

# TOWARDS BRIDGING ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS DIVIDES IN NIGERIA: EXEGETICO-HERMENEUTICAL APPLICATION OF GAL.3:26-29



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## **Abstract**

*Nation building is the primary target of every nation especially, the developing states. To achieve this goal effectively, the collaborative effort of every citizen is required. It is obvious that Nigeria is a heterogeneous society with multi-ethnic groups and religious affiliations. The peculiarities of each ethnic group and religious ideology as unique as they appear, if properly harnessed and harmonized could foster nation building. Observations have shown that ethnic tensions and religious divides are banes that confront Nigeria's nation building. It is therefore, the interest of this paper to bridge ethnic and religious tension in Nigeria by stimulating greater self-consciousness of the nation's unity in diversity using Paul's religious principle of unity "in Christ" as upheld in Gal.3:26-29. This work adopts exegetico-hermeneutical approach. The paper concludes that to build a formidable nation, principle of unity in diversity should take priority over ethnic and religious divides in Nigeria.*

## **Introduction**

Nigeria as a nation is the product of colonialism. It is a conglomeration of multi-ethnic groups and religious affiliations engendered by European imperial powers. Nigeria is also endowed with bounteous natural and human resources. In spite of her rich natural and human endowments, Nigeria as well as many other African States are regarded as failed countries. She has witnessed lots of woes and troubles in the past fifty-three years of

political independence. The memories of Nigeria-Biafra civil strife is yet to be overcome. Nigeria, still, is plagued by vestiges of corruption, political instability, bad governance and worrisome enough is the intensity of ethnic and religious tensions hence crippled national growth and development. The level of ethno-religious unrest is so intense that the seemingly efforts toward tackling socio-economic and political challenges in Nigeria appear illusive. Of about 250 ethnic groups that made up the Nigerian State, each is jostling for recognition and every possible means is sought to sway through. Some of the measures employed often times pose threat to the corporate existence and development of the nation.

Despite these observed upheavals that have engulfed Nigeria, the good news is that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. The necessary resources both human and natural to fashion and develop a world class nation are embedded in Nigeria. The heterogenous nature of the Nigerian State evident in the plurality of ethnic identities and religious ideologies could make this quest a reality. There exists a common ground that could serve as a veritable means for the actualization of nation's development. It is from this backdrop that our pericope is considered indispensable. The idea of unity in diversity as upheld by Paul in Gal.3:26-29 if adopted and properly harnessed and harmonized in Nigeria, would act as a cohesive force for the actualization of effective nation building.

### **Clarification of Concepts**

To address the concept of ethnicity has been a herculean task. This is because the terms such as ethnicity, ethnic groups, tribe, and ethnic crises and what they stand for on their face value is not

very clear. In the Nigerian context, ethnicity and certain concepts like tribe and nationality are oftentimes used interchangeably. This explains why there is no unanimous agreement among scholars as to what defines ethnicity. In spite of the challenges in addressing the concept of ethnicity, there still exist a common point of reference among them.

Thus, ethnicity entails recognition and pledge of importance to acclaimed affinity among a particular group of people and considerable differences among others. From the etymological point of view, the adjective "ethnic" comes from the Greek word "ethnos" which refers to a group of people who share a common and distinctive culture. According to Obasi (2010) "the group shares a commonality of social customs, rites, myths, religion and ancestral homeland" (p. 37). Considering its classical form, it refers to members of a particular ethnos that share common features among different ethnic groups. Umezina (2012:217) defines an ethnic group as one which "ascribes to itself the common blood or common ancestry". It is a social group of people who identify with each other based on common ancestral, social, cultural or national experience. It is important to note that membership of an ethnic group tends to be associated with shared cultural heritage ancestry, history, language (dialect) or ideology and with symbolic system such as religion, attire, mythology and so on. It is the fact of belonging to a social group that has a common national or cultural tradition.

Frank (cited by Olukoju, 1997:305) holds that "ethnicity is an elite phenomenon". In other words ethnicity is a concept employed by the nations to further their interests and desires. According to Sklar (cited by Olukoju, 1997), tribal movements may be created and instigated by the new men of power in furtherance

of their own special interests. Tribalism then becomes a mark of class privilege.

On the contrary, ethnicity is held and considered a populist phenomenon and has never been the preserve of the elite. The fact remains that the elites oftentimes employ ethnic identity as a mechanism to achieve their targets. They front ethnicity as a means to achieve political and economic powers which obviously is detrimental to the gullible and unwary followers. There are certain integrative factors that characterize ethnicity. They include religion, culture, geographical location, language, tradition and myth of common origin. It is in the light of these factors that Umezina (2012) further explains ethnic identity as “a feeling of belonging and continuity in being, resulting from an act of self-ascription and /or ascription by others to a group of people who claim both common ancestry and a common cultural tradition”(p. 218).

Religion as a concept is also difficult to define. This is because the object of the study is not subject to observation and empirical proof hence varied speculations by different disciplines. Religion whether objectively or subjectively defined explains man's conscious dependence on a transcendental being. According to Madu (1997:19) “religion as it were is the strongest element in man and exerts probably the greatest influence in man”. Religion has both functional and dysfunctional tendencies. In other words, religion could aid integration and division. Mbonu (2014) avers that “religion has the potential of World maintaining and World scattering forces”(p.118). The functional perspective of Religion is laid bare in Iruonagbe (2009) articulation of religion as “man's attempt to find and maintain peaceful relations with the supernatural and his fellow human being”(p.153). Here, Religion is

expressed as agent of peace. Religion, among other factors, also pave way for culture and ethnicity to thrive in the human society. This, however, explains the assertion of Obiefuna and Uzoigwe (2012) that religion originates in a culture that is more often than not determined by an ethnic group that is defined by a dominant political party. Religion often times is employed as a corollary to ethnicity and both serve as mobilization and politicization weapons to wield public opinion.

The intermingling of ethno-religious identities amidst the primordial idea of common ancestry and heritage more often than not sparks off divisions, segregation, discrimination and conflict. Ethno-Religious divides no doubt rear its ugly head most when there is a crosscut between ethnic identity and religious inclinations. These observed sources of identity, the present researchers posit are the fundamental banes that confront Nigeria's nation building.

The idea of nation building connotes the process of developing both the people that form part of the nation and other strata of the human society simultaneously. Ezeanya (cited by Agunwa, 2014) holds that "the building of people that made up the nation precedes the building of the nation that contains the people"(p.94). In other words, nation building is a holistic venture that lays on the citizens the obligation of cultivating attitudinal change and healthy orientation of the values that will foster the realization of the common good.

### **An Overview Of The Background To Ethno-religious Waves In Nigeria**

A lot of ethno-religious divides have bedeviled Nigeria and to a considerable extent shake its bounds of unity and development. However, it is glaringly clear that most of the

conflicts in Nigeria have ethno-religious undertone. Mbogu (2014) clearly lays credence to the above point when he states that religion and ethnicity as they present themselves in Nigeria have become critical factors in ethno-religious conflicts. At different levels, people have experienced religious or ethnic discrimination; people complain of past and present religious and ethnic marginalization, people demand for religious or ethnic rights in their states. Worst of all, states use religion and ethnicity in political discourse and action” (p.55).The issues raised above and their attendant effects could be understood when the underlying factors that engineer these perils are laid bare.

Obviously, Nigeria as a nation is built on a faulty foundation. Among several other reasons that results to ethno-religious divide in Nigeria is the amalgamation event which is the hand work of the European imperial powers under the leadership of Sir Fredrick Lord Lugard. The formation of the Nigerian state in line with the economic interest of the colonial government paved way for the integration of different ethnic groups with varied ideologies and religious affiliations hence the emergence of ethno-religious unrest and tensions in Nigeria. However,the outcome of 1884 and 1885 Berlin conference that fixed the frontier of Africa with a ruler fundamentally was not oriented towards ethnic unrest. As an addendum to the above fact, Nwodo(2011) states that “when the British colonial rulers,in the early 20th century, forced the two hundred and fifty ethnic groups that make up Nigeria into a territorial entity, their major preoccupation was to maintain law and order and to make the economic exploitation of Nigeria as easy as possible”(p.101). But as Dim (2010) asserts, it was solely Europe’s determination to achieve hegemony. The then established ethnic heterogeneity becomes time and again virulent when the

social differences lead to social tensions. He further observes that in Nigeria today, conflicts that are ethnic by nature are often disguised as religious ones. Umezina (2012) explicitly declares that "Nigeria is a mishmash of more than 250 ethnic groups, each of which is jostling for recognition and relevance in the political arena; each has terrible fear of being dominated by others; each is crying of political marginalization" (p.216). The merging together of the Northern and southern protectorates without taking cognizance of the African peoples similarities and most importantly their dissimilarities in terms of structural constitutions, cultures, language and value system and ethnic make-up account for the incessant ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria.

Dismantling of the existing traditional administrative system and re-organization and lumping of varied ethnic groups without dialogue led to the emergence of the Nigerian nation as an entity. Coleman (cited by Egbunu, 2009) states that although ethnicity is said to be rooted in the very set up of Nigeria, but it got exacerbated by the colonialist indirect rule approach. Ikime (2008) laments that "it was the British who forced us, as it were, into one nation. It was they who subdivided us into regions, provinces, divisions, districts and sub districts. We did not choose the province, division to which we belonged" (p.281). This is not without effects on the polity, unity and development of Nigeria. Nnoli (1980:113) asserts that the introduction of indirect rule in Nigeria by Lord Frederick Lugard, not only reinforced ethnic divisions, it also complicated the task of wielding diverse elements into a Nigerian nation. This method of rulership at the surface engenders relative peace, but apparently, foments ethnicity.

Olukoju (1997) records that ethnicity became further intensified when the Richard's constitution institutionalized

regionalism and thereby ensured politicisation of communal associations. With this development Amucheazi (1986) notes that “the focus of identity remained with the region and the ethnic group rather than shifting to the new nation-State-Nigeria. This notion was prevalent at every turn of event as the Nigerian citizen identifies him/her self as an Easterner, Northerner or Westerner”(p.46).

Many of the political parties formed in Nigeria within these regions were formed and nourished by ethnic chauvinism and regional parochialism. We also cannot rule out the effects of creation of separate quarters popularly called “Sabon Gari” for strangers especially in the Northern region. Such separate settlement negates opportunities for mutual relationship and provides platform for differentiation of ethnic groups.

In as much as the colonial powers could be held responsible for the spark of ethnicity in Nigeria, we cannot but point out the position of the educated elites that skyrocketed ethnic tensions through post independence administration. Most of the political parties that emerged then primarily triggered the mobilization of primordial ethnic prejudices and sentiments as opposed to national issues. This, allowed for differential treatment of ethnic groups evident in educational disparity, domination and marginalization so intense in the sharing of “national cake”. The disparity in education engendered mutual suspicion and discontentment. This is equally evident in the lop-sided power sharing, dethronment of merit and enthronment of mediocrity as obtains in the manner and pattern of appointment to public offices.

Ethnicity has become so pervasive in Nigeria that it serves as a means of attracting federal resources only to suit the interest of a particular region at the expense of the others and common good.

Ethnicity to a considerable extent has questioned the spirit of patriotism in Nigeria therefore, it should be considered as a cog in the wheel of nation building. This is the situation in Nigeria even after fifty-three years of political independence. The country has never fully experienced peace. It is surrounded by chequered history of one peril or the other. The impact is enormous and devastating.

### **The Taunting Impacts Of Ethnicity In Nigeria**

There is no gain saying the fact that Nigeria is underdeveloped. She has a fundamental problem to resolve among several other perils. And this is the taunting issue of ethnicity. However, ethnicity as a concept is not bad. In the observations of Tanko (2007) the fact that there are many ethnic groups in a society does not automatically mean that there must be conflict between them. Saghae and Suberu (2005) sharing similar view with Tanko note that diversity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for conflict" (p.4). In other words, the very fact that a Country has different ethnic, communal, religious and racial groups does not make division and conflict inevitable.

Ethnic consciousness has beclouded Nigeria to the point that the citizens often see it as a preferred means of pledging loyalty as against loyalty to the nation. Babangida (cited by Tanko, 2007) remarks that:

Ethnicity is currently a huge social movement and human investment across the country. It is not only nurtured around the structure and ideology of ethnic nationalities; it is also increasingly becoming a preferred mode of loyalty by Nigerians as opposed to loyalty to the nation State. (p.111).

Little wonder therefore, that Nigeria has not been able to produce right leaders who operate above ethnic sentiments and interests. Previous elections have been characterized by where the candidates came from rather than the impeccability and credibility of the candidates. This Umezina (2012) says explains why the National Assembly is replete with many people who are there neither in the interest of the nation but for their own ethnic groups. They shot themselves up into the National Assembly by weeping ethnic sentiments. They described themselves as best candidates to fight for the right of their respective ethnic groups" (p.221).

Again, ethnic nationality has bequeathed on Nigeria the issue of 'federal character clause'. The brain behind the 'federal character' may appear commendable perhaps to facilitate greater unity of the state. The underlying political manipulations and sentiments that brought it afore breed acrimony, political favouritism and prejudice in the public service and overall government affairs. Merit at this point is sacrificed on the altar of mediocrity. Its effects no doubt is devastating.

Among the negative impacts of ethnic waves in Nigeria is in the formation of political parties. Of about 63 political parties in Nigeria, none has a clear political vision, mission and manifestoes. This is because they were formed and engineered by ethnic chauvinism. Nwodo (2011) in this regard posits that "the growth of political parties in Nigeria was characterized by distinct affiliations of the parties with ethnic based organization and lack of reasonable support in areas outside the ethnic origin of their founders" (p.102). Consequently, the ruling party is not challenged to initiate programmes that will boost the realization of the national interest. With this in mind, it is clear that ethnicity has divisive tendencies that is not only disastrous but has far-reaching effects on the

Nigerian nation. Internationally, it portrays Nigeria in a bad image and scares foreign investors who would contribute in industrializing our state.

### **Exegetico-Hermeneutical Application Of The Text**

Exegesis is from the Greek word (ἐξηγεῖσθαι 'to lead out') which means a critical explanation or interpretation of a text. Biblical exegesis is a critical explanation of the biblical text with the view to find the meaning of the text which then leads to the discovering of its relevance. Hermeneutics and exegesis are closely tied together. Hermeneutics could be described as the development and study of theories of the interpretation and understanding of texts. Mbonu (2013:114) explains hermeneutics in terms of plurality of ideas. "Such plurality offers prospects for a multiple interpretation of texts". Essentially, hermeneutics involves cultivating the ability to understand things from somebody else's point of view, and to appreciate the cultural and social forces that may have influenced their outlook. Hermeneutics, therefore, is the process of applying this understanding to interpret the meaning of written texts which may be historic or contemporary. In biblical parlance, hermeneutics refers to the study of the interpretation of religious/biblical texts. The above assertion provides a veritable background for our inquiry into Paul's message to the Galatians (3:26-29) which is the focus of our discussion.

### **Background Of The Letter To The Galatians**

The letter to the Galatians was composed and addressed to the Gentile Christians who were engulfed by intense theological controversy. According to Hagner (2012) "the crisis that had come upon the Galatian Church threatened the very truth of the gospel and being one of the communities evangelized by Paul in the

course of his missionary activity in Central Asia Minor (cf. Acts.16:6;18:23), Paul writes with the greatest urgency” (p.436). The urgency and burning indignation that accompany Paul’s letter is quite clear in the assertions of Byrne (1988) thus, “since his successful winning of them to the law-free gospel which he proclaimed to the Gentiles, they had come under the influence of other Christian preachers who placed more stress on the Jewish legacy”.(p.1). In opposition to Paul’s instruction and teachings, these sought to persuade the new Galatian converts that circumcision and commitment to the Jewish law which it implied is a prerequisite for the attainment of salvation. Paul convinced that the essence of the gospel was at stake articulated his message in burning indignation and in clearest terms to counter this deviation and assure the Galatians that the law-free preaching which they received and to which they must adhere, is the only true form of the gospel. Hence, without the traditional thanksgiving and greetings as in other letters (Romans, Corinthians), Paul responded with stern but strong and intense language. Paul affirms both his authority as divine(1:1-5) and the truth of the gospel(2:14) as unity (not uniformity) in diversity.

### **The Text Under Study-Gal.3:26-29**

Our text reads:

- 26 Πάντες γὰρ υἱοὶ θεοῦ ἐστε διὰ τῆς πίστεως ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ  
27 ὅσοι γὰρ εἰς χριστὸν Ἐβαπτίσθητε, χριστὸν Ἐνεδύσασθε.  
28 οὐκ ἐνὶ Ἰουδαίῳ οὐδὲ Ἑλλην, οὐκ ἐνὶ δούλῳ οὐδὲ  
Ἐλεύθερος, οὐκ ἐνὶ ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ Πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς εἷς  
ἐστε ἐν χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ.  
29 εἰ δε ὑμεῖς χριστοῦ, ἄρα τοῦ Ἀβραὰμ σπέρμα ἐστέ, κατ  
ἐπαγγελίαν κληρονόμοι.

### **Our Proposed Working Translation**

26 For all are sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus;

27 For as many as were baptized into Christ put on Christ.

28 There is no Jew nor Greek, there is no slave nor free man , there is no male and female for you all are one in Christ Jesus.

29 But if you [are] of Christ, then you are seed of Abraham, heirs according to promise.

### **Exegesis Of The Text**

Our text has no traces of textual problem but filled with undilluted manifold meanings. Considering Paul's use of rhetorical techniques of chiasmus and inclusio, the text no doubt could be considered a unit. Gal.3:26-29 being a pericope forms an integral part of the letter to the Galatians which belongs to the letter genre. From the available internal evidence of the letter, we posit, given the theological aura of the letter, that Paul establishes freedom based charter by dismantling the old world order that engenders division.

The word "all"(pantes) as used in vv.26,28d is a language that suggests universality. It is used in reference to every Christian irrespective of class,gender,sex or ethnic background. Baptism in Christ as it is used in vv.27-28 remains the ground on which all would share common heritage as beneficiaries of the promise to Abraham. Therefore, regardedless of every possible distinctions as slave or free,Jew or Gentile,male and female, being baptized in Christ guarantes unity with a common bond and their identity as children of God established. The unity emphasizes oneness in God (Gal.3:20) in Christ( Gal.3:16// Icor.10:6-17,Col.3:11). Acording to Byrne (1988), putting on Christ which the phrase "in Christ

suggests”,then,involved for the Jewish convert a ‘death’ to those old categories of racial,social and sexual distinction”(p.12).

The richness of v.28 calls for special attention. It contains three parallel statements rendered in present tense. The first two pairs are disjunctively joined by neither –nor,while the last pair is conjointly rendered with ‘and’ making allusion to the establishment of the new world order and status made realizable in Christ.

### **Hermeneutical Application Of The Text**

It is a proven truism that ethno –religious divide is pervasive in Nigeria to the point of doubting the unity of our dear nation. At different times,intervals and levels,people have experienced ethno-religious oppression and discrimination. The cry of every ethnic group in every nook and cranny of the state is the past and present ethno-religious marginalization.

However, the primary cause of what we experience in Nigeria as ethno-religious tension has to do with the issue of discrimination, oppression, marginalization, domination, exploitation,accusation of neglect,exclusion of certain segment from having access to the nation’s economic resources,poor political representation and so on. The consequences of the above observations are the rising of militancy of various ethnic segments,religious movements and collapse of national development.

Many Nigerians both politicians and ordinary citizens have suggested disintegration of Nigeria as a panacea to this hydra headed situation. The opinion of such people may not totally be swept under the carpet but far be it that Nigeria should disintegrate on a platform of diverse egocentric ambition of some

people under the guise of ethnicity and religion. Some uphold disintegration banking on the fact that Nigeria cannot claim homogeneity of language, culture and religion. In other words, Nigeria has no claim or traces of common ancestry. The fact that there are many ethnic segments in a country like Nigeria does not imply that there must be ethnic and religious conflicts. In support of the above point, Tanko (2007) cites example with the United States of America. Thus, "The United State of America has a variety of ethnic groups with their different socio-cultural identities living together, and yet, the level of conflict between them is relatively low" (P.109).

Be that as it may, the text under study apparently provides invaluable ideas that could cushion the tension of ethno-religious divides in Nigeria. The Galatians situation however, opens up a new page for the recognition and appreciation of the equality in dignity and responsibility we owe to God and one another. The inviolable dignity of the human person Acha (2011) affirms "stems from the very ontological fact of being created in the image and likeness of God's fatherhood and our common humanity becomes a source of unity across the boundaries of ethnic differences, race and religion" (p.127). Ukpogon (cited by Chiegboka,1997) lays credence to the above fact when he posits that the equality that ensue from our dignity as God's creature entails not uniformity but unity in diversity.

The 1914 amalgamation event that merged varied ethnic groups, distinctive cultures, religions and languages should be appreciated in the light of divine providence toward fostering nation building. The peculiarities that characterize Nigeria's heterogeneity should transcend in the bond of nationhood. Stott (1984) acknowledges divine providence in nation's creation thus: "since God has made every nation and determines their times and places,

it is clearly right for each of us to be conscious of our nationality and grateful for it" (p.208). He further reiterates that while our racial, national, social and sexual distinctions remain, they no longer divide us. They have been transcended in the unity of the family of God (Gal.3:28).

Our unity implies oneness as a nation and does not in any way negate our diverse peculiarities in terms of culture, language, religion and so on. The uniqueness of every ethnic group, culture and religion will only boom when we understand and appreciate that in unity lies our dignity. We have and share common ancestry in Nigerian nation. Our diversity should be a source of strength as against division that it causes. Our unity is in our diversity.

Gal.3:26-29 especially v.28 apparently stimulates us to overlook ethnic differences that have engulfed us. The claim of superiority of one ethnic group over the other as obtains among Jewish Christians over the Gentile converts incubates discontentment, distrust and suspicions. As Paul repeatedly used the phrase "in Christ" so also we could say "in Nigeria", Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Christians, Muslims and Traditional worshippers alike could lay hold of common ancestry as beneficiaries of the bounteous natural and human resources in our nation.

## **Conclusion**

Many Nigerians, politicians and ordinary citizens alike still question the bases of the acclaimed unity of Nigerian nation even after centenary celebrations. The reason for the reoccurring question is glaringly clear-the incessant ethnic and religious divides in Nigeria and its consequences among other. It is important to note that the three major religions in Nigeria advocate peace and perhaps religion could be exempted from the conflict

arena. By implication; it is abuse and exploitation to employ religion as a catalyst to wield ethnic interest.

Exegetico-hermeneutical study of Gal.3:26-29 establishes the equality, dignity and responsibility we owe to God and one another. The gap already created in Nigeria by ethno-religious divides can be bridged through the recognition and appreciation of our unity in diversity. Therefore, there is need for us to revive the spirit of patriotism that has grown cold among us. Claim of superiority of one ethnic segment and religious group over the other that mar our unity should be deemphasized while the uniqueness of every culture and religion should be upheld.

The theological theme of Gal.3:26-29 especially in v.28 expressed by Paul if properly appropriated would go a long way in serving as a veritable tool for re-orientating and reforming attitude, primordial belief, thought pattern and convictions of Nigeria towards a more and inclusive perspective. Unity consciousness should override ethnic prejudice and religious sentiments so as to actualize formidable and effective nation building.

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