The family of God in Ephesians 2:12-22 in light of the Luo of Kenya's extended family system: Towards Christian unity in the ecclesial life of the Church in Africa

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Abstract

In the African setting, the family is one big institution which transcends the household to encompass a broader scope of relations brought together by ties of kinship. This worldview has to be brought to bear in the understanding of the Church as the family of God if it is to make sense to African Christians. The relationship that arises out of such comprehension is one that is open and inclusive. Ephesians 2:12-22 presents a relationship which defies the conventional understanding of family, which is based on Western culture. The features of the Ephesian family are acceptance, a peaceful coexistence, a common descent (one Father), homely feelings, and subscription to shared principles. The comparative analysis between the passage and the Luo of Kenya (Luo's) extended family system reveals connections between the two. Through the ideals of the Luo's extended family system, light is shed into the passage and the understanding of Christian unity enhanced.

Key Words:

Extended family, Christian unity, Ecclesial life, Acceptance, Western individualism

1. Introduction

The ecclesial model of the family enjoys prominence in the discussion about Christian unity as a pattern to the relationship among believers in the various levels of the Church. However, this model suffers from Western individualism which limits its scope to the extent that it fails to make sense to African believers. The African worldview stretches the family to encapsulate all the relatives, clan and village members, the whole tribe, and even those that are incorporated into their societies. Approaching the model from the Western context creates a misunderstanding whose consequence is the perpetuation of disunity in its various forms, as the reference of the family is claimed exclusively by denominations and Christians who then view each other as strangers. However, viewed in the perspective of the African person, it could enhance unity among Christians and save the Church from disunity which presently manifests in tribalism, nepotism, classicism, regionalism, clericalism, etcetera. It also renders needless the desire for a denominational merger as a show of unity as it roots for a mutual relationship amidst distinctions. That would involve listening to each other and benefiting from their engagements in a symbiotic manner. At the local Church level, interacting that way enables openness, sincerity, and amicable ways of handling differences whenever they arise to reign. The factors point to the need for an extension, modification, and correction of the age-long understanding of the ecclesial model of family.

1.1   The background of the study

The Western missionaries did not take the *modus operandi* of the African people into consideration when they came into the African continent. For instance, their evangelistic approach among the Luo was too sudden, careless, abrupt, full of disturbance, shocking, and upsetting (Odinga, 1967:62-65). They were keen on ripping the community focused Luos out of their everyday lives and creating a wedge between them. Normalcy was upset among other African communities too. Years after the missionaries' departure, the wedge continues to exist among the African people and especially among Christians who experience parsimonious relationships.

The familial model is one of the models which ecclesiologists have proposed in an attempt to address the problem of ecclesial disunity. Ezeweke and Ikechukwo (2012:31) for instance, are of the view that as an ecclesial model, the family could foster love, unobstructed relationship with each other, faithfulness and allegiance to one another, a forgiving spirit, as well as ministry. However, this model suffers from a misappropriation arising from the Western culture of individualism which manifests in among other ways domination by the clergy and centralisation of ecclesiastical powers in them which denies the laity the opportunity to utilise their *charisms* and practice their priesthood as believers. At the interdenominational level, the model has created arrogance among denominations as some of them claim the reference of family exclusively to themselves through what Cleveland (2013:12, 15) refers to as "right Christian, wrong Christian" attitude whose consequence is the disapproval of each other. All these factors call for a recast of the model. This work is an attempt to provide clarification by looking at the family of God in Ephesians 2:12-22 in light of the Luo's extended family system. Christian unity could be the consequence of such an expanded understanding.

1.2 The problem statement

Familial overtones currently dominate the debate on Christian unity in the ecclesial life of the Church. While this model is legitimate, it limits the understanding of the subject through the Western individualistic approaches that are characteristic of it. The blurring of understanding is as a result of the failure to take into consideration the *weltanschauung* of the African people, which is collectivist. Consequently, disunity manifested in various forms abounds in the Church at its different levels. With improved understanding, appropriate conduct ensues, and optimum conditions for the thriving of unity created among Christians.

1.3 The purpose of the study

The study endeavoured to showcase the kind of unity expected of Christians within the ecclesial life of the Church in Africa by establishing a connection between the Luo's extended family system with the familial model of the Church presented in Ephesians 2:12-22.

2. The Ephesian family

Ephesians 2:12-22 presents a kind of familial relationship which defies the conventional understanding. Paul points out that through the cross and the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, impediments to oneness between God and humankind, and among humanity have been dismantled, and the privilege of sharing God as a Father is enjoyed. The passage is filled with familial overtones which have been identified below.

2.1 Acceptance (vs. 12-13)

The first characteristic of the family presented in Ephesians 2:12-22 is that members enjoy full acceptance amongst themselves, and are tolerated despite peculiarities. This family is extended yet very intimate as they are "near" to each other rather than "far off". The condition of the Gentiles before being drawn to God to be part of His family was pitiable though. Stott (1979:95) refers to their dilemma as "Gentile disabilities". To begin with, the Gentiles were "without Christ", a situation aggravated by their not being part of the "commonwealth of Israel".[1] In other words, the Gentiles were not members of Yahweh's nation nor part of "his saving purposes". (O'Brien, 1999:187). While they could be accommodated into the Jewish society through proselytisation, the distance between them and the Jews remained palpable.[2] Besides, the Gentiles were "strangers to the covenants of promise" made to the patriarchs of Israel. O'Brien (1999:189) expresses the idea further as follows:

> Being separated from the chosen people of Israel was a serious disadvantage since it meant being outside the sphere of God's election and isolated from any covenant relationship with him. Hence Paul's readers were foreigners to the covenants of promise. The covenants with the patriarchs had held out the promise of great blessing to all nations of the earth, but it was not until the coming of Christ and the open proclamation of the Gospel that believing Gentiles could be blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (Gal. 3:9).

The next predicament among the Gentiles was hopelessness. Their state was as a result of being separated from Israel's anointed one.[3] On the other

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1   The latter condition is to be understood in the sense of a literal Israel rather than as the Church (Best, 1998:241).

2   Πολιτείας, a form of πολιτεία has been used here in the sense of a "theocratic constitution from which they were excluded" as opposed to the contemporary understanding of "citizenship" in the Greco-Roman world which would suggest the act of being kept out of a "commonwealth" (O'Brien, 1999:187).

3   The hope alluded to as to be understood in relation to the work of the Messiah in saving the nation (O'Brien, 1999:187, 188).

hand, the Jewish people even in their unbelief and lives lived in exclusion from Jesus, recognised the Messiah and anticipated the fulfilment of the words of the Scripture given to them concerning Him – Romans 3:2. (O'Brien, 1999:188). In addition to the disadvantages recounted so far, the Gentiles were also "without God". They could have been worshipping other gods apart from the one worshipped by the Israelites though.[4] As O'Brien (1999:190) puts it, "in contrast to Israel which had a relationship with the true God, (Gentiles) were God-forsaken". It is a condition which Meyer (cited by Abbott) describes as, "The deepest stage of heathen misery." (Abbot, 1909:59). Hendriksen (quoted by Stott) summarises the whole situation among the Gentiles as "Christless, stateless, friendless, hopeless and Godless" (Stott, 1979:95-96).

The good news of the Gentile people's full acceptance into the family of God is presented in verse 13. There has been a bestowal of blessings which none Jews were previously deficient of.[5] This does not incorporate them into the literal Israelite society, but to a "new Israel" bound by a "covenant" which is different from the Abrahamic one. (Best, 1998:246). It is "in Christ Jesus" and on account of his blood that this happened. In referring to "the blood of Christ", the offering of His life on sinners' behalf and death by crucifixion is implied (Ephesians 1:7). (Stott, 1979:98). It is by this that reconciliation of humanity to the Father and fellow humans occurs (Ibid). "In Christ Jesus" also denotes oneness with him which is an avenue for the reception and appreciation of the "reconciliation" brought by Him. Bratcher and Nida (1993:54) enlightens that "In Rabbinic teaching, 'to come near' was used of the reception of a Gentile convert into the Jewish faith." O'Brien (1999:191) adds that, "In drawing near to the congregation of Israel that person came near to God, who was near his people." However, Paul introduces an exceptional means. Nearness to Christ sets the stage for reconciliation as it brings people closer to God and fellow human beings. Jesus destroyed the separation between the races mentioned when He died by way of crucifixion. (Anders, 1999:114; Foulkes, 1989:88, 89). Volf (1998:172, 173, 174) articulates what happens when people embrace God's salvation as follows:

> (They) do not remain alone with their God. By entering into this relation to God, supported by the communion of believers, they are simultaneously constituted into the communion of believers ...To believe means to enjoy communion with God ... Because the Christian God is not a private deity. Communion with this God is at once also communion with those others who have entrusted

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4 The phrase, καὶ ἄθεοι, "and without God" denotes inexistent connection with Yahweh as the only true deity. (Best, 1998:243; O'Brien, 1999:190).

5 Νυνὶ δὲ breaks the monotony introduced in verse 11 by μνημονεύετε, "remember" (Lange, Braune Riddle & Schaff, 2008:91).

themselves in faith to the same God. Hence one and the same act of faith places a person into a new relationship both with God and with all others who stand in communion with God ... faith means entering into communion, communion with the triune God and with other Christians.

2.2 A peaceful coexistence (vs 14-17)

The members of the Church family presented in Ephesians are at peace with each other and as such able to interact freely and unhindered as there are no obstacles to communion between them. Peace is of utmost importance to this family, considering the peculiarities within it. That peaceful environment was established courtesy of the accomplished work of Christ. O'Brien (1999:191) points out that, "He is the central figure who effects reconciliation and removes hostility in its various forms."

Peace, as understood in the Old Testament (O.T.) and the Jewish perspective, was widened to mean "well-being" and encompassed "salvation" whose dispenser is none but Yahweh. (O'Brien, 1999:193). However, besides referring to the saving work of the Messiah (Luke 1:79; 2:14; 19:42), it also speaks of the absence of conflict between humans (Acts 7:26; Gal. 5:22; Eph. 4:3; Jas. 3:18). In Best's (1998:252) description, "Peace is the end of alienation; people can be alienated from God, from one another or internally alienated; the first two aspects are present here, the third is not. Peace as salvation is God's gift." It is "in Christ Jesus" (verse 13) that the O.T. promises of peace came true.[6] Best (1998:270) observes that since the meaning of "peace" stretched further than the termination of animosity to complete welfare of its recipients, "It is not merely, 'I am no longer angry with you', but more positively, 'I seek your well-being'". This understanding is behind the New Testament (N.T.)'s concept of peace too.

It is in Christ and "his flesh" that oneness between the two "groups" has been achieved. Since Jews and Gentiles came together as believers in Christ Jesus, their treatment of each other has changed, and a new kind of oneness has set in which supersedes the previous condition (O'Brien, 1999:194). The Gentiles are no longer "far off" (verse 13), but near enough to enjoy the Messiah together with their Jewish counterparts. (Best, 1998:251; O'Brien, 1999:194). Chrysostom (cited by Abbott) says that Christ, rather than elevating us to the Jewish people's social rank has elevated all the sides together to a higher status (Abbot, 1909:61). He equates the process to the

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6   The word "peace" has been used "four times" between verses 14-17 to bring to fore the reconciliatory "work" of Jesus. (O'Brien, 1999:193). The reconciliatory tone is manifested in the statements, "he has made both groups into one" (verse 14), "create in himself one new humanity" (verse 15).

act of liquefying a figure made of "silver" and another one made of "lead" to form "gold" (Abbot, 1909:61). Before being drawn to Christ, the relationship between the groups was marked by animosity. Lenski (1937:440) describes the situation as follows:

> The Jews utterly despised the goyim or Gentiles; they considered them dogs, vile, unclean (Matt. 15:27; Rev. 22:15). One must know the status of dogs in the Orient. This attitude toward Gentiles is reflected in many New Testament passages and flashes forth in shocking language in rabbinical literature. The Gentiles reciprocated in kind and hated the Jews because of their arrogance, their scornful separatism, their peculiar religious laws and ways. The enmity was mutual. The world of men was actually divided into two classes, Jews and Gentiles; there was a gulf between them so deep and wide that it seemed impossible ever to close it ... Uncompromising rabbis spoke derogatorily even of the proselytes.

The intense hostility and dislike which existed between the Jews and Gentiles resulted in the formation of a barrier which kept them apart and made the realisation of peace impossible. Through Christ's death, that barrier has been brought down. As a result, the two groups have been transformed into one entity in the eyes of God. (Anders, 1999:114). The wall existed in the form of ceremonial laws.[7] Jews and Gentiles were hostile towards themselves, but once the divisive law had been set aside, there was nothing to keep these two parts of humanity apart.[8]

In verse 16, the elusiveness of peace among humanity without a relationship with God comes to fore. Each party was in the past estranged from God as sinners (verses 1-3), and peace with him was necessary for both (O'Brien, 1999:203; c.f. Barth, 1983:45-72). The Jews in specific had a law which not only stood between them and Gentiles but with God too (O'Brien, 1999:203). There was a need for reconciliation to God which Christ's death accomplished. Paul refers to the removal of animosity among them and with God as "putting to death that hostility". Robinson (1907:65) states that "Christ in his death was slain, but the slain was a slayer too".

The other step taken by Christ to ensure peaceful coexistence among the Jews and Gentiles, and humanity as a whole, was his preaching of peace. Christ might not have done all the preaching in person but through his

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7   As Stott puts it, "the law had made a deep rift in humanity." (Stott, 1979:101).

8   As opposed to ἀνηρ, which mainly refers to a masculine being, ἄνθρωπος has been used to suggest "man" in a collective sense. The inclusive nature of the word is remarkable as it speaks of the "new" formation, that is, εἰς ἕνα καινὸν ἄνθρωπον, a "new humanity", "one new humanity"(C.f. Ephesians 4:24) which brings together both men and women (Wuest, 1997:76).

Apostles and others sent by him and strengthened by the Holy Spirit following his vicarious death (Matthew 28:20; Luke 10:16; John 13:2). (Sandnes, 1991:229; Abbot, 1909:67; Jamieson, Fausset & Brown, 1997:346). In his proclamation, he declared as King the cessation of enmity between the two groups following his dying on the cross and victory (O'Brien, 1999:207, 208). As Foulkes (1989:92) puts it, "Through his cross peace was made, and he through his church takes out the message of reconciliation and peace to the world" (cf. Acts 10:36; 2 Cor. 5:18-20). The verse seems to echo what Yahweh had said through prophet Isaiah that time would come when He would pronounce "Peace, peace, to the far and to the nea." (Isaiah 57:19; C.f. 52:7). The point presented by the Apostle Paul in quoting Isaiah 57:19 is that the "Messiah" would mediate peace between the Jewish ("those who were near") and Gentile (those "who were far off") people (Anders, 1999:114).

2.3   A common descent – one Father (vs. 18)

The other important feature of the Ephesian family is that its members have been fathered by one person whom they are free to approach without restrictions. Fee (1994:684) states that "Jew and Gentile stand together as one people in God's presence with old distinctions no longer having significance." Together as "one new humanity", they can approach God and confidently call him "Father" (O'Brien, 1999:209). No one encroaches upon their right to access him. The other remarkable point is that the relationship enjoyed with the "Father" within the Ephesian family is tight rather than remote. The preposition πρός in the word προσαγωγην brings this fact to fore.[9] According to O'Brien (1999:209), in the O.T. dispensation, the word drew attention to a time when there would be no prohibition of entrance "into the sanctuary as the place of God's presence". At that time, Gentiles would be allowed to go before God to speak to Him as they show reverence and adoration in His house of worship.[10] Lincoln (1990:149) states that in the N.T. dispensation, this access "is not confined to a specific locality such as a temple".

The diversity of the Godhead as a feature which is prominent in verse 18 establishes further the point about accessibility to God as it rules out human mediation. According to Jamieson, this is "fatal to the theory of sacerdotal priests in the Gospel through whom alone the people can approach God. All

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9   There is a view that the Apostle's use of προσαγωγην figuratively could have been informed by the religious rite of presenting gifts in the temple to be able to appear before God in the Levitical system (c.f. Leviticus 1:3; 3:3; 4:14). (O'Brien, 1999:209).

10   1 Kgs 8:41–43; c.f. Is 56:6–8; Zec 8:20–23. The fact of unrestricted approach to God is also present in the mind of the author of Hebrews (Heb 4:16; 7:25; 10:22; 12:22).

alike, people and ministers, can draw nigh to God through Christ, their ever living Priest" (Jamieson *et al.*, 1997:346). O'Brien (1999:210) points out the connection between the various players as he says that, "in this passage also Paul speaks of salvation in trinitarian terms: Christ's peacemaking work has provided access to the Father for both Jews and Gentiles through the one Spirit." Bratcher and Nida (1993:60) go further to describe the part played by each when they say that, "Christ provides the means for the access of humanity to God, and the Holy Spirit is the manner, or the circumstances, in which the right of access is exercised."

2.4 All at home (vs 19)

The kind of family proposed by Paul is one that attracts homely feelings. No one feels homeless, unwanted, unimportant, or even to be a liability to the family. Instead, each person enjoys the security, protection, care, sympathy, kindness, and the support that other members accord them. They experience the warmth associated with a home environment. In their former state though, the Gentiles lacked positive qualities as they were mere "strangers and aliens" (vs.19; c.f. vs.12), but since they believed in Christ, their statuses radically changed from being outsiders to insiders.[11] As O'Brien (1999:211) puts it, "They now have a privileged place in God's new community … Now they belong in a way they never did before." They have a place to call home and are enjoying full citizenship in their land. (Lincoln, 1990:150). Stott (1979:105) says that "To this new international God-ruled community, which had replaced the Old Testament national theocracy, Gentiles and Jews belonged on equal terms … The words no longer strangers and sojourners but … citizens emphasise the contrast between the rootlessness of a life outside Christ and the stability of being a part of God's new society." As pointed out by Abbott (1909:69), the saints with whom the Gentile believers share citizenship with are "membership of the spiritual commonwealth to which Jewish and Gentile Christians alike belong." Τῶν ἁγίων, as used by Paul, encompasses all who believe in God or Christ as opposed to its previous exclusive use to refer to the Jewish people (1:1; 4:12; 5:3; 6:18).[12]

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11 They have moved from being ξένοι which as an adjective means "unknown", "unfamiliar" (Acts 17:18; Hebrews 13:9, Ephesians 2:12); and as a noun "stranger", and "foreigner" (Matthew 25:35, 38, 43–44; 27:7; Acts 17:21; Ephesians 2:19; Hebrews 11:13), that is someone coming from a different "tribe or country", and even a mere traveller (Abbott, 1909:68; O'Brien, 1999:211; Lenski, 1937:449). They are also not the πάροικοι, "aliens" anymore (Acts 7:6, 29; 1 Pt 2:11; Eph 2:19).

12 Going by what ἅγιοι means in the rest of the epistle to the Ephesians, everyone who believes is in the mind of Paul, for instance, Ephesians 1:1. (Best, 1998:278). Τῶν ἁγίων is to be understood in connection to belief in God and does not suggest an individual "holiness." (Best, 1998:278; Abbott, 1909:69).

The message conveyed by the phrase "citizens with the saints" is that there are citizens who went before Paul's Gentile audience whom they are now joining. (Bruce, 1984:302, 303). These are they who "first hoped in Christ" (Ephesians 1:12). (Ibid.). As O'Brien (1999:211) puts it, "These Gentile Christians now have a homeland or commonwealth. They 'belong' as fellow-citizens with the rest of believers in that heavenly commonwealth ruled by God." While facilitating a link with the "past" (Christians who no longer exist); the phrase "citizens with the saints" also connects the present with the "future" (future believers) (Kunhiyop, 2012:142, 146). Christians are part of a vast community which recognises the role played by "spiritual ancestors" some of whom are Hebrews and some Christians as they could be emulated. (Ibid.). These great men and women are in the Scripture referred to as "witnesses that surround us" (Hebrews 12:1) and are mentioned by their names – Hebrews 11. (Ibid.). However, Biblical ancestors are not the only ancestors as there are others locally. (Ibid.)

The status of the believers of Gentile background, however, surpasses mere citizenship for they have become "members of the household of God". According to Towner (1993:417-419), in the Roman economy during the times of Paul, being a "member of a household meant refuge and protection, at least as much as the master was able to provide. It also meant identity and gave the security that comes with a sense of belonging." In the words of Best (1998:278), "Gentile Christians, once refugees, are now neither homeless nor stateless … Those who were once outsiders are now insiders." O'Brien (1999:211-212) states that they are "children together (with their Jewish counterparts) in God's own family". As McKelvey (1969:111-112) puts it, Paul saw "the inclusion of non-Jews in the church as the fulfillment of the great promises that in the eschatological age the nations would be graciously accepted by Yahweh in his house". By "household", a more critical relationship between believers and God as well as amongst themselves is brought to fore (Foulkes, 1989:93). On account of their faith in Christ, they have become God's "children" (2 Corinthians 6:18) through adoption (1:5) and can approach God (2:18) who is "the head of the household". (Best, 1998:278). Οικεῖοι is a word that suggests a closely-knit relationship.[13] As Eadie (quoted by Best) puts it, Gentile believers are not "guests—here to-day and away to-morrow." (Best, 1998:279). The term "household" also

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[13] Best (1998:278) describes οἰκεῖοι τοῦ θεοῦ as "the warmer metaphor". Its use as imagery is significant as it brings to fore a more profound sense of belonging. The Gentiles constitute the οἰκεῖοι τοῦ θεοῦ which is another way of saying that they are "the community of the faithful" (Abbott, 1909:69). As used by Paul, the phrase has a connotation of "kindred" (Abbott, 1909:69).

rules out the perception of servant-hood or slavery among believers as they have transitioned into "children and sons" and God is a Father to all of them (Lenski, 1937:449-450). They have become part of a family whose members in the N.T. refer to each other as "brethren" ("brothers and sisters") which "expresses a close relationship of affection, care and support" (Stott, 1979:106). While the phrase "members of the household of God" tells how Christians are supposed to relate with each other and with "their heavenly Father", the state is not realisable in the absence of love (O'Brien, 1999:212; Stott, 1979:105, 106).

2.5 Subscription to common principles (vs. 20-22)

The principles which govern the Ephesian Church family are those bequeathed as a heritage from the past generations of believers. These values constitute the norm which every member adheres to for them to be "the temple of the Lord". Besides determining conduct, they also inform life in various ways. The unity enjoyed in the family of God has its basis in the Word of God and failure to adhere to the claims of the universal truths results in division. In Verse 20, Paul presents what McKelvey (1969:113) refers to as "the bedrock of historic Christianity". As O'Brien (1999:216) puts it, "They (believers) have the right foundation. None may question their membership in God's new community." The "twelve", or fourteen apostles (inclusive of Paul and Barnabas) spoken of constituted the "foundation" probably not just because they joined the Church before anyone else did, but mainly because it was on account of their efforts in disseminating the Gospel following the event of the "resurrection" that "the Church" expanded and received its form (Best, 1998:282). God also revealed his will for his Church to the prophets for dissemination. The declaration made in this section that Christians of a Gentile background are "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" speaks of belonging in the community of believers which is grounded firmly upon established teachings stemming from what God has made known (McKelvey, 1969:113). Christ plays the role of a "cornerstone". Bratcher and Nida say that "Christ is called the most important stone in the building, the one that provides cohesion and support for the whole structure" (Bratcher & Nida, 1993:63). To highlight the significance of the metaphor of "cornerstone", Foulkes (1989:94) states that, "It denotes primarily the honour of his position in the building, but then also the way in which each stone is fitted into him, and finds its true place and usefulness only in relation to him" (c.f. Col. 2:7; 1 Pet 2:4–5). The building takes place as "the mystery" made known "in Christ", and revealed by the Spirit of God is expounded by the "apostles and prophets" – 3:4-11 (O'Brien, 1999:218).

The relationship with Christ is once again brought to fore as a major factor in the Church's striving to be the ideal family as it is through him as the "the cornerstone" that the joining of building stones with each other takes place. Best (1998:279, 287) observes that "Perhaps it is that believers are shaped, smoothed and joined together by their relation to Christ whom they are to resemble" (2 Cor 3:18; Phil 3:21). It is through the work of the cornerstone that the whole building grows into ναὸν ἅγιον ἐν Κυρίῳ, "a holy temple (sanctuary) in the Lord" (Abbot, 1909:73). The materials used in the construction of this new "community" are Christians of whom Gentile believers are part (Best, 1998:288). God brings individuals who believe in Him together with each other and forms them into an entity which He indwells by way of His Spirit (Best, 1998:289-290; 1 Pet 2:4; Rom 12:1; 1 Pet 2:5; Heb 13:15).

3. The methodology

Theology, though Scripture-based, does not make sense when the contribution of humans through culture is stifled or disallowed in the conversation. The comparative and exegetical methods have been used in this work to enhance the understanding of Christian unity. These approaches enabled the dissection of culture and the decipherment of the selected passage to take place, and points of contact between the Luo's extended family system and Scripture identified. As a result, a new understanding of Christian unity emerged. The descriptive design which was used in the study brought in more enlightenment to it while also addressing problems arising from its misunderstanding. As an inductive study, there was reliance on the data gathered from selected respondents among the target population through structured interviews. The sample size was comprised of 200 Church members from various Christian denominations both in the mainline and African Independent Churches within the four counties of Kenya which are home to the Luo namely, Migori, Homa Bay, Siaya, and Kisumu.

4. The results, discussions, and findings of the research

Most of the respondents interviewed attributed ecclesial unity to respect and love among Christians. These virtues create an atmosphere for carrying out church activities together while also contributing to the growth of the Church. The majority of respondents were also of the view that the absence of conflict among Christians would boost unity and facilitate an enabling environment

for Christians to care for one another. The extended family system among the Luo is characterised by a more profound sense of love, respect, and care for each other which are the components of unity.

A significant number of respondents were of the view that unity among Christians based on the extended family system could enable them to work together towards a common goal as well as share a vision. Jalang'o (2020), a Church Elder in the Seventh-day Adventist (S.D.A.) Church, for instance, enumerated the consequences of disunity among Christians as follows: "Loss of focus on mission, derailment of the church agenda, loss of prayer power, disintegration, loss of a sense of belonging hence low potentiality, and finally a collapse of the group." In the words of Openda (2020) also a Church Elder of Legio Maria Church, "Worship services could be hampered as some members defect to other churches; enmity among Christians; separation; lack of assistance for each other in difficult moments; lack of growth in all its spheres" (which includes spiritual growth) would be experienced. These developments arise because the clergy and laity expend most of their energy and time in politics and wrangles rather than in the execution of the Church's divinely assigned mandate. Opiyo, J. (2020), a member of the student's Christian group in Bishop Abiero Girls Secondary School, stated that, "the Church may fall apart due to divisions, hatred, and misunderstandings amongst its members. At the interdenominational level, negative attitudes towards other denominations, quarrels and fights, and competition among the churches arise." Other characteristics could be scrambling for members by Christian denominations, and the loss of respect among parties involved, especially leaders. (Achieng' 2020). The Luo's extended family system condemns these habits and proposes a mutual relationship. Some of its features are cooperation and teamwork, which happen to be among the ways of demonstrating unity among Christians. These could manifest in pooling resources together to finance Church projects and support the needy within their midst. (Okuku, 2020). Besides, they are also critical in ensuring success in the Church's evangelistic program for more souls are won when Christians are united. (Ong'ow, 2020).

The Luo's extended family system proposes the kind of relationship which if replicated among Christians and in the Church could increase comprehension on ecclesial unity. One of the things about it is that disagreements are anticipated in advance and robust measures put in place beforehand to settle them when they arise. (Opiyo, L., 2020). The process often involves sitting down and having meaningful and genuine conversations among

the parties concerned (Opiyo, L, 2020). The findings of the study affirmed that Christian unity could be attained through dialogue as a way of solving recurrent relational problems among Church members. It is a better way of dealing with impasses and sorting out stalemates within the ecclesial setting. As a mechanism, dialogue facilitates the mitigation of the causes of disunity among Christians. At the local Church level, disunity could be attributed to misunderstandings between church members; envy and jealousy among members and clergy; pride manifested in the feelings of superiority over other members; discrimination; lack of transparency in handling Church funds; sexual immorality; discrimination based on ethnicity and kinship; abuse of spiritual gifts; lack of cooperation in performing church duties; and poor or centralisation of management (Mondo, 2020; Jaoko, 2020; Migoma, 2020; Otieno, 2020). Failure to handle arising disputes in a timely and judicious manner results in leadership wrangles, atrophy, haemorrhage in membership, and retardation of growth and development in all forms. (Ibid).

It also emerged from the interviews that unity among Christians could also be enhanced through guidance and counseling; and sensitisation of members at joint prayer meetings and other Christian forums where brotherhood and sisterhood among Christians are emphasised and awareness created on its significance (Achieng', 2020). As a matter of priority, the Church's leaders and governing bodies could create forums where unity would not only be discussed but sensitised and nurtured. Worship services, for instance, provide an opportunity through sermons and presentations which could be around the theme of unity. (Ibid.) However, it is through prayers and faithfulness to the Gospel that Christians receive spiritual uplifting, which in turn impacts their relationships with each other and strengthens unity. The Luo's extended family system creates an environment within which all these are possible. At the interdenominational level, it could contribute to an elimination of competition for membership and differences based on doctrinal subscriptions. (Othuon, 2020). The outcome would be improved relationships between Christians despite affiliation to different denominations.

5. The comparative analysis between the Luo of Kenya's extended family system with the Ephesian family

In the African context, the family is not limited to the man, woman, and their children. The term encompasses a wide range of networks that are formed by people who are related through a common progenitor, unlike in the Western

perspective (Nkansah-Obrempong, 2013:310, 312; Mbiti, 1969:106). Mbiti (1969:106-107, 104-105) describes the point further as follows:

> In traditional society, the family includes children, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters who may have their own children, and other immediate relatives. In many areas, there are what anthropologists call *extended families*, by which is generally meant that two or more brothers (in the patrilocal societies) or sisters (in the matrilocal societies) establish families in one compound or close to one another. The joint households together are like one large family. In either case, the number of family members may range from ten persons to even a hundred where several wives belonging to one husband may be involved. It is the practice in some societies, to send children to live for some months or years, with relatives, and these children are counted as members of the families where they happen to live … The kinship system is like a vast network stretching laterally (horizontally) in every direction, to embrace everybody in an any (sic) given local group. This means that each individual is a brother or sister, father or mother, grandmother or grandfather, or cousin, or brother-in-law, uncle or aunt, or something else, to everybody else, and there are many kinship terms to express the precise kind of relationship pertaining between two individuals … Such being the case then, a person has literally hundreds of 'fathers', hundreds of 'mothers', hundreds of 'uncles', hundreds of 'wives', hundreds of 'sons and daughters'.

The scope of an African family is stretched to encompass the dead for even in death; people exist in the minds of loved ones and are involved in family matters. (Mbiti, 1969:107). Children who are yet to be born or yet to be conceived also constitute the family (Mbiti, 1969:107). Furthermore, based on current realities, the scope of the family is extended to encompass people who are not related by blood, for instance, the Church family (Chukwu, 2011:77). The Church, though a spiritual entity, reflects what goes on in the human family for instance, "nurture, love, caring, support, meeting the needs of the members of the family" (Nkansah-Obrempong, 2013:325). Nkansah-Obrempong (2013:325) adds that "The Church is the family of God with God as the Father ... God as the head of the Church loves, nurtures, provides, disciplines, and cares for the needs of the Church."

The Luo's extended family system presents ideals that are coherent with Ephesians 2:12-22 in various aspects. Firstly, when people accept God in their lives, they cease to live in exclusion. The chasm is taken away and the other members in the family of faith accepted. Peace with God translates into peace with others. A person does not accept Christ's achievements on the cross for him or her and continue to disproportionately elevate socio-cultural and economic distinctions between him or her and other believers. Union

with Christ does not provide for the treatment of each other as outsiders. On the contrary, the product of alienation with God is alienation with others. The relationship with God changes the way others are treated, including those affiliated to other denominations. Because of this, denominations could still find an amicable way of working together despite their diversities. They can only preach the peace which they have with each other.

The Luo's extended family system leads to an understanding of the Church as a big family that defies exclusive parochialism generated by negative ethnicity. As an inclusive system, the Luo's extended family system provides virtues which could help the Church to deal with the phenomenon of negative ethnicity by drawing the "them" into the "us". Through negative ethnicity, others are kept away based on their tribe or race. While the Church is supposed to provide an atmosphere which is free from ethnocentrism and the disunity accompanying it, in Africa, ethnic induced fragmentations are its experience. Obiefuna (cited by Chukwu) observes that "this mentality is so pervasive that the saying goes among Africans that when it comes to the crunch, it is not the Christian concept of the Church as a family which prevails but rather the adage that 'blood is thicker than water'. And by water here one can presumably include the waters of Baptism through which one is born into the family of the Church." (Chukwu, 2011:196).

Ecclesial exclusivism also manifests in the polity of the Church in form of the Episcopal structure. However, since all believers are at par in the presence of God, the ecclesial hierarchy advocated for by the Episcopalian structure is not supported. One of the loopholes of this structure is that it attempts to provide a different means of accessing God through the clergy. With the priests' usurpation of the position of Christ and the Holy Spirit as the "means" and "manner" of approaching the "Father", believers are denied the opportunity to own Him. The priesthood of all believers is also curtailed. Moreover, instead of helping believers to find settlement in the family of God, it renders them homeless by denying them meaningful participation. The Episcopalian structure, therefore, is a form of disunity. Whereas to an extent, the structure could bring Christians together in some way, the kind of unity that arises from it is devoid of love and begets "tyranny" which manifests in callousness and autocracy (Boice, 1986:585). On the contrary, as Boice (1986:585) puts it, the consequence of genuine love for other Christian believers is unity in that "by love we discern that we are bound together in that bundle of life which God himself has created within the Christian community" Bloesch (2002:300) emphasises this point further as follows:

Christians are commanded to love each other despite differences of race, gender, privilege, and social, political and economic background (John 13:34-35; Gal. 3:28-29), and to be of one mind wherever possible (John 17:20-21; Phil. 2:2; Rom. 14:1-15:13). We know that divisions among Christians hinder our witness in the world, and we desire greater mutual understanding and truth-speaking in love.

The enrichment of understanding on ecclesial unity generated by the Luo's extended family system would facilitate the recovery of the experience of the Apostolic Church, which functioned as a selfless community whose members catered for each other's needs. (Acts 4:32-34). Nkansah-Obrempong (2010:86) articulates the synchrony as follows:

Through the blood of Jesus, we have been accepted into the family of God who is the Father of every family. This strong sense of family serves to provide strong social bonds among people who have left their immediate families to have new families in the Christian community. The Church community, therefore, becomes the new extended family. The loyalty and commitment to see the welfare of the people makes the Church grows (sic). Thus, the new community of Jesus widens its kinship ties and obligations to include the larger family of God and not only members of the immediate family.

The Luo's extended family system enhances responsibility and support for one another within the family. Chukwu (2011:188) observes that treating each other as siblings "will help build bridges across races and nations, not only in Africa but all over the world". The blood of Jesus not only brings members together but forms their family. However, a sense of friendship is required to keep the relationship going. Luos say, *wat imedo gi osiep* (friendship fortifies kinship).

Moreover, while the Luo's extended family system disapproves of anti-unity behaviours among Christians, disputes are to be anticipated ahead of their arrival and provisions made for them. Measures that are already in place could be used to address differences amicably whenever they arise. Throughout the process, the spirit of brotherhood has to be allowed to permeate. Since they have a common Father in God, the stakeholders would be willing to bear with each other. In the event of a need for the dispensation of discipline, redemption should be the outcome.

The other feature of the Luo's extended family is that its members are guided by specific rules and customs which are passed from generation to generation. These are often traced back to their progenitor. In the same sense, the relationship with the "Father" and with Christ translates in unity amongst Christians not just in a given locality and generation, they are connected to those who went before them and those who would follow them

by some age-long principles. Their unity is not at all costs as it is contingent on subscription to the truth as lodged in the Scripture. As Wilkin (2010:460) puts it, "Many church people think unity at almost any price should be their aim … Believers are to be united only with those who are morally and doctrinally sound." This has a bearing on ecumenism. Christians in Africa should not accept an ecumenism that encourages a form of ecclesial unity which disregards Christ's teachings.

6. Conclusion

While the validity of the age-long familial model of the Church is indisputable, revamping it could address the deficiencies exhibited in it and to a great extent clarify Christian unity in the ecclesial life of the Church in Africa. However, any attempt at enriching the understanding of the Church has to be in synchrony with the Scripture. The exegesis of Ephesians 2:12-22 revealed features of the family of God which are also demonstrative of the unity enjoyed among its members. The Luo's extended family system through the ideals embedded in it casts significant light into these characteristics and in the course of doing so enforces unity among Christians in the ecclesial life of the Church in Africa. This is made possible through the correlation of values presented in both realities. The Luo's extended family system shows the potential to bolster the understanding of Christian unity as it widens the parameters of relationship beyond exclusive parochialism which begets alienation and embraces all despite their distinctive features.

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