

Religious Debate held at Church of Christ, Lawson on Sat. Aug. 20, 2011

Proposition: All Christian forums (such as preachers' forum, elders' forum, brethren interactive forum, trustees forum, women forum, singles' forum, the Likeminds, etc.) outside the local congregation are unscriptural.

Affirm: Olumuyiwa *Asaolu* & Jobalo *Oshikanlu*

Deny: Oji O. *Oji* & Oscar *Uluocha*

Affirmative by Bro. Olumuyiwa *Asaolu*

Definitions and Preamble

The proposition earlier announced by the organizers was supposed to be modified based on our feedback; it is not just any or all Christian meetings that are under contention. *If the forums are truly 'Christian forums' there would be no need for a debate or for organizers to exempt Schools, Concerts, Cooperatives, etc. The focus is on forums that purport to be affiliated to the church and are involved in the work of the gospel, namely "religious forums."* The word forum means:

1. A means of expression e.g. web forum, town square, TV or radio program. (**A method**)
2. A meeting e.g. a get-together, an assemblage, conference, outing or seminar. (**An event**)
3. A group e.g. a home, a tribunal, a pressure group of representatives. (**A body**)

From <http://www.dictionary.com>, *Forum*: from Latin: public place; related to Latin foris **outside**

1. a meeting or assembly for the open discussion of subjects of public interest
2. a medium for open discussion, such as a magazine
3. a public meeting place for open discussion
4. a court; tribunal
5. (in South Africa) a pressure group of leaders or representatives, esp Black leaders or representatives
6. (in ancient Italy) an open space, usually rectangular in shape, serving as a city's marketplace and centre of public business

This debate according to the organizers is concerned with *'forums of standing arrangement and not ad-hoc meetings'* or venues, publications, broadcasts, etc. Therefore, the forums under consideration are not merely means of expression or meetings but are organized groups or associations that are contrasted with another body, the local congregation.

Proposition defined:

- **All:** "each and every one, the entire, altogether without exception, totality of"
- **Religious forums:** "organized groups constituted from across several local congregations that meets periodically to review, plan, influence or carry out matters affecting the churches or segments thereof."
- **Outside:** "apart from, beyond, outer or exterior to"
- **The local congregation:** "a recognizable assembly of Christians who meet at agreed times in a particular geographical locality, in order to worship and serve the Lord, based on NT directives; the local church."
- **Are:** "have the status of, being"
- **Unscriptural:** "not in accordance with the expressed will and harmonized word of God, as revealed in the sixty-six books of the Bible in general and authorized by the New Testament (NT) in particular."

Authority on any religious matter is predicated on direct statements, imperative accounts of action (approved examples) and implication of scripture or its silence (necessary inference). An unscriptural belief or practice is one that cannot be reasonably justified from the inspired word of God. This debate is not about whether Christians from various congregations may attend a local church's program. It is not to dispute the validity of a random meeting outside the church setting at social events such as marriage ceremonies, book presentations, trade fairs, concerts, etc. It is neither about whether autonomous congregations may freely cooperate by assisting one another. Nor is it on whether the aforesaid forums are humanly perceived to be constitutional or beneficial. ***Instead, the debate is on whether the very existence of a religious forum as a standing entity violates the scriptures. It is to ascertain whether Christians in the Bible created associations outside the local church and if we may do so today. We are considering the question: 'where is the scriptural authority for organized religious forums?'*** The burden of proof lies on our co-debaters.

Introduction

Which institution has God created...

1. As the body of true worshippers who worship in the spirit by Christ Jesus? _ John 4:24; Phil 3:1-3; Eph 3:21
2. As the pillar and ground of the truth to declare His manifold wisdom? _ 1 Tim 3:15; Eph 3:10; 1 Thess 1:7-8
3. As the forum of members and supplier of officers for His work? _ Roman 12:4-13; 1 Cor 12:27-31.

Unfortunately, when some think the **church** is not what it ought to be and feel that they can do better than the pattern in the scriptures, such create their own religious bodies, formulate their own plans and appoint their own officers, effectively sabotaging or diminishing the church of God! It is painful that one has to contend with ‘*denominations without, forums within.*’ From Bible studies, we understand and humbly assert that all religious forums such as the Elders forum, Preachers forum, Board of Trustees of Church of Christ - Nigeria, Brethren Interactive forum, etc. are unscriptural. These are recent human developments, previously non-existent. At the point of baptism, one becomes a member of the universal church or kingdom and body of all the saved, whose register is kept in heaven -Heb 12:22-23. However, a believer belongs to a local church based on mutual consent for fellowship as seen in Acts 9:26-28, Acts 20:7 & Heb 10:25. Local congregations are independent of one another as they are to be led by appointed leaders who serve under Jesus, the chief Shepherd –Acts 14:23; 1 Tim 3, 1 Pet 5:1-4, Rev 2-3. The Lord created the church as a distinct entity primarily for spiritual purposes –Eph 3 & 1 Tim 3:15. Other institutions such as the family, the society, the government or man-made organizations cannot fulfill the work of the church and should not attempt to usurp her role. God’s earthly work relating to the gospel is done through Christians, working as individuals or as local churches of Christ. “*From whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love*” -Eph 4:16 (ASV). The Bible teaches that the church is the only body for which Christ gave Himself and of which He is the savior -Col 1:18, Eph 4:4 & 5:25-27. It consists of individuals (1 Cor 12), not forums or denominations. Recall the proposition contrasts different forums to the local congregation yet recognizes that all such bodies are OUTSIDE not within it! These imply a reverse proposition that “*the local congregation is not the only scriptural forum for Christians to be members of, there is more than one body; the church is insufficient for God’s plan of salvation.*” Our co-debaters cannot shy away from this logical corollary!

Thesis

Why the modern spate of creation of various forums “**over and across**” the local congregations? The superstructure forums are not created for their members to just come around, say ‘hello/hi’ to one another and instantly disperse. ***Indeed forums exist to provide an alternative fellowship platform for doing the work of the local congregation (evangelism/edification/ benevolence) and to discuss issues pertaining directly or indirectly to the churches, in order to reach a ‘collective or consensual position’ to be advocated or implemented across the congregations!*** Every forum will seek to protect its members’ interest and regulate their activities. Each will first seek acceptance, then relevance and eventually dominance; by trying to monitor, outclass and direct the affairs of churches of Christ. Eventually, forum non-members and unrepresented congregations will be subtly ostracized, leading to avoidable factions. Sadly, these religious forums constitute an avenue for diversion of God-given resources that should be channeled into His church. Brethren, why dissipate time, energy, talent, wealth, etc. in a religious association which is foreign to the Bible? To establish or promote a standing forum is to demonstrate one’s belief in human ability to create a grand religious organization, greater than the local churches from which its members are drawn. Only Christ, the early apostles and prophets are the universal church officers who function in and over all churches of the saints. All other true church officers (Elders, Deacons, Preachers & Teachers) are appointed at the congregational level and have local jurisdiction. They should work for and always report to their base, even when *sent* on outside assignments. They lack scriptural authority to unionize and pressurize local churches along some uniform line of action. The forums serve narrow interests and ***are competing organizations*** to the local church as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Some Attributes of Every Organization

SN	Attribute	Example (local congregation)	Example (forum)
1	Name	Church of Christ -Mt:16:18 & Rm 16:16	Preachers Forum – Lagos
2	Address	11 Odubiyi Street, Lawanson -1 Cor 1:2	48 Orodu St, Ajegunle
3	Origin	In 1965 by divine will through Bro. Atobatele & late Bros. Asiegbu, Asuquo, etc. as part of Christ’s kingdom. –Mt 28:19	Some years back by human will through certain individuals as a professional body.
4*	Aims, objectives and functions stated in a	Serve God, declare His manifold wisdom, edify members and provide for her needy,	Protect members welfare, enlighten themselves, plan joint-outreach

	formal or informal Constitution or MOA	etc. based on the Bible –Acts & Eph 3	programs, etc. based on group policy
5*	Terms of membership	Must be a Christian -Acts 2:38-47	Must be a ‘recognized’ Evangelist
6*	Benefits of membership	Spiritual -Eph 1:3 & Rm 14:17	Social, material & psychological
7	Official hours	First day of the week, etc. -Acts 20:7	First Thursday of every month, etc.
8*	Officers	Pastors, Evangelists, etc.-Eph 4:11	Chairman, Secretary, etc.
9	Material property	Books, gifts, etc. -Col 4:16 & Phil 4:18	Literature, letter-heading, etc.
10	Costs (of finance)	Regular collection & expenses -1 Cor 16	Occasional fund raising & expenses
11	Characteristics	Has population, growth rate, recruits -Acts	Has population, growth rate, recruits
12	Disciplinary measures	Rebuke, disfellowship -1 Cor 5 & 2 Thess 3	Rebuke, suspension
13	Membership termination	Relocation, death (spiritual or physical) -Acts	Relocation, death, resignation

God created the local churches for a purpose, why do some establish forums purportedly for similar purpose? Why do others build their own denominations supposedly for similar purpose? We can and should cooperate without forming unscriptural bodies. If the desire is to disseminate information; e-mail/website, SMS, letters, magazines, books, etc. suffice. ***If the motivation is direct interaction, congregational programs and invitations suffice.*** While a church may invite Christians from other places to her programs for fellowship or edification, the invitees have the power to honour or reject such invitations. It is the local church, not the regional or universal church that is commanded to come together into one place, and thus the entity in which one must not forsake the assembly. Any local church may organize lectureships for officers and invite others as it is done for youths or sisters. Teaching and communication must be structured for people to benefit whether they are men, women, youths, spiritual babes or children. Preachers such as Timothy and Titus were equally enjoined to teach specific things unto the elderly women, youths, faithful men, etc. and would have done so in a very effective manner by addressing those groups in the assembly of the whole church and by further instructing them in separate sessions. That is the authority for a local church to segment her classes and programs. God allows a part of the local church to meet provided such meeting is under the jurisdiction of the congregation. This is the very reason why he directs that certain actions (e.g. Discipline, Communion) should be carried out “*when the whole church be come together into one place*” -1 Cor 5:4; 11:18-20. No group in a congregation should be a law unto themselves doing their own thing without care from other church members. For example, the local ‘youth fellowship’ is actually a regular meeting and class for youngsters as approved by the congregation.

When a local church organizes a teaching program, etc. for such youths and the event is publicized with invitations extended to other churches and outside speakers, it is still a LOCAL congregation’s program. It is within their divine mandate and they have control over such event. ***This is remarkably different from when an assuming or ambitious individual spearheads a named group across congregations and such organization conduct programs purporting to represent all churches of Christ; regionally, nationally or universally.*** Such presumptuous ones lack both the divine mandate (scriptural authority) and the saints’ collective mandate (natural approval). Contemporary examples include Church of Christ - Northern Youth Forum, Churches of Christ Singles’ Forum, Santos Coordinating Evangelists or Preachers Forum, Board of Trustees of the Church of Christ - Nigeria, Africans Claiming Africa for Christ, etc. Such bodies have no scriptural basis or precedent. The Bible has no account of organized bodies such as ‘Preachers Forum - Macedonia, Elders Forum of Asia, Galatian Churches Youth Forum, Achaia Singles’ Forum, Judea Church Leaders Wives Forum, etc.’ The modern forums and their works are not divinely assigned; they are associations pretending to be organs of the church. Though allegedly made-up of Christians, the BIF, BOT, EF, ACAC, etc. are *man-made religious forums*, the Saints Cooperatives & Bentol 2000 Summit are *commercial forums* alongside the entertaining/competitive Acapella Fiesta while the Singles forum & Likeminds are *social networking forums*.

Rebuttal of some ‘Arguments’ commonly used to justify forums

1. That ‘Preachers Forum’ is like Paul’s team

- Did Paul and his colleagues give themselves a **name or work outside** the church? His team was not an organization, unlike modern forums as shown in Table 1

- Preachers are servants of the local churches, **sent out by the congregation to work even in Paul's day –Roman 10:14-15**. See Acts [11:22-26 & 11:29-30 & 12:20 for JAJA], Acts [13:1-3 & 14:21 for AGA], Acts [15:1-3 & 15: 25-33 for AJAJ], Acts [15:40 & 21:17-19 for aGJ] (JAG = Jerusalem-Antioch-Gentiles)
- We humbly advise every preacher who lacks apostolic authority, to diligently study the work of Philip, Titus and Timothy. An Evangelist may be sent to go establish congregations and train others in the process. This differs from resident preachers formal monthly meeting, held to plan or review the affairs of local churches.

2. That Acts 15 contains an example of a forum

Is Acts 15 describing a BOT, BIF, PF or EF session? No!

- The truth was still being progressively revealed through the Apostles and Paul's apostleship was contested by some hence the need to seek authenticity at Jerusalem.
- It was a special meeting of the Jerusalem church with members present [vs 4, 7, 12-13, 22-23] not one of several scheduled meetings of any association across Jerusalem, Samaria, Antioch, Galatia, Asia, etc.
- It typifies a church meeting (with visitors reporting a matter about some members) not a standing forum.

3. That forums are implied in 2 Cor 8:16-24

Paul mentioned: Titus the volunteer... and our brethren... the messengers of the churches.

- **Are we familiar with 1 Cor 16:3-4 & Rm 15:25-26?** Congregations freely selected their own messengers for work with the apostles, when desired. Each would choose faithful and reputable brothers (see Acts 16:2). Not that a forum was conveyed to collectively elect representatives.
- After the Jos crisis in 2009, churches there wrote letters and designated some brothers as contacts through whom relief materials could be sent to them.
- It was **always the churches in action not forums** such as BOT, PF, BIF, etc.

4. That forums are necessary for unity

Should we therefore honour the invitation to join denominational fora and the World Council of Churches so as to be united with others who claim to be Christians? When Christ prayed for the unity of His followers through all ages, He based unity upon **believing the apostle's word** (John 17:20-21) **not on convocation of forums** such as CAN, BIF, etc. Is it possible to be '*one, of same mind and united*' with Christians whom one has never met? (Col 1:4-9, Eph 4:1-3) The assumption that the need for unity obligates us to create standing forums so churches would be consistent in outlook and efficient in operations is the very reason denominations have man-made creeds, ecclesiastical order and headquarters.

- The Laodecians were united with the Colossians (4:16) because they both respected the inspired apostle's word NOT because they formally unionized.
- The Corinthians were beseeched to 'speak the same thing' and avoid division -1 Cor 1:10-13. That requires understanding and humbly projecting the word of truth.

5. That forums are expedient for cooperation

Churches cooperated without standing forums in the NT. Many still follow that pattern in their work. Local officers lack scriptural authority to unionize and pressurize local churches along some uniform line of action. Dissatisfaction with God's local church arrangement is responsible for the superstructure associations or forums. **Do men desire to rule a grand religious organization, greater than the local churches from which its members are drawn?** Whether asked or not, individuals or churches, out of love and concern may reach out to offer help to a congregation but it is unscriptural to create an organized forum to stimulate cooperation among the local churches.

6. That national BOT is a Nigerian government requirement

Pg 91 of 'Autonomy issues & unity of the Church of Christ (Oji, 2009)' started thus: "**cooperation can exist without elevating one congregation above another or forming a central body to oversee others...**" If he truly believes that statement, why did he contest election to be a member of the Board of Trustees (BOT), the ruling organ of a central body registered as 'The Church of Christ – Nigeria'? The BOT wrote a human Constitution **to oversee** churches of Christ in

Nigeria. It claims legal rights to all church buildings and periodically summon churches delegates for National General Meetings. I have shown in a 2010 article (Genesis Vol 7 No 4 - *On church registration and matters arising*), both from legal and scriptural perspectives, that the supposition for a national BOT is **False**. The law of the land (Federal Constitution, 1999 as amended) grant **freedoms of religion, of association and of assembly**. Also, the CAC/ CAMA plainly shows that **registration is optional not mandatory**. Where desired, it should be done by individual congregations BECAUSE the Bible empowers each local church to be self-governed and managed by local officers under Christ –Acts 14:23, 1 Pet 5:1-4, Acts 20:28, 1 Tim 3, Heb 13:17, etc.

7. That forums have some advantages

Denominations too are perceived by people as having advantages, same goes for polygamy, celebrating Christmas, baptizing infants, substituting sprinkling for immersion or using instrumental music in worship.

- Claims of ‘advantages’ from a ‘good-intentioned’ but unscriptural forum are illusionary! Can a structure built on a crooked foundation endure?
- The dangers and ultimate disadvantage of standing religious forums far outweighs any apparent temporal benefit.
We can NOT help God!
- God does not accept excuses... The Bible is SILENT about forums but is very LOUD about local congregations.

NB: Several letters from forums, magazine articles (e.g. CRV published by Bro. Oji), etc. are useful to point out the errors of the forums and their claims (as the author demonstrates via PowerPoint presentation at the Debate).

Conclusions

The local churches should be strengthened and encouraged in their work. The early apostles’ inspired writings are available to guide each local congregation. Standing religious forums are unscriptural and unnecessary. ***You cannot be neutral and should be prepared to either welcome or challenge new groups such as Deacons Forum, Secretaries Forum, Ushers Forum, etc. and new levels e.g. Lagos Elders Forum, National Pastors Forum, African Overseers Forum and World Bishops Forum!*** It is amazing that many preachers find only the Elders Forum to be unscriptural while some elders find only the Preachers and Leaders Forum to be so. It should be obvious that all such forums stand or fall together, as observed by the Dec. 2010 Arise Newspaper Editorial titled “Preachers Forum: softly, softly.” Interestingly, that article concluded: *‘It is imperative for every Christian who loves Christ and His church, in times like this, to be eternally vigilant and watchful on what the forums (sects) in the churches are doing, as history always repeats itself in a very unsuspecting manner. And before one realizes it, it is too late.’* The editor’s call is inadequate for to tolerate sects in the churches is as sinful as creating them in the first place -1 Cor 3:3; 11:19 & Tit 3:10, James 4:17. Departure from the faith accompanied the veneration of one Bishop over all others in the unscriptural, worldwide council of Bishops spearheaded from Rome after the death of the apostles. George Santayana wrote: *“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”* Dear brethren, membership in the Lord’s church is associated with salvation (Acts 2:47, Eph 1:19-23 & 5:23) but membership of a forum is not. ***To avert a looming apostasy, let forums self-dissolve.*** I pray that this message will help many to discern the truth and see the need for repentance.

Epilogue: Why participate in this Debate organized by the Brethren Interactive Forum?

- The Bible commands each Christian to always be ready to gently answer anyone who questions his/her belief -1 Pet 3:15. It recorded many instances when our Lord was questioned by the Pharisees, Sadducees, Lawyers and Scribes - Mt 22. He laid the example of responding meekly.
- We are to fight the good fight of faith (1 Tim 6:12) and be set always for the defense of the gospel. Paul the apostle often reasoned with religious people, disputing and persuading about the kingdom of God. He even accepted the invitation to present his views before pagan Greek philosophers at the Areopagus -Acts 17, 18:4; 19:8.
- This is a public occasion to present our contrasting views for scrutiny, giving each of us an opportunity to weigh the Bible evidence, re-appraise our beliefs or involvement with religious forums and to research more on the topic to ascertain the truth –Acts 17:11 & 2 Cor 13:5

Affirmative Presentation by Jobalo Oshikanlu

Introduction: ***What are these forums?***

1. The organizers of this debate confirm that this debate focuses on the various “standing” forums amongst our brethren. The forums spotlighted are therefore not ad-hoc or random, nor singular or isolated meetings of brethren.
2. We do not refer to forums whose purposes are not primarily spiritual but set up as business outfits such as acappella fiesta, co-operative societies, Christian magazines, etc.
3. The forums referred to are not local churches of Christ i.e. they are “outside the local congregation”.
4. Part of the very essence of these standing forums is that they are not situated within any one congregation but draw their membership and attendance from multiple/several churches. Typically, such forum seeks to draw its membership from the churches of Christ in a particular geographical radius/area such as Lagos. That the members or attendees are Christians is the lone rationale for laying claim to the word “Christian” in describing “forums”, not that the New Testament uses the name “Christian” in describing such a forum.
5. Usually, each forum organizes its programmes and meetings through “coordinators” or “organizers” or “committees” or “persons in charge” or, sometimes persons described as “chairmen”, “secretary”, “treasurer”, etc. In order for a forum to be able to appoint or assign a person into any of these positions, such person must have been reasonably regular at the meetings of such forum.
6. Usually, these forums fund their programmes through the freewill contributions of their members, and several of them receive financial or material support from local churches, the most obvious of which is the use of churches’ meeting halls and other facilities for their programmes.
7. The ‘officers’, ‘coordinators’ or ‘persons in charge’ in these forums are not necessarily members of the church whose meeting hall and facilities are being put to use for the forums’ programmes. In other words, the local church is normally not the organizer, neither is it usually in charge of the forum/programme it is described as “hosting”.
8. Each forum therefore meets from time to time and organizes its own programmes, for which purposes, it deploys men and women, and brethren also commit their time, efforts and resources towards implementation.
9. Finally, while not being churches, they are set up by our brethren to assist/promote purposes for which local churches of Christ are concerned. Examples of the forums are given (see the proposition above), they are known to most of us. In other words, they are set up for the purpose of sharing spiritual fellowship, promoting the gospel, and taking doctrinal or administrative decisions or positions which are either binding on local churches, or local churches are encouraged to adopt.

There may well be additional descriptions or features of these forums not highlighted above. For the purpose of this write-up however, what is important is that all the above facts are TRUE of the forums which are the topic of our discussion, which facts are, clearly, features of full-fledged organizations established just like any other religious association set up by men. The forums are therefore real bodies, real organizations, and not merely existing on paper. It should therefore be untruthful for anyone to argue in this matter that they exist as organizations only in the minds of those of us who argue against them.

What is wrong with these forums?

1. A person becomes a member of the body of Christ – the Universal Church and Family of God – upon belief and obedience to the gospel up to baptism (1Cor 12:13; Acts 2:47; Eph 3:15; Col 1:13). Rising from the waters of baptism, the *numero uno* of all responsibilities of a member of the body of Christ is to place his membership in a local church (Acts 9:26-30; 13:1-3; 14:25-28; Heb 10:25). For a person to be in full fellowship with Christ and his body, such person must be a member of a specific local church as the epitome of the body of Christ, where the *super glue* that binds every man to Christ is “that which every joint supplieth [and] ... working in the measure of every part” (Eph 4:16). The local church is the only unit of operation designed by God where every individual Christian should share exclusive spiritual fellowship and serve the Master (Eph 3:21). The New Testament gives indication of no alternative

spiritual association for a Christian. In fact, as labourers and builders, we (like Christ who built the Universal Church) have been hired (Mat 20:1-16) to build churches, local churches (ICor 3:8-10), not any other spiritual bodies – **not even forums!** This is also because the local church is the only unit of organization known to the divine pattern expressed in the New Testament for carrying on the work of the gospel (Heb 8:5; ITim 3:15).

Membership of the local church is, effectively, the army position which God has assigned to each Christian (IITim 2:3-4; IICor 10:3-6; Eph 5:10-19). Why should you as a Christian abandon your army position, your divinely-ordained duty-post, and go to take up positions in organizations set up by men? Is it nothing to us that the Master says to each of us individually that “*let every man take heed how he builds*” and “*every man’s building work shall be tried of what sort it is*” ? (ICor 3:10-13)

2. These forums are “standing” organizations or associations engaging in spiritual fellowship and seeking to promote the gospel. Hence, although separate from local churches, they do what God designed for local churches to do, existing in parallel to local churches, and sharing resources with local churches. This clearly insults His Divine Majesty, and this is the same error of denominationalism that we condemn day-in, day-out. Our level of discontent with the simplicity of the divine institution is accelerating so hugely, as to increasingly seek to supplement the wisdom of God with human structures! (ICor 3:19; Heb 13:9)

Please remember that when a church makes a contribution or shares its resources, it establishes ties of fellowship with the recipient or beneficiary of such contribution or resource (Phil 4:15). By receiving support from local churches, these forums which have no place in the divine arrangements for the church revealed in the New Testament, become tied in fellowship to such local churches. Also, these forums assume temporary control over the facilities of a host congregation, even with the host congregation’s members in attendance. This is a corruption of the divine pattern of God for His church (Heb 8:5; ICor 3:16-17; IPet 5:2; IICor 2:17; Deut 22:9). As Christians, are we prepared to risk our fellowship with God by continuing to have a hand in this? (IIJohn 9)

3. Many of our local congregations today are in a pathetic state of spiritual deprivation because a lot of commitment, time, effort, moneys, and human capital resource are regularly diverted to these forums. Concerning our churches, Bro. Oji O. Oji wrote¹ that: “*We very easily suspend or cancel evangelism schedules in order to ‘trash’ a word or expression used by a member ... At the end ... we get so exhausted that no strength is left to face the real battle outside*” and that: “*We remain perpetually unknown even along some of the streets where we are located and have worshipped for many years*”², which is true! But has it never occurred to us that part of the reason for this situation is **the diversion of the investment due to our local churches to these forums?** Effectively, it is in the local church that we are commanded to be “steadfast, unmoveable, ALWAYS abounding in the work” (ICor 15:58). If our Lord requires us to ALWAYS abound in the work in the church, **there is no justification for our local churches having to compete with these forums for our spare time and resources.** We risk inability to account for this iniquitous misappropriation on the last day as a means of entry into the eternal home (Luke 16:1-12).
4. These forums provide an avenue, outlet and *forum* for insincerity amongst brethren in the work of the Lord. These days, one popular talk is about how door-to-door evangelism “*is not really working*”, and people are trying to find easier ways for this work to get done in a world where preaching God is increasingly old fashioned. But it is work; and not being easy, is a normal feature of work. Our brethren rather expend their time with, and for these forums. In reality, people do not really want to labour for Christ, but they want to inherit eternal life. We appear to be deceiving ourselves (Gal 6:4-5,7). The early Christians suffered a lot in this work (ICor 15:10; IICor 11:23-29), so as to receive God’s approval. How many of us who are ‘officers’ or ‘coordinators’ or ‘workers’ in these forums have participated in evangelism work in our local church in the last one month? How many of those of us who are regular at these forums are regular at all church meetings and work – we complain about not having enough time due to work – and yet from the little time we have, we give to these **unchristian** forums, and even attend their functions on days that our local church has set aside for its work! *Brethren, this ought not so to be.* I am not saying that door-to-

¹ *Autonomy Issues & Unity of the Church of Christ*, 2009.

² See pp.66 and 65 of Bro. Oji’s book.

door evangelism is not getting more difficult and unrealistic in a few areas. God is not to be blamed for that, but us, since we have diverted all the creative and innovative talent, meant for the development of new strategies in the church, to man-made forums.

5. These forums exist in denial of the principle of walking by faith (II Cor 5:7). How can the church designed by God to declare His manifold wisdom (Eph 3:10) be 'imperfect' enough as to benefit from assistance with human wisdom and human organizations (Isaiah 55:8-9)? Does God need our help, or we, His (Luke 3:8)? In our discontent with the Lord's structures, murmurings about how our evangelism is not working (I Cor 10:10; Phil 2:14-16), and persistent envy of the 'progress' being made by the denominations, let us pause and remember that it is God that gives "increase" to the work – and that it is merely for us to do the work with sincerity (I Cor 3:6-7). Let us remember that the preaching of the gospel is not only for the purpose of achieving conversion, but also to serve as a "witness" (Mat 24:14). Let us remember that the problem is with us, and not with the Lord or His word, and that, before running off to man-made structures, we have need for greater faith and patience since, although we may "have toiled all night, and have taken nothing", we must be ready at all times, at his word, to "let down the net" (Luke 5:4-6).

Some Common Erroneous Arguments in Support of the Forums:

1. *They are necessary for unity, so that we may speak the same thing:* Should we therefore join CAN today, because that is necessary for unity?? The "unity of the spirit" which the Master enjoins, is "unity of the faith" (i.e. following the faith as a unit) which comes by every man, in every nation under heaven, "hearing", "studying" (Rom 10:17; II Tim 2:15) and speaking nothing but the "truth in love" (Eph 4:3,13,15). It is not by presuming to help God with new ideas that bring his people together under man-made forums operating in parallel to His church (Heb 8:5; 13:9).
2. *The forums are expedient for planning/coordinating the work of God:* We need to stop being foolish about presuming to help God to properly coordinate work that cannot be coordinated under the arrangements He ordained for His church in His word (Is 55:8-9; Heb 8:5). The battle is not ours, but the Lord's. We merely need to stay in the positions He assigns to us, do only what He tells us, and leave Him to accomplish His own victory. The bible tells us this in VERY PLAIN LANGUAGE! (Josh 6:3-5; 10:11; Judges 7:2-3,7). The God of Israel that we serve has not changed (Heb 13:8; Gal 6:16). We also need to stop these forums usurping the authority of local churches by making decisions for them, and violating their scripture-ordained autonomy by commandeering the facilities of local churches for forum programmes (as highlighted above).
3. *In Acts 15, forum(s) decided a dispute for the church:* Brethren, we have used Acts 15 enough as a pre-text for violating God's design for His church. Acts 15 involved two churches – one, at Antioch, and the other, at Jerusalem. Other than the two churches, there were no forums of the type under debate here. The Antioch church sent delegates (vs.2) to verify a question of fact and truth from the Apostles at Jerusalem. What was the question to be verified? A doctrinal disputation arose in the Antioch church, arising from the preaching of some brethren who ostensibly had received such teaching, and brought same, **from the Apostles in Jerusalem!** This is clear from vs.24 where the Apostles confirmed "we gave no such commandment" to the false-teaching brethren. A church can still send delegates to verify any matter of fact from another local church today. But since the Apostles are no longer at Jerusalem or in any local church today, to verify matters of the truth, it is to the bible we go! (John 17:17)
4. *Paul had teams he went about with from the various churches, and with whom he gave oral and written directives:* Please tell me if anyone today is an Apostle like Paul who part-revealed the truth by word of mouth in those days, and by epistle today (II Thess 2:15; I Cor 13:9). The brothers who travelled on preaching tours with Paul were very often identifiable by name (See Acts 20:4). You could hardly list the specific brethren who are part of each of the Forum under debate because, as pointed out in the introduction above, usually all brethren (or a specific category of brethren e.g preachers) from churches in a geographical area are encouraged to be part of each Forum. This is why a separate and specific name has had to be coined for each Forum (e.g. "Brethren Interactive Forum"). If each Forum was merely some individuals carrying out some unique purpose (like Paul and his companions), no specific name or

description for each Forum would have been necessary. The composition of Paul's team also regularly changed. But the standing invitation to these Forums is to the same pool of persons – all brethren. That is why each Forum cannot do without committees or coordinators. They are necessarily full-fledged religious bodies offering platforms for work and worship, as men's alternative to the only one designed by the Almighty God, which platforms are for uprooting and burning at the end of time (Mat 15:13). The gimmick of finding all kinds of exquisite analogies, witty explanations and clever packaging to becloud corruption of the will of God, and thereby side-step God's organizational plan for His work is a very ancient one, as ancient as the Serpent's clarification, in the Garden of Eden, in expanding upon its statement that "You shall not surely die" (Gen 3:4).

5. *The Forums assist in sharing correspondence, comparative experiences, gospel materials and fostering interaction:* Nothing wrong with such intention. As I encouraged Bro. Elijah and Bro. Olomo last year, convince your local church to organize good programmes, and extend invitation to brethren in other churches, and invite me too. But I will not attend a Forum (outside the local church arrangement) for any topic other than to consider the scriptural propriety of such Forum. To do otherwise would be lawlessness (Mat 7:23) i.e. "acting without divine authority".
6. *What is wrong with brethren coming together interactively?* A Christian may throw a birthday party or other kind of party, and invite Christians from all over the world! That would not be sin, even if item 2 or 3 of the day's programme is a gospel preaching session, and even if he throws the party every year. But if amongst the primary purposes of such regular party is to plan for or implement items of worship, plan for evangelism and periodically assign Christians to undertake various tasks to facilitate these, the entire scheme becomes as sinful as denominationalism!

The home is a forum too. A home can and should engage in items of worship, and could evangelize. But the home does not thereby corrupt the New Testament, because (apart from being a divine institution too) the home is not primarily established for the work of the gospel. The home is primarily for company (of man and woman), procreation, physical well-being, etc. The home is not primarily or exclusively made for furtherance of bible teaching, even though bible teaching will help the members be Christ's ambassadors. The Forums under consideration are primarily in place for work that the Lord assigns to local churches.

7. *Some Forums (e.g. Board of Trustees' Forum) are necessary due to government directives:* As a lawyer, I would refer you to a legal article I wrote in 2002 where I refuted the notion amongst many brethren that Nigerian law compels the registration of churches, which necessitated putting Trustees in place³. I highlighted that there were advantages as well as disadvantages of incorporating Trustees, and that every local church is well placed to decide for itself to incorporate, or not to. Several years after, I was informed that one church in Ibadan tried to register on its own, but one of the so-called "Church of Christ - Nigeria" Trustees petitioned the CAC, blocking the registration as a statutory conflict. *This clearly underscores one of the significant reasons why we have these Forums – **the desire for political influence and power within the brotherhood by some of our brethren.*** It is very possible to challenge the petition blocking that local church's registration – but it will entail material cost in money and time, which I decided was not prudent use of resources committed into my trust by God, at least not at that time.
8. *Why can I participate in a club or secular association, but condemn a forum of my own brethren?* If a club or other secular association invites me to give a talk about my faith, I should, and will go (IPet 3:15). Note that those are secular organizations or bodies. Such bodies have their primary goals which are secular in nature, and hence, they are not set up to do what the Lord has designed to be the responsibility of His church. The fact that a non-religious institution tries to promote the spiritual well-being of its members would not change its essential substance or primary purpose, more so if there is no tie of fellowship established between it and a local church. Other than the church, a Christian should simply not be part of any religious association, unless it is merely an arrangement under the authority of a specific local church.

³ Please contact me should you need a copy of the legal article: jobalo99@hotmail.com.

Conclusion: I beg you, brethren. Think deeply about these truths of scripture, open your eyes and stop diverting resources and energies that are justly due to our local churches, to man-made forums. We will achieve greater than we can imagine if we tow the right line, with faith and patience (Luke 5:4-6). We should maximize the potentials of our churches, and not continue to leave them in starvation and lack of cultivation as we currently do – our God is still the same Great God of old as revealed in His word. Let us stop trying to help God with man-made structures. He does not need our help – He can accomplish the salvation of as many as He likes without us, if He wants to (Luke 3:8). We should simply do what He tells us by staying in the army positions that He has assigned to each one in His church – instead of wondering off like we continue to do.