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**JOHANNINE ECCLESIOLOGY: A CHALLENGE
TO THE COMMUNAL LIFE
OF THE CHURCH IN AFRICA**

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By:

Augustine Chukwuemeka Nwaosu

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ABSTRACT

The hypothesis upon which this research is built is that "the Fourth Gospel was influenced by the relationship between the Johannine community and the synagogue community which included the secret disciples." This relationship was one of conflict which was a direct result of the Christological confessions of members of the Johannine group that 'Jesus was the Messiah the Son of God'. It was this confession that led to the expulsion of the Johannine group from the synagogue thereby enhancing their sectarian nature.

In this research therefore, the Johannine community is referred to as a church in an attempt to understand the communal nature of the Church in Africa. The historicity of the community and its literature is explored wherein the following conclusions are drawn.

1. That the origin of the community is traceable to some Jewish disciples of John the Baptist who later followed Jesus and those that Jesus called.

2. That the community was sectarian by nature, ostracized from the Jewish synagogue community due to their confession of faith in Jesus Christ.

3. That they suffered from such problems as both external and internal conflict and death..

4. That the author of the Johannine corpus (the Gospel and the Epistles) was the Beloved Disciple whose identity is yet to be established while the date of writing and place are still uncertain.

In chapter three, the research makes an attempt to analyze the idea of the church from such images *as* the flock and the branches of the vine. This analysis reveals therefore that the Johannine Church, enjoyed an intimate knowledge and love relationship with the Good Shepherd and the true vine identified as Jesus by the use of the "I AM" phrase.

It is this understanding of the on-going knowledge and love relationship that helps one to identify certain implications and challenges that the Johannine Church holds for the communal life of the Church in Africa. These implications and challenges are addressed from two dimensions: the church as a group and the individual members. The implications for the church as a group are centred around love and unity which are antidotes to the conflict which confession of faith in John and the African society inspires. Other implications and challenges embedded in the two mentioned are: obedience, fruit-bearing and protection which result from abiding faith in Jesus for the individual's love, unity, nurture, protection and obedience to the Lord of the Church.

The thesis concludes by upholding that the Church in Africa in its formative days suffered hatred, persecution and rejection as did the members of the Johannine

community. But this conflict situation, though not widespread today, is still found in areas where Islam and traditional religions are supreme. The research makes some recommendations for the Church today in order to help foster inter-faith relationship and peaceful co-existence in the world.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Having explored the implications and some challenges that the Johannine community hold for the Church in Africa from the perspective of the hypothesis set forth, this chapter will serve as a summary of the research. It will, however, make some relevant recommendations in attempt to reappraising the communal nature of the church in Africa. Therefore, the task of the chapter is two-fold: a summation and recommendations that can help the Church in Africa to pick up what it has lost in its community lifestyle and to call for change in areas where its communal nature has been compromised.

Now that one is aware of the tape which plays a harmonized version of the Johannine ecclesiological images and their implications, it should be reiterated that the conflict and consequent dialogue which the community and the Jewish synagogue community had, was precipitated by the high Christological confession of the Johannine community that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." For Jesus to be both Christ (*Χριστός*) and the Son of God carried dual meanings for the Jews. The implication for the Jews are grave, so much so that they had an eschatological hope of a future Messiah to come. Could

Jesus therefore be the eschatological Messiah for the Jewish redemption? As the Son of God, Jesus was misunderstood by the Jews to be their king in the ordinary sense of Jewish monarchy.¹ No wonder therefore did the confession of the community earn for them both social and spiritual ostracism from the common-wealth of the Jews.

It should as well be noted that there were certain individuals who would not boldly confess their faith in Christ for fear of losing their relationship with the synagogue (Ἀποσυνάγωγος = aposunagogos John 9:22). Though these believed in him, they were yet to belong to the sheep of Jesus' pasture and therefore could not lay claim to any inheritance from him. In other words, they were neither members of his sheep fold nor branches of his vine. The same were identified as those who loved the praise of men rather than of God and therefore were called 'secret disciples'. The make up of those undecided group were primarily those that Jesus of the Fourth Gospel addressed and persuaded to make public their confession of faith. In favour of the foregoing, Rensberger submits that the Johannine group was faced with crisis, as those who openly acknowledged their faith were expelled, while "others strove their secrecy to maintain their standing within the Jewish community."²

¹Oscar Cullmann, The Christology of the New Testament (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 111.

²David Rensberger, Johannine Faith and Liberating Community (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988), p. 26.

To summarize chapters two to four, this writer believes that the background of the faith community as highlighted leads one to the exploration of both the Johannine community and its literature respectively. On the origin of the community, it has been posited that the earliest members comprised of those disciples that Jesus chose and those introduced to him by John the Baptist when he identified Jesus as the "Lamb of God" (John 1:36). As to whether the community was Jewish or Hellenistic, one agrees that the Jewishness of the community cannot be denied, but also accepts that there were strong Hellenistic tendencies observable probably because the community was located in a Gentile region or because the world of the New Testament was Hellenistic. Whichever be the case, this writer is of the opinion that the Johannine community was Jewish in origin simply because they were members of the Jewish synagogue later expelled because of their Christological confession. The foundation of the community has been said to be rooted in the death of Jesus Christ.

On the nature of the community, this research finding upholds that it was sectarian, charismatic and estranged from the Jewish social and religious life. Its problems however ranged from ostracism and probably loss of relationship with family and friends, infiltration of wrong teachings by doctetists and death which was becoming a concern for the membership especially

