in relation to this truth and grace may enhance division and impede reconciliation. Like Jesus whose presence constitutes the proper understanding and externalization of the prerogative of the Jews in relation to the Samaritans, ecumenical dialogue challenges us Catholics to continually assess and identify our areas of exaggeration and even insufficiencies, amend them and live out the Gospel with the hope that the radiance of the Church's image becomes clearer to others on the other side of the divide.

e. The Imperative of Dialogue

Dialogue is one word that has constituted and enriched the global dictionary. It has shaped the world we live in today, and has reduced the frequency of conflicts and wars; where it is genuinely appreciated and utilized, positive results have emerged. Even the UN as today's symbol for peace was constituted at the International Community's recognition of the imperative of dialogue. What it has not achieved and the length of time it takes to achieve it and even the lives lost for awaiting its results must not discourage people from embracing it because that which is spent to construct it is nothing compared to its achievements. Dialogue is therefore essential equally in the

¹⁹ H. Kelly, "The Object and Method of Conference," in *The World Conference for the Consideration of Questions Touching Faith and Order* (Gardiner, ME: Protestant Episcopal Church, 1915), 11 in Bradford Hinze, *Practice of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2006), 181.

achievement of Christian understanding; it means ‘remaining with’ against the prevention ‘to enter’ recorded in Luke 9:53 and indicates an essential dimension in faith sharing (see Acts 10:48). It implies sitting together, interaction with, entering into a relationship with the other and enjoying the hospitality of the other. It affords an atmosphere where truths in terms of criticisms are prudently told in charity without any intention to offend. What Hinze describes as “the ability to express criticism without sowing bitterness (which) can be a sign and test of the mutual trust established in dialogue.”²⁰ This is the meaning of the time spent between Jesus and the Samaritan woman and above all the consensual invitation ‘to stay with’ the Samaritans.

Ecumenical dialogue therefore means ‘staying with’ to discuss Christian unity. There must be the readiness to stay with, to be asked to stay with; there must be effort on the part of the initiator to appeal to the appreciative disposition of the other to be asked to stay (exactly what Jesus did). It is therefore essential in ecumenical dialogue to make the environment conducive so that it will be easy to make the move and ask the other to stay and accept the invitation to stay. But how is this staying together going to be possible when the tone of present day preaching of the Gospel in Nigeria is that of antagonism towards the other churches and when many of the churches, as John Cardinal Onaiyekan notes, are not interested in ecumenism.²¹ The first step towards ecumenism as dialogue is the invitation on the part of Christian churches to abandon advertisement as preaching and see preaching as an explanation of the

²⁰ B. Hinze, *Practice of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church*, 181.

²¹ J. Onaiyekan, “The Phenomenon of Pentecostalism in Contemporary Nigeria” in *Seeking Common Grounds: Inter-Religious Dialogue in Africa*, The Collected Writings vol. 1, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa 2013), 134.

contents of the *kerygma*. Preach the essential content of the Gospel and not the other church. The essence of the antagonism is because the principal desire for the existence of churches appears to be the desire to acquire members by any means; founders therefore prefer to blackmail other churches so that their members may be taken over.

Encounter amounts to staying with, staying with implies friendliness. A friendly atmosphere must therefore be created. The step which may be considered an achievement in the Nigerian Christian ecumenical dialogue will then be a dialogue on how to change the attitudes of churches towards other churches which very often reflect in homilies and monographs. Another important task is controlling the reduplication of churches by collaborating to set certain conditions for the founding of churches. The constant split is in itself an obstacle to ecumenical dialogue because it makes it difficult to identify a discussion partner.

f. Dialogue as Proclamation

Dialogue itself is a form of evangelization; it prepares the ground for the *kerygma* among those who have never been informed of Christ and his Gospel. In ecumenism, dialogue becomes a vehicle for re-evangelization understood as a re-education, on the Gospel message among Christians, meant to make clearer and distinct each communion's understanding of Christ in its doctrine and worship. It can in this context become, above all, an occasion for sincere clarifications on the truth about Christ, his message, his Church and Christianity with the aim of effecting transformation, renewal and even shifting of grounds. It does become equally a moment for proclamation in the manner in which Jesus explains to the Samaritans the correctness of worship in Judaism and the Jewish prerogative of salvation: Salvation is from the Jews (John

4:22). It entails the prudence to explain in charity to the other the excesses of its communion, the humility to accept such observations, the courage to proclaim the truth of one's conviction with the desire to convince without forcing with the hope that all is possible with the same Christ. This is the position encouraged in inter-religious dialogue but which is not in any manner out of place in ecumenical dialogue.²²

5. Conclusion

The divide between the Samaritans and the Jews reveals the division that exists between Christians. Just as Jesus a Jew was able to rise above the differences and make it possible for the Samaritans to meet and profess faith in the Messiah, Christians can, with renewed emphasis on and an authentic imitation of Jesus overcome their differences and work together on the promotion of Gospel values. These values imply denouncing pronouncements, judgments and activities that tend to provide half truths about the others and represent them unfairly. Working together implies inter-church relations which can only be born out of dialogue. Jesus' representation of the motive for the division as unessential underscores equally that Christian communions are divided by their insistent emphasize on the accidentals. These misplaced emphases and disagreements on the unessential tend to de-emphasize the fundamental Christian common Trinitarian and Christocentric patrimony. When attention is turned towards recognition of these common elements of the Christian faith in a genuine, prudent and patient dialogue then the gap between Christian communions would be bridged

²² Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientation on Inter-Religious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (May 19, 1991), Rome, no. 77.

and the journey towards authentic union and the hope for better understanding and collaboration renewed.

Like the Samaritans and Jews who worshipped the same God and expected the coming of the Messiah, Christians expect the second coming of the Messiah. The 'eschatological present' of the Messiah leads to the Samaritans' acceptance of the Jews in the person of Jesus. The complete oneness among Christians in terms of unity without diversity is for the 'eschatological future' when in his second coming, the Messiah will be present as Lord. While that is being expected and anticipated efforts must be lavished on ecumenical dialogue as the basis for working together in unity amidst diversity. In other words, ecumenical movement as dialogue is an imperative for the Christian communions because it encourages initiatives and activities planned and undertaken according to the various needs of the different churches.²³ It constitutes consequently the vehicle for promoting and achieving unity in diversity while expecting the eschatological age of complete unity without diversity.

²³ *Unitatis Redintegratio* no. 4.