

Unity in Diversity: Missional Identity of the Church in Pauline Ecclesiology and Implications for the African Church

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Abstract

Paul's metaphor of the church as the Body of Christ offers a theologically rich and contextually adaptable paradigm for understanding ecclesiology and mission. In the face of fragmentation, secular ideologies, denominational rivalry, and digitization, this Pauline metaphor calls the church back to its Christ-centered identity and Spirit-empowered mission. This article explores the Body of Christ motif in selected Pauline texts (1 Cor 12:12–27; Rom 12:3–8; Eph 4:1–16) and explores how it has been discussed in Reformed thought (Calvin, Kuyper, Bavinck, Horton) and African theological circles (Mbiti, Bediako, Sanneh, Orobator, Maluleke, Katongole). It argues that the Body of Christ metaphor provides a theological vision for unity-in-diversity that resonates with the African communal worldview of Ubuntu while resisting both Western individualism and African sectarianism. The study further engages contemporary ecclesial challenges, including the rise of the digital church, the lure of prosperity theology, and the growing secularization of African urban centers. Ultimately, it contends that a retrieval of Paul's ecclesiology empowers the African church to remain faithful to its missional calling, embodying Christ's presence in a fractured world.

Keywords: Church Imageries, Pauline Ecclesiology, African Ecclesiology, Ubuntu, Reformed Theology, Missional Church, Digital Ecclesiology, Contextualization

Introduction

The exponential growth of Christianity since the first missionary set foot in Africa signifies a great reception of the Gospel message. While the African continent continues to experience numerical growth and vibrant expressions of faith, ecclesial unity and missional coherence remain largely essential. Ethnic loyalties, denominational competition, prosperity-driven individualism, and emerging digital forms of church have reshaped ecclesial identity in ways that often obscure the church's theological nature and vocation. Apart from the numerous denominations, there are also



numerous theological traditions, such as the Anglican/Episcopalian tradition, the Arminian, Wesleyan, and Methodist tradition, the Baptist tradition, the Dispensational tradition, the Lutheran tradition, the Reformed or Presbyterian tradition, and the Renewal/Charismatic/Pentecostal tradition.¹ This crisis is not merely sociological; it is profoundly ecclesiological.

Apostle Paul's rendering of the church as the Body of Christ gives a metaphor worth investigation and deep meditation. The Body of Christ carries deep theological meaning and signifies the urgency of the church's mission. The metaphor goes on to describe the church as a living organism, fully dependent and belonging to Christ, the Savior. The church is thus not a gathering of believers or an institution but the physical embodiment of Christ in the world. The church is called to participate in renewing the world through unity and active witness. When the church is united, it can accomplish² more in terms of fulfilling its mission.²

This article argues that Paul's metaphor of the Body of Christ provides a theological and missional vision for unity in diversity, challenging the contemporary church to embody Christ's presence through Spirit-empowered participation and public witness. The contemporary church faces a two-pronged crisis in which divisions seem to characterize the church on one hand, while a loss of identity thrives on the other. Unity in the church has been a contentious issue for many decades, with the visible church characterized by disunity.³ The crisis provides a continuum: churches tend to uphold the formation of institutions or drift into consumerism, encouraging attendees to live for themselves and find the best in this life, and to forget the missional call altogether. Many churches today hold varied understandings of the church's mission, either overextending into social activism without gospel proclamation or under-engaging the world in pursuit of doctrinal purity.⁴

Pauline's thoughts about the church yield many insights; he envisions a unity brought about by the Holy Spirit, with love as the foundation and geared towards active evangelization of the world. The intention to reach the world is a God-ordained idea. Mission is not primarily an activity

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: Zondervan Academic, 1994), 6.

² Andrew Kubai Mitu, Dickson Nkonge, and Lucy Mathai, "Causes of Disunity among the Churches in Tigania East Sub-County, Meru County, Kenya," *Journal of Philosophy and Religion (JPR)* 2, no. 1 (October 2023): 177–88, <https://doi.org/10.51317/jpr.v2i1.419>.

³ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 309.

⁴ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2011), 20–25.



of the church, but an attribute of God.⁵ The church is not the originator of mission but the instrument through which God does mission. The mission includes a component of reconciling all things to God. Paul sees the Body of Christ as one united whole with unity of the Jew and Gentile, Male and female, slave and free (Gal. 3:28). Indeed, the church is not just a recipient of salvation but the sphere in which the power of the Spirit is actualizing the reign of God through Christ.⁶ Undoubtedly, the church has theology to deal with and a mission to advance on earth.

This research advances by delving into theological and missional engagement with Pauline texts and major voices from scholars in both evangelical and ecumenical traditions. The sources will be utilized to demonstrate that the metaphor of the Body of Christ provides a sufficient basis for empowering the church to remain united in diversity and to reach the world for Christ. In a world where internal fragmentation and external threats undermine the church's credibility, Paul's metaphor reveals the true identity: Spirit-enabled, Christocentric community actively involved in God's mission.

This article contends that Paul's Body of Christ metaphor provides a critical theological resource for reconstituting the African Church's missional identity. By reading Pauline ecclesiology in conversation with Reformed theology and African communal philosophy, particularly Ubuntu, the study argues that unity-in-diversity is neither a sociological convenience nor a cultural given, but a Spirit-enabled participation in Christ's own life and mission. Such a retrieval challenges both Western individualism and African sectarianism, offering a constructive path toward faithful ecclesial witness in a rapidly changing African context.

Methodology

This study employs a theological-analytical methodology. This method will employ a structured approach to the view of God and religious doctrine (ecclesiology), going beyond the exposition of Scripture to analyze meaning and consistency, ensuring that theological arguments are defensible against objections. Its primary sources are biblical texts, particularly Pauline epistles, read within their canonical and theological contexts. The analysis focuses on key passages in which the Body of Christ metaphor is central (1 Cor 12:12–27; Rom 12:3–8; Eph 4:1–16).

⁵ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th Anniversary ed. edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 399.

⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Westmont: IVP Academic, 2006), 284.



Secondary sources are drawn from Reformed theology, African contextual theology, and contemporary missiological scholarship. Reformed voices (Calvin, Bavinck, Kuyper, Horton, Vanhoozer, Goheen) provide theological depth on ecclesiology and mission. African scholars (Mbiti, Bediako, Sanneh, Orobator, Maluleke, Katongole, Phiri, Tiénou) highlight contextual dynamics and communal worldviews. Missiologists are engaged in current debates on mission and ecclesiology in Africa.

This study first examines the scriptural foundations of the church through Paul’s metaphor of the Body of Christ, with particular attention to its theological implications for identity and belonging. It then explores the dynamics of unity in diversity as articulated in Pauline ecclesiology, before considering the role of the Spirit in shaping a distinctly communal and missional witness. Building on this exegetical and theological framework, the paper engages the relationship between ecclesiology and mission, drawing out how Pauline insights may be constructively appropriated within contemporary church contexts. The discussion further turns to the interaction between culture and ecclesial identity, especially within African settings, while critically addressing contemporary challenges facing the Body of Christ. The study concludes by synthesizing these findings to propose a theologically grounded and contextually attentive vision of the church.

Literature Review

Scriptural Description of the Body of Christ

Paul, in Romans 12:3–8, goes ahead to enumerate a variety of spiritual gifts bestowed upon those in the faith as members of the body of Christ. This is Paul’s first mention of this great metaphor of the Body of Christ, a doctrine which he alone, among the apostles, sets forth, he being the one chosen “minister of the Church” (Col 1:24, 25),—as to its real, heavenly, corporate character.⁷ The apostle here illustrates the union and connection of believers by the figure of the human body. Every member has its proper place in the body, and its proper function to perform, and every member is valuable according as it is useful in the body. But no member is useless. Paul acknowledges that members of the body have various functions, not for competition but for cooperation.

He reminds his readers that the design for which these gifts were bestowed was the edification of the church, and not the exaltation of the receiver; that, however diversified in their

⁷ William R. Newell, *Romans: Verse-by-Verse: A Classic Evangelical Commentary* (Kregel Publications, 2003), 321.



nature, they were all manifestations of the same Spirit, and were as necessary to a perfect whole as the several members of the body, with their various offices, to a perfect man.⁸ All the saints make up one body in Christ, who is the head of the body, and the common center of their unity. Believers lie not in the world as a confused, disorderly heap, but are organized and knit together, as they are united to one common head, and actuated and animated by one common Spirit.⁹ Strikingly, these gifts are not for individual joys and prestige but for the good of the entire body. This diversity of gifts, when exercised in love and humility, fosters unity and maturity within the church.¹⁰

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul invokes the human body as a metaphor for the community constituted by the messianic event, namely the death and resurrection of Jesus.¹¹ The use of the human body analogy to explain the exercise of spiritual gifts emphasizes the unity of the body.¹² The metaphor of the body was widely used in Greco-Roman political discussions of concord to illustrate how unity can exist within diversity in society.¹³ His first audience would have resonated well with his writing. In this pericope, the apostle aims to communicate that although it [the body] has many parts, all the parts work together as one, and they all need one another.¹⁴

Believers are to remain united and foster interdependence, as none can function alone in the body. No part of the body chooses to perform another part's function, because that would be confusing. The metaphor in this scripture emphasizes that each member, regardless of role or position, is important to the church's health.

Ephesians 4:1-16 follows a similar theme: the apostle calls those in the faith to conduct their lives in a Godly manner and to preserve the unity of the Spirit while embracing peace. We must *endeavor to keep* this unity – we do not create it. God never commands us to create unity among believers. He has created it by His Spirit; our duty is to recognize it and keep it. This is a spiritual unity, not necessarily a structural or denominational unity. It is evident in the quick

⁸ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans: Designed for Students of the English Bible* (HardPress Publishing, 2019), 706.

⁹ Matthew Henry, "Commentary on Romans," Blue Letter Bible, accessed March 30, 2026, https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/mhc/Rom/Rom_012.cfm.

¹⁰ Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, 284.

¹¹ "The Politics of the Messianic Body—1 Corinthians 12:12-31a (Ray Pickett)," *Political Theology Network*, January 19, 2016, <https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-the-messianic-body-1-corinthians-1212-31a/>.

¹² Eric C. Redmond, "1 Corinthians Commentary. TGCBC," *The Gospel Coalition*, n.d., accessed March 29, 2026, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/commentary/1-corinthians/>.

¹³ Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 43.

¹⁴ Tsholofelo J. Kukuni, "Spiritually Gifted and Divided? A Text-Centred Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 12:1-31a," *In Die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 58, no. 1 (May 2024).



fellowship possible among Christians of different races, nationalities, languages, and economic classes.¹⁵ Interpreting Ephesians 4:1-6 in view of our contemporary situations is comparatively easy to comprehend. Disunity is a well-known accusation against the church.¹⁶ He acknowledges the diversity of gifts and roles within the church but stresses that these are given to equip the saints for ministry and to build up the body of Christ until it reaches unity in faith and knowledge of the Son of God.¹⁷

From Paul's writing, there is no doubt that positions do not matter and that individualism is discouraged. His ecclesiological argument advocated a situation in which all members participate and are appreciated for their contributions to the church's mission. The church is not merely an institution but a living organism, the fruit of the Father's election, the Son's redemption, and the Spirit's regeneration.¹⁸ The church is thus a unified Body, though diverse parts make it up. All parts are necessary for the growth and missions.

Theological Insight for Unity in Diversity

Paul's metaphor draws heavily on trinitarian theology. The Godhead, made up of the Father, Son, and Spirit, operates in diversity and perfect harmony. The Body of Christ is also expected to exude such a posture as she continues her mission on earth. The church, as the communion of saints, is the fruit of election by the Father, redemption by the Son, and sanctification by the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ It is to be noted that the church traces its origin to the Trinity and therefore has to reflect that same divine unity.

Critics who vouch for uniformity in the nature and form of the church have fallen short of the Creator's intention to have diversity in the church. The Spirit makes the many one, without erasing their differences. Unity in the church is never uniformity, but a harmonious diversity.²⁰ It is to be celebrated that the church in itself has diverse gifts, and everyone has a function in God's

¹⁵ David Guzik, "Ephesians Chapter 4 - Enduring Word," Paul's Letters, *Ephesians 4 – Living to God's Glory*, December 6, 2015, <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/ephesians-4/>.

¹⁶ Frederick J. De Beer, "The Ecclesiastical Difficulty of Ephesians 4:1–6 in View of the Different Perspectives on the Baptism in the Holy Spirit and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit," *In Die Skriflig / In Luce Verbi* 54, no. 1 (October 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v54i1.2641>.

¹⁷ Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology*, 210–15.

¹⁸ Johan Herman; David Hugh Freeman Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, Trade Paperback edition (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1960), 282–85.

¹⁹ Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, 311.

²⁰ Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology*, 215.



divine design. The church must again become a community in which all members, equally, encourage each other to discover and to develop their gifts and ministries.²¹

Spirit-Led Communal Witness and Participation

The vibrancy of the church is directly related to the active participation of its Spirit-led members. In other words, the believers ought to manifest the Spirit's work in bringing many together into a woven community that spreads the fame of Christ. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good as recorded in 1 Corinthians 12:7. There is no doubt that gifts are granted freely for the good of all and to build the body. Spiritual gifts are given to equip the church to carry out its ministry until Christ returns.²²

Coming together in fellowship plays a huge role in maintaining the church's vibrancy. The Greek term *Koinonia* denotes a spiritual communion among those in the faith who jointly participate in the life of the church. The church is a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the kingdom of God.²³ This implies that living as a community has a special place in God's reign; it is through this that the transformative power of the gospel is portrayed in a diverse environment.

The church's unity and diversity, while enabled by the Holy Spirit, serve as a compelling witness to the world of God's redemptive work. David Bosch articulates this missional dimension, stating that mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God."²⁴

Ecclesiology and Mission from Paul to the Church

Paul's metaphor of the church as the Body of Christ denotes not only internal unity within but also the outward calling to hold Christ out to the world. Internally, the body imagery expresses a corporate solidarity in which the individual finds identity only in relation to the whole.²⁵ Thus, Paul's vision resists individualism by locating identity within the shared life of the community. Unity is not optional but constitutive of what the church is. However, the metaphor does not terminate in internal cohesion, as the body of Christ is also the visible historical expression of Christ's Presence in the world. The church is the means by which Jesus continues his work within

²¹ Timothy A. Van Aarde, "The Missional Church Structure and the Priesthood of All Believers (Ephesians 4:7-16) in the Light of the Inward and Outward Function of the Church," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no. 1 (January 2017): 9.

²² Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1016.

²³ Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story*, 3.2.2011 edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 105.

²⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 399.

²⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 309.



the world.²⁶ In this sense, therefore, the body metaphor carries an inherently missional angle. Ecclesiology cannot be detached from mission. The church does not have a mission. The mission has a church.²⁷ It is God who sends, and therefore His embodiment on earth, the church, ought to live as the sent one.

The gathered body exists as a living sign of the kingdom, extending the kingdom through witness and communal life. Joining the church is joining a community of faith. The church plays a central role in God's saving purposes, showing that salvation is not merely individual but corporate.²⁸ Paul is holistic in his understanding and interpretation of how the body ought to function. Paul's understanding of the Body of Christ is fundamentally holistic, encompassing not only the spiritual unity of believers but also their relational, functional, and missional interdependence. In his ecclesiology, the church is not merely a collection of individuals bound by shared belief, but an organically unified body in which every member is integrally connected to Christ as the head and to one another as mutually dependent parts (1 Cor 12:12-27; Rom 12:4-5). This holistic vision resists reducing the church to either a purely spiritual reality or a merely institutional structure. Instead, Paul presents a dynamic organism in which identity, practice, and purpose are inseparably intertwined. It is to be noted that the church is both the end and the means of God's redemptive work: she is chosen to be holy and sent to proclaim his excellencies.²⁹ The metaphor of the Body of Christ encompasses both theological identity and missional responsibility.

Cultural Engagement and Ecclesial Identity

The gospel creates a new cultural identity, not erasing old ones, but reconfiguring them under the lordship of Christ.³⁰ The church exists in a context and ought to know how best to engage culture. The gospel remains unchanged, but is conveyed in ways that diverse cultural forms can understand and embrace for their own transformation. In essence, the message of the gospel about how Christ saves needs to be packaged in ways that recipients would resonate with in their settings. It should not appear as a foreign concept that has no bearing on those who receive it.

In pluralistic spaces, Paul's teaching in Galatians 3:28 stands out: There is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. The church must resist

²⁶ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone : 1 Corinthians* (London : Louisville, KY: SPCK Publishing, 2004), 172.

²⁷ Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*, 4.

²⁸ Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, 125.

²⁹ Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, 317.

³⁰ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2008), 391.



two temptations: cultural syncretism that dilutes the gospel, and sectarianism that isolates believers from the community aspect of being one body under Christ. The Spirit gives unity while allowing for diversity. Pentecost shows the plurality of voices speaking of one gospel.³¹

We know of Paul living out the gospel during his time on earth. He made every effort to contextualize the gospel among his hearers. 1 Cor 9:19–23 shows that he consciously contextualized the message without making compromises. In this study, contextualization is defined as the process of making the Gospel of Jesus Christ relevant in any given culture by recognizing each culture’s uniqueness and the gospel’s universality.³² True contextualization is not accommodation but translation, the Word made flesh in every culture.³³ The church must not simply preach to culture but enter into it, critique it, and renew it from within.³⁴ The church is thus to preserve its identity and to forge ahead in witnessing to all cultures, so that the Gospel transformation is seen. Theological contextualization in Africa may take different forms across historical periods, but its objective must always remain the same as in biblical times.³⁵

Contemporary Hurdles for the Body of Christ

There are three fundamental issues that the church will need to surmount: the evolution of the digital church, the challenge of secularism, and increased denominational fragmentation. The metaphor of the Body of Christ will need to powerfully speak and engage these impediments in the life of witnessing. The three challenges impact internal cohesion and affect public witness and engagement with the broader society.

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a pivotal moment for religious congregations, compelling them to navigate profound technological, theological, and social disruptions.³⁶ It was during this era in human history that the digital church gained acceptance. The use of the internet and digital technology has permeated most facets of life, from educational institutions to business

³¹ Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology*, 142.

³² Moses Kirimi Ndunjo, Dickson Nkonge Kagema, and David Nyaga Bururia, “Contextualization of the Christian Gospel in Kenya: A Case of Tharaka Community,” *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 8, no. 18 (2018): 23, <https://www.iiste.org/Journals/index.php/RHSS/article/view/44410>.

³³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Later Printing Used edition (Grand Rapids, Mich. : Geneva SZ: Eerdmans, 1989), 64.

³⁴ Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*, Illustrated edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 211.

³⁵ Daniel Dei, “An Integrated Approach to Theological Contextualization in Africa,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 46, no. 3 (June 2019): 7–7, <https://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/187>.

³⁶ Heidi A. Campbell and Megan Boone, “Making Sense about the Future of Churches’ Engagement with Technology: A Post-Pandemic Reflection on Digital Ministry,” *Ecclesial Futures*, ahead of print, July 3, 2025.



organizations, both secular and religious.³⁷ Technology has played a significant role in extending access to the church, but it cannot fully replace the fellowship embodied in in-person meetings. The Pauline trail of thought on the church as a body demands physical presence, participation, and the reception of sacraments. The church is not an idea or an institution alone, but a living organism animated by the Spirit of Christ.³⁸ Digital involvement falls short of this organismal identity.

Secularism has led to a reduction of the gospel to civic harmony, moral activism, and therapeutic deism. Secularism poses challenges to the church's structure and functioning. Secularisation implies the eradication of the religious dimension at both individual and social levels.³⁹ The structure and functioning of the church are affected, as observed when the church has lost battles due to the "privatization of faith" and the failure to distinguish its biblical ecclesiology from cultural influences.⁴⁰ Some aspects of secularism include individualism, prioritizing one's personal goals and interests, and the freedom to live as one wants.⁴¹ It goes against the very ethos of her existence. A church that exists only for itself and for its own religious purposes will find itself increasingly irrelevant.⁴² Paul's vision resists such reductionism. The church exists to display the cosmic lordship of Christ and the reconciling power of his cross (Eph 1:22–23; Col. 1:18–20).

Denominational fragmentation threatens the integrity and credibility of the gospel. Some divisional measures are effective for the propagation of the church and for maintaining certain distinctiveness. Paul insists that the model is composed of 'one body and one spirit' in Ephesians 4:4. This model advocates visible unity in mission and love. As John Stott asserts, disunity obscures the truth that the church is meant to declare. Unity is not an optional extra.⁴³ The Body of Christ metaphor exposes sectarianism and renders it immature (1 Cor 3:1–14). On the flipside, Churches are called to mutual recognition under Christ's Lordship.

³⁷ Jason L. Rankin, "Implications of Digital Church for Christian Leaders," *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 11, no. 1 (December 2024): 2408868.

³⁸ Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, 343.

³⁹ Department of Theology, Emanuel University of Oradea, Romania and Ovidiu Hanc, "Secularism and the Church A Case Study on the Church in Romania," *Dialogo* 9, no. 1 (December 2022): 105–14, <https://doi.org/10.51917/dialogo.2022.9.1.8>.

⁴⁰ Department of Theology, Emanuel University of Oradea, Romania and Hanc, "Secularism and the Church A Case Study on the Church in Romania."

⁴¹ Leonard Ndzi, "Church and Culture: An Exploration of Challenges and Opportunities for Contemporary Ecclesial Communities," *ShahidiHub International Journal of Theology & Religious Studies* 3, no. 2 (August 2023): 263, <https://www.shahidihub.org/shahidihub/index.php/ijtrs/article/view/178>.

⁴² Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 232.

⁴³ John Stott, *For the Lord We Love: Your Study Guide to the Lausanne Covenant* (Place of publication not identified: Christian Focus, 2009), 256.



Implications for the African Church

Africans would understand the Ubuntu philosophy: “I am because you are, and you are because I am.”⁴⁴ Ubuntu refers to the worldview of Black people of Africa, from which they derive relational, communal, societal, environmental, and spiritual knowledges, values, and practices.⁴⁵ The aspects thereof tend to be on the outside of an individual but influence the lenses through which they process their world. The African fabric of interconnectedness in community expresses the theme I am because of who we all are. The Body of Christ is relevant since the African Church exists to exhibit spiritual vibrancy and address looming socio-political challenges. The African worldview is inherently communal, making the Church-as-Body metaphor especially resonant.⁴⁶ The African ought to be at the forefront of advocating for the communal nature of worship and resisting replacement by digital options. God created man not as an isolated individual but as a social being.⁴⁷

The promotion of Doctrinal Unity across denominations ought to be a vision for the African Church. There is no other bond by which the society of the faithful is held together than agreement in sound doctrine.⁴⁸ Such unity flows from our Savior Jesus Christ. As the Nicene Creed declares, “one holy, catholic and apostolic Church”,⁴⁹ reminding African Churches that the Body of Christ is united in Spiritual oneness. Embracing the creeds would be a good way to foster unity while preserving cultural differences.

As the continent gets urbanized, secular thought and practices will influence public life. The African Church will need a robust biblical worldview to remain firm. Believers will need to live out their Christianity in art, education, politics, and all spheres of life. It will be Kuyper who asserted that “there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which

⁴⁴ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 2nd Revised & enlarged edition (Oxford ; Portsmouth, N.H: Heinemann, 1990).

⁴⁵ Jacob Rugare Mugumbate et al., “Understanding Ubuntu and Its Contribution to Social Work Education in Africa and Other Regions of the World,” *Social Work Education* 43, no. 4 (May 2024): 1123–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2023.2168638>.

⁴⁶ Tokunboh Adeyemo et al., eds., *Africa Bible Commentary* (Carlisle: HippoBooks, 2016), 1377.

⁴⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 3: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2006), 316.

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559th edition, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, Ky. London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 4.1.10.

⁴⁹ Jared Ortiz and Daniel A. Keating, *The Nicene Creed: A Scriptural, Historical, and Theological Commentary* (Baker Academic, 2024).



Christ does not cry, ‘Mine!’”⁵⁰ In the same thought, African believers will need to stand out as salt and light in this watching world.

Embracing theological education and local leadership is a necessity for the African Church. The church’s greatest need is biblical preaching. I mean preaching that is faithful to scripture, doctrinally balanced, Christ-centered, and Spirit-empowered.⁵¹ The pew and the pulpit will do well to embrace sound theology. Investment in learning will go a long way toward shaping doctrine and the Christian mind, while not losing sight of Christ’s aim for the church. The Holy Scriptures are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come.⁵² This stresses the importance of granting access to all people in languages that they understand. The African Church has a role to play in ensuring theological education is made available to all.

Theological Synthesis

The metaphor of the church as the Body of Christ, as mentioned by the Apostle Paul, is a grand vision of community, unity, and the church’s missional work. Individualism, denominational disunity, and digital influence have no room in this metaphor. All believers are called to participate in a Spirit-led life through united communities where Christ is preached. We are strongly reminded that the church is not a human invention but one that Christ made and dwells in. In Herman’s words, “the Church is not a product of human will or invention but the work of the Holy Spirit, gathering people from all nations into one spiritual organism.”⁵³ Indeed, each member has a role to play as we all submit to Christ. In addition, Christian unity in Africa will require conversion to Christ.⁵⁴

While thinking of missions, the church is not a static or inward-facing institution. All intentions to create the Body of Christ had a mission at their very core. The church is not the goal of the gospel but the instrument of God’s mission.⁵⁵ It is incumbent on the church to urgently engage in the evangelization of the world. It is upon the church to manifest the life of Christ to the

⁵⁰ Mr James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans-Lightning Source, 1998), 488.

⁵¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: Applying God’s Word to Today’s World* (Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity, 1992), 15.

⁵² The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms As Adopted By the Presbyterian Church in America with Proofs Texts* (Lawrenceville, Ga.: Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 1.8.

⁵³ Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, 317.

⁵⁴ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, “United Over Meals Divided at the Lord’s Table: Christianity and the Unity of the Church in Africa,” *Transformation* 27, no. 1 (January 2010): 16-27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378809351452>.

⁵⁵ Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*, 219.



world. The African Church urgently needs to heed this call. Communal traditions, denominational fragmentations, Western individualism, and secular ideologies are all glaringly taking over the continent. Through sound doctrine, sound leadership, and active participation, the church will remain as salt and light in a dynamic space. We cannot have God as our Father unless we have the church as our mother.⁵⁶

Conclusion

This study has argued that Paul’s metaphor of the Body of Christ provides a theologically rich and normatively authoritative framework for understanding ecclesial identity, particularly within contemporary African contexts marked by fragmentation, rapid growth, and cultural complexity. In light of the preceding analysis, this paper offers a constructive proposal to recover a robust, biblically grounded, and contextually faithful vision of the church. First, the church must recover its fundamentally Christological identity. Paul’s articulation of the Body of Christ resists all attempts to ground ecclesial belonging in ethnicity, social status, or institutional affiliation. Instead, union with Christ constitutes the primary and non-negotiable basis of membership. In African contexts where ethnic and communal identities remain powerful, this requires a deliberate theological re-centering in which all secondary identities are subordinated to participation in Christ. Such a move does not erase cultural particularity but reorders it within a redemptive and eschatological horizon.

Second, unity must be understood as both a theological given and an ecclesial task. Paul presents unity as grounded in the one Spirit and the one body (1 Cor 12:13), yet he also exhorts the church to maintain this unity actively. African churches, therefore, must move beyond mere affirmation of spiritual unity toward visible and practical expressions of reconciliation and cooperation. This may take the form of interdenominational partnerships, shared mission initiatives, and structures of mutual accountability that embody the unity already established in Christ.

Third, the communal nature of the church must be reclaimed in opposition to growing individualism. While African traditions such as Ubuntu provide valuable resources for communal thinking, they must be critically appropriated and reshaped by Pauline theology. The church is not simply a community of shared humanity but a Spirit-formed body whose life is ordered around

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Calvin*, 4.1.1.



Christ's lordship. This distinction safeguards the church from collapsing into either cultural romanticism or individualistic spirituality, offering instead a distinctly Christian vision of communal life marked by mutual edification, sacrificial love, and shared participation in the Spirit.

Fourth, the relationship between ecclesiology and mission must be re-integrated. Paul's vision does not permit a separation between what the church is and what the church does; rather, the church is inherently missional because it participates in the life and mission of God. Consequently, African churches must resist models of mission that are either purely programmatic or entirely individualistic. Instead, mission should be understood as the corporate witness of the Body of Christ, expressed through proclamation, service, justice, and the formation of disciples within local communities.

Fifth, contemporary challenges such as prosperity-oriented teaching and digital expressions of church demand careful theological discernment. While prosperity theology often resonates with legitimate socio-economic aspirations, it risks distorting the gospel by prioritizing individual success over communal faithfulness and sacrificial discipleship. Similarly, digital forms of church, though offering new opportunities for connection and outreach, must not replace the embodied and relational dimensions that are central to Pauline ecclesiology. The church must therefore engage these developments critically, affirming what is beneficial while resisting what undermines its theological integrity.

In conclusion, this study contends that a renewed appropriation of Pauline ecclesiology offers a compelling pathway for addressing the identity crisis facing the contemporary church in Africa. By grounding ecclesial life in union with Christ, embodying unity in diversity, cultivating Spirit-formed community, and participating faithfully in God's mission, the church can recover both its theological depth and its missional vitality. Such a vision not only addresses current challenges but also positions the church to bear faithful witness in an increasingly complex, rapidly changing world.



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