

Rising Ethnic Agitations in Nigeria: Embracing Biblical Perspectives of Reconciliation as the Way Forward

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Abstract

Conflict is a universal phenomena of human societies .So long as there are diversities in ethnic, political, religious, social, cultural and economic interests in the world, conflict is bound to occur. Conflict though common to all, its situation in Nigeria has assumed a level that is considered by many as highly alarming. It is so dangerous that from East to West, and North to South there is an unending agitations of all sorts. Some countries have established conflict commission and other forms of national reconciliation and integration mechanism as a way of promoting peace but this country has continued to play to the gallery as far the conflicts are concerned. It is against this backdrop that this work seeks to examine the Biblical platform of reconciliation as a way forward for Nigeria's increasing voices of agitations. The research employed historical and phenomenological method of analyses with regards to data collected. The study adopted content analysis technique in analyzing the collected data. The following were raised as constituting some of the issues under agitations namely resource control, religious and self determination. It highlighted some Biblical models of reconciliation such as Scripture-Centric, Dialogue, Forgiveness and Education models.

KEY WORDS: Ethnic, Agitation, Biblical, Reconciliation, Conflict and Peace

Introduction: The recurring decimal in Nigeria history for more than five decades is the rising trend of ethnic agitations of all kinds. Nzomiwu

(2012:206) puts it more pointedly when he states that conflict has assumed constancy in Nigeria sociopolitical space. According to him conflicts have deterred progress and development in Nigeria such that despite constant military interventions in our political history many areas of dispute and disagreement have remained unresolved.

Conflict is a universal phenomenon across the human societies. What this means is that man has not succeeded in building a society devoid of conflict as all kinds disagreement appears to be unavoidable. Ziegler (1980:120) as cited in Nzomiwu (2012: 206) states that conflict is a more permanent reality than peace in the world. This he notes is predicated on the fact that as long as there are different political, social, ethnic, religious and economic interests among nations agitations is bound to occur. Many advanced nations have put in place various forms of conflicts resolutions mechanism as well as national resolution and negotiation commission which have aided them in keeping ethnic and religious agitations to the barest minimum. Udemba (2013:197) posits that the mutual suspicions and conflicts which have continued to retard the development of the Nigerian nation stems from the fact that it is a country that was birthed by the amalgamation of many diverse tribal, political and religious inclinations. Furthermore he states that in spite of this inherent faulty foundation of the Nigerian nation not much is done in the area of entrenching institutions that promote reconciliation and peace in the country. What this means is that that though humanity has been fraught with agitations arising from different forms of disagreement they only snowball to deadly conflicts when trivial issues which should be addressed early are allowed to degenerate violent warfare. As Nigeria continues to witness increasing trend of socio-political, religious, ethnic, cultural, economic and agitations for self-determination and survival that are increasingly resulting in the deaths of many innocent citizens this work therefore seeks to examine the biblical perspective of reconciliation as a way forward.

Theoretical Perspectives

Schock (1996) is of the view that economic inequality and political subjugation are both discontent –oriented theories that engender violent political agitations. This was put very clearly when he states inter-alia:

The basic assumption of these theories is that violent political conflict within nations is contingent on the extent of economic inequality. The greater the degree of economic inequality the greater the discontent experienced by individuals and groups. The more intense and widespread the discontent, the more likely that grievance will become clear and somehow get translated into violence political conflicts (p.101).

Gurr(1970:33) corroborates the above view when he avers that aggressions are product of anger induced by frustration especially the one that result from impediment placed in the path of goal-directed behavior. According to him the disposition to respond aggressively when frustrated is a part of mans biological wiring. Thus he notes that there is an inherent biological instinct in men and animals to attack the frustrating agent, which he refers to as an outgrowth of stimulus-response effects in psychology. This work would therefore focus on the deprivation theory as the precursor of all kinds of agitations in Nigeria. It is an attempt to examine how all kinds of deprivations or frustration driven by political institution and structures exercabate conflicts and how Biblical platform can be exploited in charting the way forward.

Conceptual Clarification

In this section an attempt will be made to define some key words in the above subject matter. These words include the following- Ethnic, Agitation, Biblical and Reconciliation.

Agitation: The word agitation is defined by American Online dictionary as the state of being moved with violence, or being in commotion.

Furthermore it notes that the term relates to perturbation or the disturbance of tranquility. The Chambers Dictionary New Edition (2004) defines the above word as to stir violently, to excite, to stir up public discussion, to disturb, to put in motion. Against this backdrop the word is used in this context to mean the various forms of turmoil that have come to the public domain and are posing as triggers for different dimensions of violence.

Biblical: The word Bible according to Opeloye(2014) is derived from a Greek word *biblion* which means book. The plural form is *bibla* which he notes refers to the sixty books making up the Old Testament and the New Testament Scriptures. The word Biblical with reference to our text therefore relates to the use of Bible based teaching as reconciliation tools.

Reconciliation: Reconciliation comes from the Latin word *reconciliare* which means to make good again, to restore, to repair, to restore good feelings between persons. It relates to the concept of restoring or bringing back friendship. Reconciliation according to Nzomiwu (2012) presupposes that factors which breed enmity, strife and contention exist between two or more person and groups and need to be expressed and trashed. It relates to reinstatement or re-establishment of relationship. It has to do with the furthering of peace, cordiality, happiness, development and integration.

Ethnic: According to Isaacs (1975:34), ethnicity relates to basic group identity which all members inherent at birth has and which satisfies the human needs for belonging and self-esteem much better than secondary group identities. Paglia (2010) in articulating the central idea of the word states that ethnicity is founded on the idea of primordial consciousness or feeling.

According to Onifade & Ogunlade (2010:84) while citing Dunmoye (1990) defines ethnic group as that which relates to a social group which is united by a name, common language, a territory and which manifest a unique culture that makes them feel a sense of pride. Orville (2008) in addition

states that the terms ethnic difference embraces not only cultural differences but also religious differences. In other words he posits that religion is one of the critical factors that help to define culture as well as ethnicity.

Dimensions of Agitations In Nigeria

There are many forms of agitations fueling violent conflicts in our country Nigeria. This section shall attempt to examine some of them briefly.

Resource Control Agitations: According to Ekuri and Etim (2017) agitation for resource control and true federation have remained a highly contentious and destabilizing issue in Nigeria body polity. They have been occupying a front burner in the national discourse since the nation returned to democratic system of governance. Furthermore they posit that the above agitation is geared towards enabling states to take charge of resources within their borders while also providing for agreed contribution to be made by states towards the maintenance of common services provided by the federal government. Though there are no universal agreement on the meaning of resource control, Ifealayo (2010) cited in Dickson and Asan, (2016) affirms that resources control relates to the enabling of communities and states government to access and develop natural resources within their boundaries without the interference of the federal government. Ekuri and Etim (2017) defined the above concepts as the control and management of resources by states or local government under whose jurisdiction the resource are extracted while at the same ensuring that they remit prescribed share of their revenue to the federal authority. For Dickson and Asua (2016) resource control has to do with the substantive power given to communities to enable them collect monetary and other forms of benefits derived from the exploration, exploitation and use of resources in their localities for their developmental purposes.

On the other hand Egugbo (2016) asserts that the concept relates to the struggle by Niger Deltans to control their oil wealth while ensuring that

they pay adequate taxes to the central government as is done in true federalism. In other words it is an agitation that seeks to secure the redressing of inherent deprivation, cheating, marginalization and deprivation the Niger Delta people have suffered in the hands of majority ethnic groups in Nigeria. Ele (2019) captures the above vividly when he states that the main conflict that has bedeviled the oil -rich Niger Delta region of the Nigerian nation is resource control agitation which is rooted on their quest to control their natural resources.

From the foregoing, resource control has to do with the mobilization and allocation of resources by government for development purpose. When the power to mobilize and allocate resources is resident in states and local communities, they are referred to as local or regional resource control. On the other hand when they are under federal or national government they are referred to as federal resource control. However what has been the bone of contention for resource control agitations is the unrelenting demand by regions, states and local government to have a major stake in the management of their local resources.

Religion Based Agitation: A key feature of contemporary Nigeria society is unending religious agitation. It has risen to great turbulent level that all over the nation from north to south is the constant call for restructuring so as curb the overwhelming influence that the political class from the northern Nigeria is using religion to rock the ship of state. The above is captured pointedly by Ifamose (2009) when he posits that the political elites in Nigeria“ have become obsessed with power project not for promoting growth but for amassing wealth”(p.74). According to Ele (2019) religious differences have fueled ethnic agitation in the country with the false division of Islamic North and the Christian South. Furthermore he posits that the clandestine registration of our country as a member of the International Islamic Organizations and Conference (OIC) has continued to serve as a launching pad that is propelling lack of respect for religious freedom in the country.

Onah, Diara and Uroko (2017) and World Population Review (2016) corroborates the above view when they state that Nigeria in spite of its estimated population of 170 million and diverse rich and cultural heritage has continued to be besieged by an upsurge of all kinds of conflicts with ethno-religious agitations topping the list. In their contribution Yakubu and Rothfuss (2012) states that Northern Nigeria has become the hotbed of religious extremism that have turned many people to refugees due to high level of insecurity in the region. They then cited the Boko Haram insurgency which has continued to wear the garb of Islamic fundamentalism committed to the eradication of Christianity and western education in Nigeria as a typical example of religious agitations that has assumed the place of an unending national scourge. Besides, Cheldelin, Druckman, & Fast(2008) in their contribution notes that ethno-religious agitations can be categorized into three manifestation groups namely pre-manifest conflict, manifest conflict and aggressive conflict stages. What this means is that religious agitations moves from non-violent mild nature to very extreme phase that in most cases is marked with use of very deadly weapons of war. Unfortunately Nigeria as a nation has continued to be overrun by violent driven religious agitations in recent times that call for paradigm shift if we must chart the way forward. The above view becomes highly imperative when one considers the fact that after six years of convening a constitutional conference by Goodluck Jonathan, the former President of Nigeria, to address several tensions points such as religious plurality and other thorny national issues undermining our corporate existence the problem of religious diversity has become more entrenched as fulanisation and Islamisation of the country by Fulani herdsmen and Boko Haram insurgency has become more devastating than ever. Moreover, religious conflicts according to Onah et al has remained a purveyor for the promotion of gender inequality which equally serves as a breeding ground for the fostering of political, economic and socio-cultural marginalization. Ethno-religious agitations therefore not only promote violent society it also aids and abet poverty and underdevelopment.

Self-Determination Agitation: Agitation for self-determination is not secession according to a renowned constitutional legal expert, Professor Nwabueze as cited by Ossai (2017). Rather he posits while citing IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra) as an example that it is meant to be an object lesson that repression is hardly the right response to complaints and agitations for the amelioration of the conditions of things in the society. He avers that rather than serve as solution for agitations for self-determination repression only aggravates it by forcing them underground. This was equally the view of Amnesty International (2016) when they note that the use of force by President Mohammed Buhari in dealing with IPOB agitations is counterproductive as it has continued to fuel passion and sentiments that may eventually undermine the political stability of the nation.

Ojukwu (1989) as cited in Chukwudi, Gberevbie, Abasalim & Imhonopi (2019) in his contribution submits that self-determination should be seen as normal conduct when the right possessed by a group of people to make choice with respect to charting their political, social, economic, and cultural future is taken from them. This no doubt accounts for while many nationalities in Nigeria are currently agitating for self –determination, or freedom to have greater control over their political, economic, social-cultural and religious future. The current alignment of the Middle Belt Forum, PANDEF(Pan Niger Delta Forum), OPC (Oduduwa People’s Congress) and the Ohanaeze of Igbo extraction for restructuring of the Nigerian nation politically, economically and socio-culturally all lend credence to the agitations for self- determination in Nigeria as a multi-regional quest transcending one ethnic boundary. It is against this backdrop of unending agitations for self determination that this work seeks to examine Biblical reconciliation perspectives as a way forward.

Biblical Reconciliation as a Platform for Peace:

According to Christological teachings the Bibles present some reconciliation models that could be harnessed in dealing with the agitation

questions in Nigeria. He explains that this is done when for instance an individual comes up with a problem

Scripture -Centric Model: Monroe (n,d) as cited by Chambers (1937) states that the Scriptures can be used wrongly when one adopt the easy approach of shooting Bible verses or texts at those who are suffering especially as an avenue of authenticating his or her personal opinion as a divine counsel. Unfortunately he notes that the misuse of the Scriptures not only creates division between people, it also separates people from God. According to him when Scriptures are deceitfully or superficially employed to assist hurting lives it doesn't take long for such people to begin to lose faith in the Scriptures as a platform for dealing with their existential problems. Simply put when individuals are manipulated into the letters of the Scriptures and it fails to address their need they tend to develop hardened hearts against future encouragement to seek God, His Word or His ministers. However even though the Scriptures does not claim to serve as encyclopedia or a catalogue for addressing human problems yet it has remained the Book of books in providing man with eternal guidance and permanent rules of life.

The above is corroborated by Monroe when he posits that we do ourselves great disservice when we disregard the value of the Holy Scriptures in resolving human conflicts. It is against this backdrop that he opines that God's Word was given not just to serve a therapeutic role of securing hope and comfort it was mainly given to connect man to divinity thereby enabling him to develop perspectives of life bigger than him. In other words it is a manual that not only gives expression to man's responsibility to himself and his fellow humanity it also defines what gives man his ultimate essence of existence and that is his responsibility to God. From the foregoing the Scriptures no doubt should occupy a centrality of place in providing direction in conflict resolution among peoples and nations. This is because when people encounter God as revealed by prophet Isaiah it enables them to acknowledge the fact that they are not only morally

depraved their fellow mortal also share in the same fate. A condition which he notes is fundamental in directing an individual to seek for mercy from God in securing reconciliation with himself, his fellow humanity and with God. The prophetic writing below makes the above submission much clearer:

In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. glory Then said I, Woe *is* me! For I am undone; because I *am* a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts. Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, *which* he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged (Isaiah 6:1,3 ,5-6).

God's Word by implication is vital in providing humanity with divine personality and his logic as a dimension in dealing with the complex life issues such as agitations of all kinds. It offers individual opportunity to embrace intrinsic transformation through the intervention of the divine Spirit as well as extrinsic change through lifestyle adaptation. Pauline theology captures the above truth when he notes that when an individual encounters Christ he is transformed from an old person or perverted living to a new or well-adjusted living. (2Cor 5:17) Moreover he notes that beyond the operation of the divine Spirit in the heart individual must grow in the knowledge of God's Word so as to develop excellent skill in choosing that which is God's perfect will (Romans12:1-2). Agitators from the foregoing must be confronted with God's Word and should be equally allowed to confront their opponents with the Scriptures for according to law he that comes to equity must come with clean hands.

Dialogue Model: Agitations of all kinds are products of a broken world .They are bound to happen but our reaction to them may determine whether they will escalate to violent conflicts or not. The unending conflicts in our country show that we are not getting at the root of these agitations. Another Biblical reconciliation model is dialogue model. It begins when the offended party is ready to confront the offending party in an atmosphere of love and humility. According to Sala (2015) attitude is everything and when it is deployed in an atmosphere of humility to engage an offending party in dialogue the adversarial posture of the latter is often disarmed. It is against this backdrop the Holy Scriptures prescribes dialogue as a platform for conflict resolution. The Christological teaching as cited *inter alia* underscores the above submission:

Moreover if your brother shall trespass against you , go and tell him his fault between you and him alone: if he shall hear you , you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear you take with you one or two more , that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them tell it unto the Church: but if he neglect to hear let him be unto you as an heathen and a publican.(Mat. 18: 15-17)

The above text according to The Preacher Outline & Sermon Bible shows that reconciliation does not thrive in an atmosphere of self-centeredness, withdrawal, gossiping and retaliatory response but rather one that promotes dialogue. Furthermore it submits that such an approach must embrace a three phase strategy which should involve a private discussion with the offending party, then followed by confronting of same with one or two witnesses. It is only when the above two efforts have failed to elicit their desired reconciliation that those in authority position is consulted who when they fail should then administer relevant punishment. For the Church community dealing with an unrepentant member involves excommunication or cutting him or her off from Christian fellowship and

privileges. However for a nation the punishment for an individual or group that fails to embrace peace and reconciliation can range from awarding of financial cost they must pay as fines to incarceration in the prison or death penalty. However Nigeria has remained on the boil because people at the position of national leadership who should be at the vanguard of ensuring that the law or divine prescription for peace as contained in the Scriptures are employed at the last wrung of dialogue often end up providing protection for those people or institutions that serve as triggers for all kinds of agitations. The result is that instead of moving forward as a nation we continue to move in a cycle. National dialogue from this context must embrace love and respect for the offending party. However such approach must not sacrifice truth and fairness at the altar of ethnic, religious, political or professional interest to keep the agitating party in perpetual subjugation. The agitators must be heard not from the point of subjectivism but from the platform of objectivism and truth. What this means is that those at the last phase of reconciliation process, the political or ecclesiastical leadership must protect the rule of law in dispensing justice by ensuring that those who should make necessary restitution, compensations, and amendments or suffer one damage or the other for peace to reign must be made to do so. For instance some years ago President Musa Yara Dua had to bend to the agitations of Niger Delta militant for their people. Dialogue must end in someone paying a prize for peace. The party may be government who makes some concession or an individual or group which shifts ground or gives up own agitation for reconciliation to reign.

Forgiveness Model: The word forgiveness relates to the word forgive. Forgive relates to a Hebrew word *naw-saw* meaning to lift, bear, carry away, pardon. On the other hand the word is represented by a Greek word *aphiemi* meaning to lay aside, omit, put away, remit, let alone. to give up debt, to neglect. Forgiveness therefore means the act of cancelling debt or giving up provocation or grievances in order to give peace a chance. Forgiveness and reconciliation are fundamental truths in Christian theology. According to the Christian Scriptures God became man and died through his son Jesus

Christ to offer forgiveness to humanity in order to bring about reconciliation between him and mankind. This is summed up in Pauline theology when he states *inter alia*:

For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and broken the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace. And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross... (Eph.2:14-16)

Gray (2019) in her contribution states that forgiveness and reconciliation sum up the entire message of the Bible. Besides she submits that while forgiveness involves a decision or a choice from an individual to release the offender from punishment on the other hand it takes two parties to bring about reconciliation. In divine economy reconciliation is not imposed on an individual or a group there must be two willing hearts. While God is ready to forgive the sinner he however demands that the latter must be willing to accept forgiveness and be reconciled to His maker.

The above view is put pointedly by Gray (2019) when she states that full reconciliation becomes possible when the offender acknowledges responsibility for his misconduct a choice which is authenticated by his willingness to change his behavior for good. Simply put reconciliation demands confession and repentance. Therefore in addressing the various agitations undermining our continued survival as a nation parties involved must galvanize the instruments of forgiveness, repentance and renunciation as the way forward for entrenching lasting peace and conducive environment for sustainable development. Consequently when people ask for the forgiveness of Boko Haram ethno-religious militia so that we can have peace in Nigeria, the question that should be posed to such people is can one impose reconciliation on an unwilling partner? Why has Boko Haram continued to engage in destruction of thousands of lives of innocent civilians, hundreds of Nigerian soldiers as well as the forceful

demand on people to convert to Islamic religion or pay with their blood, an unending destruction of military barracks and police stations and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people from their ancestral homes for more than ten years now even after the Federal Government has been alleged to have paid billions of Naira to appease them? What this means is that for this nation to deal with the problems of insurgency it must be able to separate the chaff from the wheat. The chaff is those agitations sponsored by the political and religious class for perpetuation of their selfish interest. This should be isolated and crushed before it crushes the nation. The wheat conflicts are those seemingly unhealthy in nature but carry in them the seed for our national greatness. They should be managed wisely for our greater tomorrow. Their ideas should be experimented and adapted for possible partial or total integration in our national project.

4) **Moral Education Model:** The Bible is replete with the charge for moral education as a way of developing divine perspectives to life and excellent character. In Deut 6: 7 & Proverbs22:6 God calls His people not only to start training their children early he demands that it should be done with diligence. Besides in Deut.4:10 the people of Israel were invited by God to come and learn his ways. Prophet Isaiah equally echoes the above invitation when speaking as God's oracle he invites the priests, kings and the people to "learn to do well, seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:17). Mosaic writing captures the objective of moral education as development of the fear of God or imbibing an attitude of respect for divine rules for living (Deut.4:10). What this means is that character is developed through character or moral education that are grounded not just on civics or human-based morality but on divine truths for living. Moral education model as a way of peace is grounded on the fact that knowledge is power and divine knowledge positions one to be amenable to divine options for reconciliation and peace.

Recommendations:

1. Biblical reconciliation model should be developed by the church community in other to develop Christian road map for national reconciliation and conflict resolution.
2. Government should incorporate Biblical reconciliation model in our educational curriculum starting from primary to the tertiary level as a way of develop peace loving citizens.
3. Government and Church leaders should lead by example by enforcing justice and equity at the highest level of the reconciliation process. In other words people at the helm of affairs should not only be prepared to punish unrepentant offenders they should equally assume liability when it becomes obvious they are culpable for actions or inactions that promote conflict.
4. The Church community must advance the gospel of Christ with a view to reconciling men to God thereby paving way for men to be reconciled to one another. They should call men and those in position of authority to repent from the lifestyle that dehumanize our individual and collective humanity and embrace God's mercy, love and righteousness towards one another.
5. Government should entrench transparency, equity and rotational tenure of a maximum of five years in appointing people to position of local, state and national leadership by creating laws that ensures that no tribe, religion or political class uses their influence to rubbish others people's religious, economic, cultural or political convictions and potentials.
6. Our judiciary should be made more autonomous in terms of funding, appointment and discipline as well as ensuring that federal character is reflected in appointing their leadership. The tradition whereby those in authority use their position to manipulate the judiciary to serve their religious, ethnic, political and economic interests does not promote Biblical perspectives of justice for all

which incidentally is the fundamental basis for birthing and sustaining reconciliation and development in any society.

7. Churches, families, government and non-governmental bodies must strive to provide moral direction of our citizenry early.
8. Government should promote theological education and ensure that graduates of same are employed in institutions of learning for the advancement of moral education in our schools.

Conclusion: This work has attempted to underscore that our nation is currently overrun by different forms of economic, ethnic, religious and political based agitations. It submits that disagreement or conflict is part and parcel of our humanity globally. However it posits that their level in Nigeria is worrisome as they have continued to sky rocket by the day. According to this study the above trend has continued to subsist because the various intervention mechanisms by government have not dealt at the root of the problem. It identified some Biblical reconciliation models such as Scripture- centric, Dialogue, Forgiveness and Moral education. Against this backdrop some recommendations are advanced below as the way forward.

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