

ECUMENISM AND PARADIGM SHIFT IN THE RELIGIOUS IDENTITY OF THE NIGERIAN BAPTIST CONVENTION: A STUDY OF SOME SELECTED PRACTICES OF THE BAPTIST DENOMINATION

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Abstract

The Nigerian Baptist Convention, a Baptist denomination in Nigeria, is experiencing a shift in some of its traditional, cherished identity and practices. One major identifiable factor for this is its involvement in ecumenical activities. Thus, the study explores the influence of ecumenism on some practices of the denomination. The objectives of the study are to discuss the development of ecumenism in Nigeria, examine Baptist denomination relationship with ecumenical bodies and evaluate the influence of ecumenism on selected practices of Baptist Churches of the Nigerian Baptist Convention. The paper employs historical research design and utilises descriptive and analytical approaches. From the study, the paper found that ecumenical relations of the Nigerian Baptist Convention Churches with other denominations, though brought some significant spiritual transformation and awakening in the mode of worship, however to a significant extent, had brought a great departure from the traditional doctrinal beliefs and practices. Continuation of this portends a devastating erosion of her cherished and biblical-rooted practices. The paper therefore, concludes that while the good aspects of her romance with other denominational churches in the ecumenical body are to be embraced and maintained, those that are inimical to the advancement of these biblically rooted beliefs and practices should be abhorred and jettisoned. The paper therefore, recommends that there is a need, for holistic biblical teaching of the Baptist denomination's identity, doctrine, and practices.

Keywords: Baptist Churches; Ecumenism; Influence; Nigerian Baptist Convention; Practices

Introduction

Religious influence in the history of every Nation and society is gradual and progressive. Such is the case in Nigeria from the 19th Century when Christianity was reintroduced in West Africa and Nigeria in particular through the Missionary activities of the Europeans. The coming of the Europeans birthed the development of different denominational Churches, such as the Catholics, the Protestants, the African Indigenous Churches and Pentecostals. Over time, these churches established ecumenical relations. Thus, they began to influence one another in doctrinal beliefs and practices. The present study focuses on examining the influence of ecumenism on some selected practices of the Baptist denomination. It becomes imperative due to paradigm shifts observed in some contemporary practices of Baptist churches. This paradigm shift is what Oguntade (2023, 93-113) referred to as spiritual transformation in the Baptist denomination. The selected practices of the study include Baptist worship practices, the pastoral call system, pastoral ordination, and pastoral dress code. The paper used the historical research design to elicit information. The approaches are descriptive and analytical. Also, the writers use participant' observations to collect

data. The study discussed the development of ecumenism in Nigeria, examined the Baptist denomination's relationship with ecumenical bodies and evaluated the influence of ecumenism on selected practices of Baptist Churches of the Nigerian Baptist Convention.

Overview of the Development of Ecumenism and the Baptists in Nigeria

The working together of the various denominational Churches during their evolution became necessary, and this called for unity even in their diversity, not in an attempt to search for a united Church but a search for unity in the diversity of the Churches especially to face and address the common enemy of the Christian faith in Nigeria (Oyalana, 1996, 49). According to Ilufoye (2021, 1), this birthed at first intra-ecumenical relations among Churches of similar traditions, such as the Mainline Churches and the African Initiated Churches. It also led to inter-ecumenical relations among Churches of different traditions, like Mainline, Pentecostal and African Initiated Churches. This became necessary for the Nigerian Churches with different denominations to achieve their mission's mandate (Ilufoye, 2021, 1).

Ecumenism and its adjective ecumenical are derivations of the Greek word (oikumene), used to mean Roman Empire or the whole World, but gradually came to refer to the whole Church as opposed to that which is divisible and partial (Ilufoye, 2021, 2). As observed by Kinnamon, the word designates a modern Christian movement concerned with the unity and renewal of the Church and its relationship to God's reconciling and renewing mission throughout creation (Kinnamon, 1997, 1-2). It is also used in the worldwide spectrum of the Church's fellowship and worldwide range of its tasks (Oyalana, 2000, 83). The above observation implies that ecumenism is the movement through which denominational Churches seek to manifest afresh the unity given and willed by Jesus in John 17:11. It also implies, as affirmed by Vischer, the fulfillment of the deepest intention of the reformation as they sought for a united Church (Vischer, 2001, 64-65).

The Origin of Ecumenism, as observed by Ishola, could be traced to Acts 15 in response to the controversy on what the relationship of the Gentile Christians should be to the Jewish Religion. Ishola believed that what could be called the first ecumenical gathering was the meeting of the church leaders in that chapter of the Bible (Ishola, 2000, 119). However, the modern ecumenism movement is traced to the 19th Century (Oshitelu, 2000, 20) and most especially the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in the first decade of the 20th Century, precisely 1910. It was from the Edinburgh Conference that the Streams that carried the movement's missions flowed from (Kinnamon, 1997, 3).

In the context of Nigeria, Roberson (1986, 295) explained that an organised type of cooperation among the missions did not occur until educational institutions came under scrutiny and regulations of the then Government. According to him, it was then that several foreign missions began to feel that such an organisation was desirable and necessary. Thus, what could be said to be the first attempt at ecumenism and its activities in Nigeria was a product of the then Government's stern policy on education, which was mainly in the hands of Christian missions. This began manifesting in the 20th Century, first in Eastern and Northern Nigeria, notably by the Church Missionary Society, the Wesleyan, and the Presbyterian (Roberson, 1986, 295). Deji Ayegboyin (2000, 20), Ademola A. Ishola (2000, 120-121), and Oyalana (2000, 81) in their separate study on ecumenism in Nigeria lent credence to Roberson's documentation as they agreed in their separate submissions that, practical ecumenism is traceable to the first decade of the 20th Century in the Eastern part of Nigeria, however, influenced by the multi-denominational Conference of Edinburgh in 1910.

By the 1930s, ecumenical relations between Mainline Churches and the African Initiated

Churches, especially the Aladura Churches, started in Yorubaland of Western Nigeria. This resulted from Joseph Ayo Babalola's revival meetings, which received serious and committed support from Mission Churches. The Mission Churches collaborated with his revival crusades in organising revival meetings, overseeing segments of baptism, and membership registration. (Oshun, 155-156). This, in essence, provided a spiritual upsurge that favoured a forum for ecumenical activities among denominations of Churches. Thus, from the 1930s, what could be described as regional ecumenical movements dominated the religious landscape of Nigeria. These included the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) formerly the United Missionary Council for Education in 1930, the Evangelical Church of West Africa in 1954, the Tayara Ekklesiyan Kristi a Nigeria (TEKAN); a Hausa for, "Fellowship of Churches of Christ in Nigeria" which grew out of the United Mission of Nigeria comprising six Indigenous Churches. Others included the Christian Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (CPFN), which started in 1956 but resuscitated in 1987, the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria inaugurated in 1986, and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) established in 1976 comprising five main blocks (Ayegboyin, 2000, 21-26), as well as the Bible Society of Nigeria established in 1966 (Bible Society, 2025, 1).

Baptist Denomination and Ecumenism in Nigeria

The Nigerian Baptist Convention is a Baptist denomination in Nigeria, and its roots and traditions are from the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in the United States of America (USA). It was in 1850 that SBC, through its Missionary Board, sent the first missionary team to Nigeria, led by Thomas Jefferson Bowen, with the planting of Churches from 1854 at Ijaye Orile and 1855 at Ogbomoso (Ajayi, 2000, 10-35). With the planting was the inclusion of Baptist traditions of distinctive doctrinal beliefs and practices which are, biblical authority, autonomy of the local Church, congregationalism, priesthood of believers, two ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, individual soul liberty or competency, separation of the Church and State, two Scriptural offices of the Church (Pastor and Deacon), and save Church membership (Ajayi, 2009, 34). It should be noted that it was from this cardinal principle of faith, especially the priesthood of believers and soul competency, (McBeth, 1996, 65) that informed and served as the theological and doctrinal foundation for other doctrinal beliefs and practices like: worship practices, call system, ordination system, dressing code patterns for pastors and congregants.

Despite its distinctive beliefs and practices, the Baptist denomination collaborates with other Christian denominations. Roberson (1986, 295-299) explains that the involvement of the Baptist Christian faith in the interdenominational activities eventually led to establishing the Christian Council of Nigeria in March 1930. The Council's first meeting recorded the presence of Baptist delegates of J.R. Williams and N.D. Oyerinde, who accompanied the missionaries to the meeting (Roberson, 1986, 295-299)

Then, Baptists were cautious in their ecumenical activities because of the factors that shaped her theological and cultural environment. This included having a root not favoured to ecumenical relationships, especially those that may lead to an organic Church that could jeopardise or tamper with her cherished distinctive doctrinal beliefs and practices (Ishola, 2000, 120-125). Thus, this was one of the reasons why the Baptist doctrinal principles by then were sustained and held more sacrosanct than in the contemporary.

Notwithstanding, from the 1970s, the Baptist denomination started to be more active in ecumenical activities (Ishola, 2000, 126). Since then, the Baptist denomination has been a member of the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), as well as the Bible Society of Nigeria (BSN). Besides being a member of these various ecumenical bodies,

she was an active member contributing positively to activities and the development of these ecumenical relations bodies. In this regard, Ishola observes that the Baptist denomination has provided technical assistance by seconding to the body of the Bible Society of Nigeria (BSN) the late Dr. E. A. Dahunsi, who translated the new Yoruba version of the New Testament from the original language of Greek. Dr J. A. Abegunde also served as the leading Old Testament consultant for the new edition of the Yoruba Bible (Ishola, 2000, 126). At the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the immediate past Nigerian Baptist Convention President, Dr. Supo Ayokunle, served as two-term President of the body from 2016 to 2021. (Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org. 15-5-2025). Today, there is an Ecumenism, Interfaith, and Special Duties department in Ibadan's Nigerian Baptist Convention head office under the Directorate of Ecumenism for Development and Peace Initiative, instituted by the immediate past Convention President, Dr Supo Ayokunle, in 2018 (Nigerian Baptist Convention Constitution, 2024, 50-51, edap.ng 15-5-2025)

Baptists' Worship Practices

Roberson (1986, 3) observed that the Baptist traditional mode of worship is simple. As observed by Ayegboyin and Nihilola (2008, 222-223), the implications of this are that traditional Baptist worship is characterised by reverence, orderliness, and solemnity. The pastor's proclamation at the commencement of worship, "The Lord is in His temple, let all reverence Him", attests to this. The prayer mode is congregational as one of the congregants prayed aloud while other congregation members say "amen."

The worship practice is also characterised by hymn singing from the Baptist hymnal, at least three times before the end of the worship service. Oil, water, mantles, or any other form of spiritual elements were not used to solve spiritual or physical problems. A simple pastoral prayer was offered for the sick and all other life challenges, and medical consultations were usually advised to be sought. There were no speaking in tongues (Ayegboyin and Nihilola, 2008, 223). There was no strict liturgical mode of worship. Each local Church has a free mode of worship as led by the Spirit. The autonomy of the local Church, soul competency, and the priesthood of believers mainly informed these practices.

However, a paradigm shift has occurred due to the Baptist denomination's involvement in ecumenical activities. The Baptist mode of worship now wears new garments. Oguntade observes, among other things, that close observation of Baptist worship patterns today revealed a gradual replacement of Western liturgy with African liturgy. Citing Oladipo, he states further that the Christian faith in the contemporary Baptist Churches has been de-westernised, and the infiltration of other forms of worship has been recorded. What accounted for this, as he opines, is not unconnected with the Africanization of Christianity, which African converts wanted (Oguntade, 2023, 105).

Some worship practices of some Baptist Churches in contemporary times are similar to those of other denominational churches, such as those found in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches and African Initiated Churches. These include interjections when the sermon is going on, expressive movement, body movement, clapping, shouting, and church music. Hymn singing is also declining. Most Baptist youths can no longer sing most of the hymns.

Moreover, the prayer pattern has shifted from the traditional way of offering prayers. Mass prayers now characterise the prayer session in a loud voice with vigour and emotions, often accompanied by speaking in tongues and shouting hallelujah, with prophetic declarations from the pastor. Praise the Lord is now common to calm, noisy atmosphere. Night Vigils that are anathema to the Baptist mode of service are now given wider publicity, especially with the introduction of

Night of Wonders. The Night of Wonders is a quarterly night of prayer and praise services of the Nigerian Baptist Convention instituted by the immediate past Convention President, Dr Supo Ayokunle. The current practices are influenced by the presence of the Baptist denomination in ecumenism. The Night of Wonders features aggressive prayers in the words of Oguntade (2023, 104), similar to spiritual activities known to Charismatic movements and African Initiated Churches.

Besides, in some Baptist Churches today, it is common to see anointing oil and various sizes of kegs of water in front of the pulpit area, a practice associated with the white garment Churches. The attitudinal response of some Baptist members to sermons is a serious departure from what it used to be. Expressions and responses during worship are common to the new-generation Churches that are part of the ecumenical body of which the Baptists are a member. For instance, some Baptist members in the 2022 Convention in session responded to sermons with excitement and began to troop out to drop money at the pulpit area. Others prayed with their faces bowed to the ground before the pulpit area. The writers observed something similar at the 2025 Convention in session on some of the worship experiences, especially during the revival hour of the evening rallies. Authors of this article opine that ecumenical relations influenced these practices.

Oguntade (2023, 106) observes that this occurs in agreement or seeking to tap from the preacher's anointing by the congregants and the belief of the congregants that offering prayers at the pulpit area will receive immediate attention from God. Related to this was the introduction of 'White Sunday' in 2022. This was instituted under the leadership of Israel Adelani Akanji. In this service, members are to appear in white with white handkerchiefs. Historically, Whitesunday was a feast of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles on the 50th day after Easter (Livingstone, 1977, 553). Kenneth J. Stewart (2017, 118) confirms that by AD 506 it had become a practice that Christians observed the Lord's Supper at Christmas, Easter and Whitsunday; indicating that Whitsunday was a Christian festival. However, the current practice in the Baptist denomination of the NBC did not have a historic link with the early or medieval church practice of 'White Sunday.'

These changes, apart from serving as spiritual transformation, which a sizeable number of the Baptists are yearning for, are a strategic influence to stem the tide of the Baptist youth exodus to other denominations. Also, it is a spiritual influence to retain membership in the denomination to check their movements to the acclaimed solution centres of other Christian denominations. However, these shifts portend a gradual erosion of the acclaimed, cherished, and distinctive doctrinal beliefs and practices of the Baptist denomination. It also portends the worship leaders' misuse and abuse of some of these new practices.

The Baptist Pastoral Call System

Pastoral call system is another area of Baptist practice that has come under the influence of ecumenism. In the Baptist denomination, the ministerial call system is a method by which every local Church extends a call to a theologically trained minister of the Nigerian Baptist Convention to serve in the church, and every minister answers the invitation to serve God through a local Baptist Church. This happens after some considerable period of prayer; the Holy Spirit leads a church to extend a call to a pastor to become their leader. The pastor, in turn, seeks the face of God in response to this church call. If the Lord confirms it, the pastor accepts the call to that particular church (NBC, 2017, 7). This implies that it is the responsibility of the church to call its pastor, and the pastor responds as the Lord leads, and it is untenured unless the Holy Spirit leads the church or the pastor to leave the church. This Enyinnaya (2025, 40) opines that it is theologically and doctrinally founded in the doctrinal beliefs and practices of the Baptist autonomy of the local church, soul competency,

and priesthood of believers. It has its historical antecedent from the 1950s at the Convention in session of 1956 when the church has the right to call pastors to the churches (NBC, 2017, 8-10).

However, some alien practices have crept in. What accounts for this is not unconnected in the opinion of the paper on Baptist involvement in ecumenism and the limited opportunities available in the pastorate in contemporary time. Eyinnaya (2025, 44) noted that these imported practices included consideration of multiple pastors simultaneously because of a call, asking pastors to submit curriculum vitae, writing an application called a letter of interest, and pastors circulating C.V. to churches. Related to this, as observed by the authors, is the advertisement for the vacant position of the pastorate call letter of interest by a church in Lagos and Ogbomoso in 2024. While collaborating on this emerging practice, Ajayi (2024, 5) described it as a loss of Baptist denominational identity.

Pastoral Ordination

This is the rite of setting a person up for a ministerial office and serves as a means by which the ordained minister's divine calling to the gospel ministry is affirmed, spiritually and ceremonially. (NBC, 2015, 34-35) Thus, it launches a pastor into the full gospel ministry. In the practice of the Baptists, ordination qualified a pastor to conduct believers' baptism, the Lord's Supper, and weddings. Thus, the priestly acts of preaching and administering the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper are reserved for the ordained; this, according to Oguntade (2023, 106), citing Brewer, is to allow for orderliness without infringing on the principle of the priesthood of believers. In the traditional setting of the Baptists, the pastor's ordination is the local church's responsibility and is done within the ambit of the local church. Drawing from Benjamin Griffith, as cited by Leon McBeth, Oguntade (2023, 107), affirms this as he avers that each particular church has complete power and authority from Jesus Christ to administer all gospel ordinances, ordain their officers, and exercise every part of gospel discipline and church government, independent of any church or assembly whatever. Before 2005, Baptist churches affiliated with NBC practised church based pastoral ordination (NBC Policies and Practices, 2005).

However, there was a departure from 2005 when mass ordination was instituted, in which qualified pastors were brought together in different Baptist Conferences for ordination service. The reason adduced for it, as noted by Oguntade (2023, 107-108) was that it was financially burdensome for the local churches, thereby losing its sacredness. Be that as it may, this paper believes that it had an ecumenical influence because, until 2005, other denominational churches in ecumenism had a mass ordination programme for their ordained. It is because the financial burdens that the apex leaders of NBC said would be removed are yet to be lifted from the neck of local Churches. Oguntade (2023, 108) observes that on the ordination day after the service, the ordained usually entertain their invitees individually, and the local church bears the financial expenses.

The Pastoral Dressing Code

This is another area of Baptist practice that is gradually experiencing a shift from previous practice, unlike before, some Baptist pastors now wear cassock, crucifix and a special 'priestly robe' similar to other Christian denominations in Nigeria. Niyi-Ojo (2024) asserts that the Baptist denominational leaders are now involved in ecumenical activities than before and are holding leadership positions in ecumenical bodies like CAN, CCN, and the kind of embarrassment that the denominational simplicity has caused and is causing, informed by this departure. The authors of this article hold that

it is an aberration to the simplicity of the Baptists. Roberson (1986, 4) noted that traditionally, pastors were not distinguished by specific garments. According to him, they have commonly worn clothes such as those worn by the congregation members with decency, honour to God, and a pleasant impression being the guiding principle in their choice. Furthermore, he emphatically states that any diversion from this to clerical collars is evidence of ignorance on the part of the Baptist ministers who should distinguish themselves by good deeds and Godly living (Roberson, 1986, 47).

Conclusion

The article investigated the influence of ecumenism on selected practices of the Baptist denomination. From the study, the article revealed that ecumenical relations of the Baptist denomination with other denominational churches brought departure from traditional Baptist practices such as the pastoral dressing, pastoral call system, pastoral ordination and some aspects of the Baptist traditional way of worship. To this end, while some of these changes are good and desirable, the Baptists need to be mindful of their cherished and biblically doctrinal beliefs and practices, which their fathers in the faith instituted; else these beliefs and practices are on the verge of extinction and oblivion. Thus, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Nigerian Baptist Convention leaders and the pastors of churches within the Convention should trace back the ancient roots of these practices, which informed the patriarchs of the Baptist denomination to put these practices in place.
2. There is a need, for holistic biblical teaching of the Baptist denomination's identity, doctrine, and practices that distinguish the denomination from other denominational churches in the local Churches, Associations, Conferences, and at the Convention levels especially among the Baptist pastors and leaders who are the custodians and executors of these practices as well as living examples of the Baptist heritage.
3. It is recommended that practices that are biblically sound in other denominations be encouraged and incorporated into the Baptist mode of worship such as exercise of spiritual gifts, healing and miracle services. It will stem the tide of Baptist members, especially Youths, exodus to other denominations like the Pentecostals and other independent Churches.
4. Nigerian Baptist Convention leaders should implement policies that would promote age-long beliefs and practices, especially congregationalism and the priesthood of believers in the local Churches.

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