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ALL CHRISTIAN FORUMS (Such as Preachers forum, Elders forum, Brethren interactive forum, Trustees forum, Women forum, Spinsters forum, the Likeminds {Bible foundation forum, Children Bible Quiz forum, Edo brethren evangelism forum, Imo claiming Imo for Christ forum, Radio/TV evangelism forum, ICT forum, Arise/Genesis publishing forum, Healing Hands/Churches of Christ Relief find, etc})
OUTSIDE THE LOCAL CONGREGATION ARE UNSCRIPTURAL.

Introduction:

The body of Christ is one universally. The so called local congregations are conveniences that resulted from geographical limitations. Autonomy is a fall out from it. However, autonomy does not override the oneness of the body of Christ. Instead, it submits to the overall canopy of unity of the church so that the people of God can freely flow across board and still respect each others' privileges. Forums provide platforms for social and spiritual interaction among believers. Some may not be necessary by virtue of degree of usefulness. Some uninformed or power hungry members can abuse the platform. All we need to do is to attack the abuse and not to condemn or destroy the platform. May God help us.

Definitions:

Forum, according to Longman Active Study Dictionary is an occasion or place where people can discuss an important subject.

Oxford learner's dictionary of current English defines forum as a place where people can exchange opinions and ideas on a particular issue.

(With this definition, this debate is a forum).

The Church is one

The church of Christ is one in the universal sense.

One in the local assembly, and

One in dispersed form as when it scattered under persecution at Jerusalem in the days of the apostles, Acts 8: 3 - 8.

The universal church is the body of Christ in its totality. Any other unit is a subset that cannot rival the main body.

Obsession

The primary obsession of the church owner, Christ, is unity. The universal church is the one body. Believers, individually and local congregationally are members of the body.

Separate and absolute individualism of the local units negates the unity or oneness of the whole system. Of course, each will do what seems right in her own judgment or understanding in disregard to others' position or feelings on the matter.

Unity is different from co-existence.

Co-existence is living side by side with or without anything bringing the parties together. It is separation, you do your own thing and I do mine, life continues. Co-existence is a time bomb waiting to detonate. It midwifes the situation where everyone does what seems good in his/her own eyes of Judges 21: 25.

Other facts about the church universal

It is not a building owned by a local congregation where worship takes place.

But a body of believers who are called out to share one faith and one goal.

They can work as a geographically restricted group though with thin walls to allow exchange and passage of nutrients from one to the other.

Or as a body that has some specialties which flow back and forth to one another.

Eph. 4: 15, 16.

15 But speaking the truth in love, we may grow up into

Him in all things, who is the head, *even* Christ,

16 from whom the whole body being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working of each part, causes growth of the body to the edifying of itself in love. Note that the body is joined together and every joint supplies to the pool for circulation to the benefit of the entire body.

Col. 2: 18, 19.

18 Let no man disqualify you of your reward by delighting in *false* humility and the worship of angels, intruding into those things that he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind,

19 and not holding fast to the head, from whom all the body, being nourished and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with the increase of God.

Note again that the body is nourished collectively and held together by the joints and ligaments that transfer nutrients back and forth from one part to another.

Platform

It, the universal church, is the platform for propagating the whole counsel of God Eph. 3: 10.

It is the pillar and ground of the truth I Tim. 3: 15.

To assign this attribute to the local congregation exclusively is to erect artificial walls that separate instead of unite the church.

Unity is in the universal church

Hence any scriptural baptism is into it and cannot be contested by any local church, Acts 2: 47. Rather, the local church absorbs such into fellowship.

Any scriptural disfellowship in a local church is an expulsion from the universal church and it binds everyone, I Cor. 5: 4, 5.

A local church can organize a scriptural function like evangelism solo and cannot be said to violate the scriptures even though there is no such example in the Bible.

A member or group from a local church can do likewise.

Members of the church across congregations can as well do same and no scripture is contradicted.

That was why Paul picked up Timothy from another local church to form his team of Acts 16: 1 – 3, 4.

In the same vein, inter-local congregational cooperation both concurrently and jointly in this matter is scripturally safe and acceptable. Cf Acts 15: 25 – 27; 16: 4, 5.

When the work is done by any of the above, it is the church working.

Moreover, any proceeds from any evangelism effort go to the church.

However, in such working relationship, participants must be cautious to shield off or minimize abuse.

Unity functions in interaction, cooperation and joint action.

It is fully made manifest in the oneness copiously preached in the bible such as the one body, one nation, one family or household and so on. Unity gives birth to peace which we all need and preach. Unity can be achieved in informal or formal relationships across all stakeholders.

Eph. 2: 13-23

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

14 ¶ For He is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation,

15 having abolished in His flesh the enmity, *which is* the law of commandments *contained* in ordinances, in order to make in Himself of the two one new man, *thus* making peace,

16 and that He might reconcile both to God in one body by the cross, by which He put to death the enmity.

17 And *He* came and preached peace to you who were far off and to those who were near.

18 For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.

19 ¶ Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

20 And *you* are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the chief *cornerstone*,

21 in whom the whole building fitted together grows to a holy temple in the Lord,
22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

The foregoing passage is filled to the brim with the message of oneness (4 times) and togetherness (2 times), all in reference to the church.

Forums are Biblical

When Christ said in Matt.18: 20 where two or three are gathered in his name that he is in their midst, he did not say so exclusively in the context of a local congregation. It includes intra and inter-congregational gathering of his people.

So, in this spirit of unity preached by him, his apostles and their direct converts practiced inter-congregational cooperation and forums covering edification, evangelism and benevolence.

Edification Forum – Acts 15: 1-4, 13-22. The Antioch church sent a high powered delegation to Jerusalem to tackle an issue that rocked the church's foundations. They were met on arrival by their counterparts in Jerusalem. In joint effort, the two congregations went into a crucial conference with themselves to resolve the matter and by God's grace they came out of it happier to the glory of God.

Evangelism Forum in the Bible – Acts 15: 25-27; 16: 4-5. Antioch and Jerusalem churches teamed up to do evangelism.

Benevolence Forum – 2 Corinth. 8: 18-24.

v. 18 A brother praised in all churches.

v. 19 The brother was chosen by the churches, how?

v. 20 Gift was administered to the churches by us, who?

v. 23 They are messengers of the churches, local congregations?

v. 24 Show them love as we boast about you.

1 Cor. 16: 3 Whosoever the Corinthian church chose to carry their relief to Jerusalem would work with Paul and his team.

Apostles' examples are not binding when they serve as methods of carrying out a command. So, we are not limited to what they did or did not do, and their methods. Hence today we travel by car, train or airplane, etc to do the work of the Lord. We use the Postal agencies, the mass media facilities and others to preach.

We are, however, bound by the commands and principles.

Abuse is possible

Virtually everything involving the human being is subject to abuse.

Politicians, professionals and even church officers such as Diotrephes of

3 John 9, 10 have been indicted in this matter.

So also Alexander the coppersmith, 2 Tim. 4: 14, 15.

Both Autonomy and Cooperation can be abused by power hungry leaders.

Though abuse corrupts a system that is pure on its own, it does not make the structure to become evil in itself and so should not cause its death. Instead, all hands should be on deck to flush it out.

Why Forums?

Every forum is to address a particular issue that can be of benefit across local churches. For instance, the TV forum is for the benefit of all congregations even those outside Lagos. Contribution to its sustenance is voluntary.

The Brethren Interactive forum is a bridge rather than wall builder among the local congregations.

Children Bible Quiz forum is a nursery for tomorrow's church.

The Trustees forum is a legal entity to represent the church in government related matters.

Bible foundation forum wants to make the Bible available to everybody.

So is the preachers' forum a learning ground for all through interaction.

ARE ALL CHRISTIAN FORUMS OUTSIDE THE LOCAL CONGREGATION UNSCRIPTURAL?

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Introduction

Some Christians are of the personal persuasion and opinion that any Christian forum outside the local congregation is unbiblical and hence, sinful. Those who hold such a viewpoint are convinced in themselves that having Preachers' Forum, Elders' Forum, Brethren Interactive Forum, Board of Trustees, Youth Forum, Sisters' Forum and such like, is against the New Testament pattern of church organization and cooperation. They are of the opinion that the Bible did not authorize the formation and functioning of any Christian forum outside the local church. Moreover, they argue and express the fear that any forum other than the local church amounts to a superstructure that is above the local church, and hence a lethal threat to the autonomy of the local church. Consequently, they have been calling on the existing Christian forums to self-dissolve or risk going to hell.

The question, however, is: From a Biblical point of view, are ALL CHRISTIAN FORUMS outside the local congregation actually unscriptural? This is exactly the poser this paper aims at debating on.

Definition of Terms

Church: (Gr. *ekklesia*): A called out assembly. An assembly, congregation or fellowship of the disciples of Christ. There are at least three senses or contexts in which the word church is used in the Bible. We have both the visible and invisible catholic or universal church, which encompasses the whole body of the redeemed or professing Christians throughout the world, all those whom the Father has given to Christ (Matt. 16:18; Eph.1:22-23; 5:23, 25, 27, 29; Heb. 12:23); the regional or sectional church which comprises all the Christians in a particular city, whether they assembled together in one place or in several places for religious worship. For example, all the disciples in Antioch, forming several congregations, were one church (Acts 13:1; Gal. 1:22; 1Thess. 2:14); and the local church (Rom. 16:5; 1Cor. 16:1; Gal. 1:2; Col. 4:15; Phil. 1:1). So the church does not exist only in the context of the local congregation. Any assembly, congregation or gathering of Christians for the purpose of worshipping and doing the work of God is a church of Christ (cf. 1Cor. 11:18; 14:4-5, 12, 19, 23, 28, 35; Heb. 2:12).

Local congregation: an identifiable collection of Christians meeting either permanently or temporally at a specific geographical locality and at a given time.

Forum: According to the Encarta Dictionary, a *forum* is "a medium ... in which the public may debate an issue or express opinions; a meeting to discuss matters of general interest." A forum is a veritable platform or arrangement that enables persons who share some common interest, goals and concerns to meet and interact freely towards achieving certain set objectives. Here we are looking at *forum* as a recognizable body or entity which organizes and participates in a programme, as well as forum as an avenue, a platform, an event, an arrangement which affords likeminded individuals the opportunity to

meet and share ideas, experiences, etc. Of course our interest here lies in Christian forum, which is explained below.

Fellowship: The KJV Dictionary defines *fellowship* as companionship; ...; mutual association of persons on equal and friendly terms; ...; partnership; ...; communion; intimate familiarity. (See also 1John 1:3-7).

Christian forum: a gathering, assembly, congregation, company, collection or fellowship of Christians; a body of Christians. Every Christian forum – be it Youth Lectureship, Sisters Lectureship, Preachers meeting, and so on – is a form of fellowship. The Bible encourages us to have fellowship one with another (1John 1:3,7; Heb. 10:24-25). The Bible did not say that Christian fellowships should only be limited to the local church setting.

Unscriptural: that which is clearly against any established command, will, pattern, precept, example, or principle of God as revealed in the Bible, which He has given to guide the conduct and practices of His true worshippers in all matters pertaining to life and godliness.

Autonomous: politically independent and self-governing; able to choose or make decisions and act on them as a free and independent moral agent; existing, reacting, or developing as an independent, self-regulating; self-sufficient organism (Microsoft® Encarta® Premium Suite 2004). Each local congregation of the Lord's church is, to some extent, autonomous. But that autonomy is only relative; no single congregation is absolutely autonomous. It should be noted too, that the fact that each congregation is somewhat autonomous does not preclude inter-congregational cooperation. Again, let it be reiterated that no local congregation is absolutely autonomous, since each congregation is only but a part of the universal church of the living God. Local congregations are interdependent, rather than being totally independent, as some people erroneously believe and teach.

Christian Forums Are Not Unscriptural

Christian forums other than the local assembly are both lawful and expedient. Elders or Preachers or Youths or Sisters from different congregations can actually meet, although it is not mandatory that they must do so. We now have Elders Forum, Preachers Forum, Youth Forum, Sisters Forum, Preachers and Leaders Forum, Brethren Interactive Forum, etc. From a scriptural point of view, there is nothing wrong in having such forums.

In Matthew 18:19-20 Christ says where two or three are gathered together in His name that He is in their midst. This has been described as the Magna Charta of the church, guaranteeing its rights and privileges, and presenting the only divine gathering center for God's Assembly. If a gathering of Christians from different local congregations is in the name of Christ He recognizes, honours and approves of such a gathering with His divine presence. To gather in the name of Christ means to assemble in His authority. That is, things done at such a gathering must be done in accordance with the principles laid down in the Bible, and they are done decently and orderly to the ultimate glory of God. This passage or indeed any other in the Bible did not say it is ONLY a local church that MUST organize such a Christian gathering for it to be considered scriptural.

The expression "in my [Christ's] name" (see also John 16:23) means in or under the authority of Christ. Christ's name or authority is the believer's power of attorney. Those who truly believe in and call on the name of Christ have the right to gather together to do His will or seek His face. So gathering in His name demands ensuring that whatever is done at such a gathering will only be those things that will eventually bring glory and honour to Him. Everything must be done in His name and to the glory of the Father (Col. 3:17; 1Cor. 10:31).

As noted by a Bible commentator, the name of Christ is the Christian's power of attorney. The power of attorney means the legal and written authority to work or transact business for another. All believers have

the full legal and family rights to use the name of Christ in fellowship (Matt. 18:5; Luke 9:48), worship (Matt. 18:20; 1Cor. 1:10), baptism (Matt. 28:19; Acts 8:16), good deeds (Mark 9:41), preaching/teaching (Luke 24:47; Acts 8:12), healing (James 5:14-16), praise (Eph. 5:20; Heb. 13:15), doing the work of Christ (Mark 16:17-20; John 14:12-15), judgement (1Cor. 5:1-5; Acts 13:6-11; 2Thess. 3:6), etc.

Any gathering of the saints that is in the name of Christ, He supports it and honours it with His divine presence – He will be in their midst. Again listen to Christ: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20).

The expression “two or three” in Matthew 18:19-20 should be understood to mean any group of believers in Christ (i.e. Christians), and not only the local church. Any number of believers greater than one is a church and can gather together regularly or irregularly for a God-glorifying purpose. It does not really matter whether the believers are all from one local congregation or from different local congregations. For instance, this present gathering is a church. If the Christians gathering willingly agree amongst themselves to meet, there is no problem with that arrangement (Matthew 18:18; Amos 3:3).

He that is not against us is for us; he that is not gathering with Christ is scattering (Matt. 12:30; Mark 9:40; Luke 11:23). So long as the existence of a Christian forum is not inimical to the doctrine and existence of the church, then there is nothing wrong with it. The Bible says unto the Lord shall the gathering of His people be (Gen. 49:10); Christ is the gathering centre of His people. So long as the gathering or forum is by the saints (God’s children) and unto the Lord (that is, for the purpose of worshipping and serving God in glory), then it is acceptable unto Him (cf Matt. 18:19-20; Psalm 50:5).

What should be the Scriptural relationship among local congregations of the Lord’s church? “There are two possibilities with regard to their relationship with each other. They may exist as independent Assemblies, as individual units responsible only to Christ the head in heaven, as some teach and practice, or they may function in unity with each other, carrying out collective as well as local responsibilities, as is taught and practiced by others” (R.K. Campbell, *The Church of the Living God*, p225). Our position in this paper is the second option, that is, the various local congregations functioning in unity with each other; this is what we see in the Bible. Although there may be several congregations of the Lord’s church, yet they all make up the one Body of Christ. 1Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:1-16; and Col. 2:19 teach us the wonderful unity that exists among all the various and diverse members of the Body of Christ – the church.

God is not the author of confusion (1Cor. 14:33). Hence it is His will that all the churches of the saints should teach and practice the same thing, so that everything will be “done decently and in order” (1Cor. 14:40). Several passages in the Bible clearly indicate the unity of New Testament congregations and, hence the unity that should exist among the Assemblies of believers in teaching and practice. (See for example, 1Cor. 1:2; 4:17; 7:17; 11:16; 14:33; 16:1-2; 16:19; 2Cor. 1:1; 11:28; Gal. 1:1-2; Rom. 16:16; Acts 9:31; 15:1-31; Rev. 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22). These passages and several others in the NT show that the Holy Spirit was not (and is still not) thinking of any local Assembly as standing independently of Assemblies of believers elsewhere, but links them up with “all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord” (1Cor. 1:2).

The council at Jerusalem as recorded in Acts 15:1-35 involved the assembling of brethren from more than one congregation; hence the outcome of the meeting was also communicated to more than one congregation. This is an apostolic example showing that whenever the need arises Christians from different congregations can actually assemble together to dwell on issues of common interest, ultimately aimed at maintaining the purity and unity of the church of God and ensuring that God is worshipped in Spirit and in truth.

In Acts 13:1-3 we see a clear example of several local churches in the city of Antioch coming together to fast and pray to the Lord. (NB: the word ‘church’ in v1 should actually be rendered ‘churches’ i.e. local

churches in Antioch, as in 1Cor. 16:1; 2Cor. 8:1; Gal. 1:2, 22. The same explanation goes for 1Cor. 1:2. The King James Study Bible, margin).

The Bible did not say or even imply that it is ONLY a local congregation that has the divine mandate to organize and invite brethren from other congregations to a religious programme. An individual brother or sister, or a group of brethren can organize a spiritually uplifting programme and invite brethren from various congregations. If a group of like-minded Christians should organize a programme and invite brethren from various congregations, that does not make the group a super structure larger than the local church. And if a local congregation willingly decides to participate in a Christian programme organized by a group of brethren, that does not mean that the congregation has lost or surrendered its autonomy.

Apart from the meetings of a local Assembly, there are other meetings which could be held among a gathering of Christians. As noted by brother R. K. Campell in his book *The Church of the Living God*, "Such meetings should be entirely in the hands of those who are competent and who assume responsibility for them. The meetings which Paul held at Ephesus in the synagogue and in the school of Tyrannus would be examples of meetings conducted by an individual (Acts 19:8-10)." Other meetings of the church besides Assembly meetings would include Christian Workshops, Gospel meetings, children's meetings (e.g. Quiz Programme, Bible recitation programme), Youth meetings (e.g. Youth Lectureship, Retreat or Camping Programme), Sisters' Lectureship, Prayer/Fasting programme, Thanksgiving and Praise worship programme, Preachers' Forum, and so on.

The views, opinions, suggestions, or decisions made at any of such forums cannot and must not be made binding on any local congregation. Congregations are and should always be, free to accept or reject any views expressed at any gathering of saints irrespective of whether such a gathering was organized by a local church, a group of brethren, or an individual. However, before accepting or rejecting any viewpoint concerted effort should be made to examine it thoroughly in the light of the Scriptures.

There is nothing wrong in Elders, Preachers and/or other church leaders/members from various congregations coming together once in a while to share ideas, experiences and challenges, and discuss any matters of common interest. However, such a coming together must not result in the establishment of an institutional superstructure larger than the local church, or the formulation of policies or legislations that would eventually be made binding on local congregations.

There is freedom of association... When Paul and Barnabas had a disagreement over John Mark they separated for a while, resulting in Paul partnering with Silas while Barnabas moved on with John Mark. Later on they all came together again and continued working as co-labourers in God's vineyard (See Acts 15:36-41 and 2Tim. 4:11). To say that any Christian forum other than the local church is unscriptural is to violate or deny the principle of freedom of association.

Do preachers from different congregations have the right to meet? Do Elders of various congregations have the right to meet? Do youths from diverse congregations have the right to meet? Do sisters of various local congregations have the right to meet? If they have the right to meet, which I believe they do, then what is wrong in their having a forum? When elders, preachers, youths, sisters, or brethren generally from different congregations meet in fellowship what portion of the Scripture have they violated?

What should really bother us is not that some saints from different congregations are gathering. Instead we should be concerned about the intent and outcome of such a gathering. The questions we should be asking are: Who are those meeting? Why are they meeting? Where are they meeting? When are they meeting? How are they meeting? Perhaps the most critical of the questions is *why* they are meeting. The scripturalness of the meetings of the various Christian forums can best be judged by considering the motive behind holding such meetings as well as their outcomes/impacts. If such meetings are held for any reason other spiritual, and/or the outcomes of the meetings are contrary to established Biblical doctrine or principles governing the church and Christian conduct, then there is absolutely no need for such meetings.

So long as any gathering of brethren from various congregations does not amount to the usurpation of the authority and functions of the local church, then there is nothing unscriptural about such a gathering. Christian Forums complement rather than compete with local congregations. There is no single passage in the Bible that prohibits or condemns Christians meeting outside the local church. Why then do we condemn that which the Bible does not condemn?

The Bible says we (Christians) are all fellow citizens and members of one family (Eph. 2:19). We should not hide under the guise of autonomy of the local congregations to create walls of partition around us. That will negate the unity Christ prayed for, for His disciples.

The organizing or holding of forums is both lawful and expedient. It derives its legitimacy from the principle of expediency. In other words, it is both lawful and expedient for Christians from different local congregations to occasionally organize and participate in any forum that affords them the golden opportunity to meet and interact in sweet fellowship for the service of God.

It should be noted that the expression “local congregation” or “local church” is not found anywhere in the Bible. Can we then say that that expression is unscriptural? The word “autonomy” is never used anywhere in the Bible in connection with a congregation. Is it then unscriptural or sinful to say that each local congregation is autonomous? That a word or concept is not expressly used in the Bible does not simply make the word or concept unscriptural and, hence, sinful. A practice, word, or concept is unscriptural and sinful if it clearly violates any known Will and Word of God.

Those opposed to having forums consider such (forums) as an inter-congregational organization, which according to them is not authorized in the Bible. They argue that the only recognized Christian forum is the local congregation. But the Bible did not say the only Christian forum that is authorized and, hence, acceptable to God is the local congregation or assembly.

Brethren from different congregations gathering together under one umbrella or forum is a form of church cooperation. And there is nowhere in the Bible where church cooperation is forbidden. And for churches to cooperate effectively there is need for some sort of coordination. Apparently Paul and some other brethren coordinated the various local congregations to send relief materials to the church at Judea hit by drought and famine. Such a centrally coordinated arrangement did not make the participating churches to lose their respective autonomy. The essence of the coordination was not to undermine the autonomy of the local churches, but for better efficiency and to achieve a greater effect within the shortest possible time.

Permit me at this juncture to quote in part the views expressed by William Woodson while reflecting on the topic “*May one congregation disfellowship another?*” According to Brother Woodson,

“While autonomous, churches in the New Testament cooperated with each other to achieve legitimate good works. When information came of a famine in Judea, disciples in Antioch determined, ‘every man according to his ability,’ to send relief unto the brethren there. This relief was sent to the elders in Judea by the hands of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11:27-30). On a later occasion, Paul gathered relief to deliver to brethren again in Jerusalem and Judea (Rm. 15:25-27). In ‘providing for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of all men’ (2Cor. 8:21), Paul encouraged the churches to designate men who would accompany him in the collection and distribution of the funds involved. Two instances stand out showing a healthy cooperation of churches. First, a brother whose name is unknown, ‘was chosen by several churches to ... engage in this activity with Paul. These churches knew, respected, and chose the same man – an example of their cooperation with each other in providing the designated relief [see 2Cor. 8:16-24; 12:17-18]. Second, other churches selected ... particular men (sic) to accompany Paul. These were Sopater of Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus of Thessalonica, Gaius of Derbe,

and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia, as well as Timothy (Acts 20:4, cf. “whomsoever ye shall approve by your letters, them will I send to bring your liberality unto Jerusalem” (1Cor. 16:3)).

“The churches were aware, at least to some degree, of each other in different places and they cooperated with each other in various good works. Their autonomy was preserved, but cooperation was also present. They did not isolate themselves from each other, and they were not lacking in true and genuine interest in each other and concern for ‘the brotherhood’ (1Pet. 2:17).”

It is the mind of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit and the apostles of Christ that there should be unity among the local assemblies of the church of the living God. To achieve this priceless, much cherished unity there should be uniformity of faith (belief), teaching, doctrine and practice across the brotherhood based on the Holy Scriptures. To strengthen and sustain this unity there should be a circle of regular fellowship among the local congregations.

The church should be seen as a single entity or system composed of many discernible components and subsystems. Like in every system, these numerous components and subsystems are coordinated, and hence function and interact in a cooperative and harmonious manner to achieve the set of goals and objectives for which the system is designed. Forums, workshops, lectureships, conferences, seminars etc. are veritable platforms for providing the much needed coordination or linkages among and between local assemblies (cf Eph. 4:15-16). This is the example we see in the Bible. No local congregation should exist as an island or in isolation, as an independent entity. To maintain the purity, unity and oneness of the one body of Christ – the church – the local congregations must necessarily be interrelated and interdependent.

Those opposed to having any Christian forums other than the local church argue and allege that forums violate the principle of autonomy and lack Bible authority. Yet they have not been able to prove with any concrete and practical evidence where and how a forum violated the autonomy of any local assembly or where exactly in the scriptures Christian forums are expressly forbidden. Though each local congregation may be a distinctively recognizable entity, yet they are all inter-related and inter-dependent, being members of that one body of Christ. In a sense, Christian forums can be seen as the ligaments joining the various local assemblies; they provide a linkage and rallying point for the churches of Christ in any geographical region.

Perhaps it will be quite instructive reminding us that the church of Christ or Christianity does not operate on the basis of straight-jacketed, iron-cast laws as in the Old Testament order, but on the basis of Holy Spirit-inspired, healthy principles interlaced with grace. There is no law, precept, pattern, example or principle in the Bible that prohibits inter-congregational concurrent cooperation either in the area of evangelism, benevolence, edification, or worship. Hence those who are condemning Christian forums on the ground that they are unscriptural are simply trying to make a law where there is none. We must all rise up and strongly oppose such a legalistic and primordial tendency, which is reminiscent of the much discredited and despicable attitude of the Pharisees of the old. We must not allow some attention-seeking individuals or groups to plunge the church of Christ into the dark abyss of dogmatism and religious bigotry. Christ has set us free, making us one with God by destroying once and for all the middle wall of partition that used to divide and separate us. Why then would anyone want to divide us again under the guise of church autonomy – a concept largely misunderstood and abused by many? For autonomy does not in any way preclude inter-congregational cooperation. A local church does not lose its autonomy simply by occasionally co-jointly cooperating with other congregations to accomplish a common goal to the glory of God.

Benefits of Christian Forums

There are numerous benefits accruable from Christians from various congregations jointly participating in activities organized by a Christian forum. Such benefits include:

- Strengthening the bond of unity that binds us together in Christ.
- Greater human capacity building through shared knowledge of the Word of God.
- Connecting people and increasing familiarity amongst brethren.
- The indescribable joy of fellowshiping with fellow servants of God from other congregations.
- Greater prospects or opportunity of bearing the burdens of one another.
- Learning from the experiences of others.
- Encouraging one another.
- Narrowing down our doctrinal differences; closing the gaps that separate us.
- Advancing the gospel and course of Christ generally.
- Edification and building up the faith of brethren.
- Providing a veritable platform for inter-congregational cooperation when necessary, for greater accomplishments to the glory of God.

If we are to go by the argument of those opposed to having any group other than the local church, it then means that the present arrangement responsible for the TV programme “*What the Bible Says*” is unbiblical and, hence sinful. But we all know that through this programme the pure gospel of Christ and God’s plan of salvation for the lost mankind is sounded out to thousands of viewers every Sunday. As a result many souls have been won over to Christ. If we are to wait until a local congregation initiates and executes the programme we may have to wait for only-God-knows how long.

Having different Forums in the brotherhood that would encourage brethren from various congregations once in a while is a development that could enhance healthy cooperation amongst the churches of Christ. A Christian forum provides an avenue for connecting people and sharing knowledge and ideas.

The occasional coming together of brethren from different local congregations creates, sustains and strengthens the bond of unity and love amongst brethren, which both Christ and the Apostles earnestly desired and prayed for (John 17: 11, 20-22; Phil. 2:1-2; Heb.13:1; Eph. 5:2,30; 1Cor. 1:10).

Sometimes ago here in Lagos a group of brethren from various congregations who were song teachers, gathered together to form a forum for teaching songs. Many Christian brothers today who are song teachers in their respective local congregations were trained through that initiative. That arrangement did not in any way negatively affect or destroy the autonomy of the local churches of the brethren who benefitted from it.

Forums play a facilitating and integrative role, providing the much needed linkage and coordination in inter-congregational cooperation towards accomplishing a worthy cause. The various forums serve the church.

Appeal to the Opposition

When one is dogmatic, extremist or legalistic one is bound to be myopic.

Those who are opposed to having any Christian forum other than the local church shouldn’t have attended and participated in this programme for any reason, since it is a forum organized by a body they condemn and tag ‘unscriptural’. They should have rather waited until a local congregation organized this meeting before they could attend and participate. Have they not sinned by participating? They should simply tender an unreserved apology to this audience and quietly walk away. By participating in this programme they have not only recognized but also honoured, endorsed and fully associated with an organization which they say is unlawful, unscriptural and sinful.

Opposing any form of inter-congregational cooperation is tantamount to trying to build walls of partition around each congregation. When one opposes inter-congregational cooperation one is inadvertently trying to destroy the unity of the church. Opposing forums that can unite the congregations is similar to saying: “To your tents, O Israel”.

We should stop majoring in minors. We should stop chasing shadows. We should not be like the Pharisees who were more interested in minor issues rather than in the weightier matters of the law. (Consider Matt. 23:23). Are we not trying to make much ado about nothing or create a mount out of a mole hill by spending quality time arguing over the scripturality of Christian forums? Rather than place a blanket condemnation on all Christian forums we should highlight the apparent benefits of such forums and the need for their activities to be properly guided by the Holy Scriptures.

Condemning the existence of all Christian forums as being unscriptural and sinful is rather an act of extremism; it can lead to a revival of the old divisive, disparaging, dogmatic, distractive, discouraging and destructive spirit of the Pharisees. Allowing such a negative and retrogressive spirit to thrive in the brotherhood will not augur well for the church of Christ. We must all, therefore, rise up and stoutly resist it in the spirit of love, using the Word of God – the truth, perfect law of liberty and sword of the Spirit.

The good work law forbids grace permits. The Pharisees, looking through the binoculars of the law, saw everything wrong in Jesus healing a sick man on a Sabbath day. To them it was a taboo, something against the law, for Jesus to have done such a good work on a Sabbath day. They were much more interested in protecting the law rather than in saving a life – an act of grace that glorified God. Their law forbade doing any work on a Sabbath day while grace permitted doing a God-glorifying good work on the same day. Today as we debate on the issue of whether or not it is scriptural to have Christian forums other than the local congregation, are we looking at what we think the law forbids or what glorifies God? Are we more interested in the legality of Christian forums rather than the benefits of such forums?

Caution!

We should guide against the abuse or misuse of any forum. We should not encourage the formation and functioning of any forum that is unnecessarily covertly or overtly discriminatory and engenders superiority (or inferiority) complex, thereby causing division in the brotherhood. For instance, what is the rationale behind forming a forum of preachers who attended Bible School to the utter exclusion of those who did not attend? Why should we have an arrangement, whether formal or informal, where in a mixed gathering of brethren only preachers (or bishops) are allowed to perform certain functions? We must not in any way be seen to be encouraging any form of clergy/laity dichotomy. We must respect the priesthood of all believers in Christ. Anything that can cause division amongst us should be avoided.

Christian forums should not be formed for self-recognition or self-gratification of the individual members. Instead forums should be formed with the express purpose of furthering the work of Christ and fostering unity and cooperation amongst brethren.

A Christian forum is not a decision making body for the church. In other words, no decisions made at any forum may be mandatorily binding on local churches.

Certain on-going or gradually emerging ideas, practices and agitations amongst us are rather questionable. Some examples include:

- The practice of the so-called “Galatia 6:6” or collection for the preacher – this is a practice in some congregations whereby one Sunday in a month is set aside to make special monetary contributions exclusively for the preacher.
- Preachers alone being considered good enough or divinely appointed to organize and anchor TV or radio evangelism programmes, or indeed any other similar programmes.

- The agitation (or do we say tussle?) that only preachers and/or elders should be on the church of Christ Board of Trustees.
- Tussle between Elders group and Preachers group over who should convene and preside over broad-spectrum public meetings involving brethren from various congregations in a place.
- The idea of Preachers seeing or referring to themselves as Prime Ministers.
- The notion that in a congregation where there are no Bishops, the Preacher automatically becomes the Sole Administrator.

No outside body may exercise undue interference or control over a local congregation. No forum has the power to dictate to a local congregation what to do. A local church takes its orders directly from Christ, the one and only Supreme Head of the church of Christ. It derives its authority from the NT scripture – the perfect law of liberty (James 1:25). However, a congregation can cooperate with and learn or benefit from other congregations.

We must not allow ourselves to be unnecessarily caged and enslaved under the guise of trying to defend church autonomy. Autonomy does not preclude local congregations from cooperating and jointly participating in a well organized and coordinated scriptural programme. A local congregation does not lose its autonomy by co-jointly working with other sister congregations to do a good work, under the auspices of a Christian forum. The emphasis here is on *doing a good work* – the work that glorifies God and edifies mankind.

The way forward

Rather than arguing endlessly over the scripturalness or otherwise of forums, we should be concerned with ensuring that such forums act scripturally always. We suggest the following as guiding principles for forums:

- Those participating should do so of their own free accord. In other words, participation should be optional, by choice rather than mandatory. There has to be mutual agreement amongst those participating (cf. Matt. 18:19; Amos 3:3).
- The gathering of a forum should be in the name of Christ and to the glory of God, as explained above.
- The forum should be a springboard for fostering and strengthening the bond of unity amongst Christians.
- The forum should encourage healthy and mutually beneficial cooperation amongst congregations.
- The forum should complement rather than compete with local congregations.
- The outcomes of the meetings of any forum must not be made binding on any local congregations. Local Assemblies wishing to adopt any resolutions or teachings by any forum should do so willingly and independently.

Conclusion

Any Christian forum or gathering that is put in place to worship God and do His blessed Will is a church of the living God. The argument that it is unscriptural for some brethren from different congregations to form a Christian forum and gather once in a while to discuss or carry out a scripturally and morally right work, is rather religious or theological. Such a lame argument can only come from the depth of a pharisaic, dogmatic, legalistic, or ill-informed mind. Our concern should not be to simply promote religion or theology, but to promote the Word, Will and Worship of God as well as unity, godliness and spiritual growth in the brotherhood. If a Christian forum or assembly is a form of fellowship, and the Bible enjoins us to have fellowship with one another, then having Christian forums is lawful, scriptural, expedient and edifying. Opposition to Christian forums is a ploy by the devil to undermine the unity of the church and promote sectarianism. The devil must be resisted. Every soldier of Christ must rise up and fight the good fight of faith to maintain the unity of the church, which Christ earnestly prayed for.