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THE PARADOX OF UNITY IN THE EARLY CHURCH AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

OLOYE, Titus Olajide, PhD[1] & ODEROTOR, ThankGod Edewor[2]
[1]Ezekiel College of Theology, Ekpoma, Edo State (in Affiliation with Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo)
veryoloye@gmail.com/+2348102809123
[2]Department of Religious Management & Cultural Studies, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Edo State
temo.forchrist@gmail.com/+2348054371994

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ABSTRACT
The early Church was established upon the principle of unity in Christ, yet it was not immune to divisions arising from cultural, doctrinal and leadership conflicts. This paradox—simultaneous unity and division—offers a constructive theological framework for examining the contemporary African church, which has emerged as the demographic heart of global Christianity. This article critically evaluates the nature of unity in the early Church as portrayed in the New Testament and compares it with the realities of African Christianity today. It argues that while conflict and diversity are inevitable ecclesial realities, the biblical model of Spirit-led reconciliation, doctrinal fidelity and conciliar decision-making provides a theological path forward for the African church, which faces fragmentation from denominational proliferation, the prosperity gospel, ethnic tensions and contested ecumenical visions. The research employs a historical-biblical and comparative theological methodology, examining key New Testament texts (Acts 2:42–47; Acts 15; 1 Corinthians 1–12; Ephesians 4) in dialogue with contemporary African scholars. The findings reveal that the early Church maintained unity not by eliminating conflict but by developing theological and communal mechanisms for addressing it—mechanisms that hold constructive potential for African Christianity. The work concludes that the African church must recover the apostolic model of Spirit-guided conciliarity and the cultural resources of African communal ethics to embody credible ecclesial unity in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Early Church Unity, African Christianity, Ecumenism, Denominationalism, Prosperity Gospel

Introduction

The prayer of Jesus Christ for His Church in John 17:21—"that they may all be one"—has reverberated through two millennia of Christian history as both a theological imperative and an unresolved challenge. The early Church, as depicted in the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline Epistles, presents a profound paradox: it was simultaneously united by the Spirit and divided by doctrinal disputes, cultural tensions and personal rivalries. This paradox was not merely a first-century phenomenon but constitutes an enduring ecclesiological reality that demands continual theological reflection.

The relevance of this paradox has intensified with the dramatic shift in the centre of global Christianity. Sub-Saharan Africa has emerged as a vital heartland of the Christian faith, with the continent experiencing the most dramatic religious demographic shift of the twentieth century–from approximately 9 percent Christian in 1900 to nearly 50 percent Christian by 2020 (Zurlo, 2020). This transformation, however, has not produced a monolithic African Christianity. Rather, the African church embodies extraordinary diversity: all four major traditions (Catholic, Independent, Orthodox and Protestant) are substantially present, with thousands of denominations having grown from African soil (Zurlo, 2020). The Independent churches, in particular, represent the most diverse and fastest-growing movement within African Christianity.

Yet this remarkable growth coexists with pressing challenges. African Christians remain, as Zurlo (2020) observes, "more vulnerable and less healthy than Christians in the global North," with many African countries scoring low on health and economic measures. This disparity raises profound questions about what it means to be part of a global Christian family when such material inequality exists between brothers and sisters. Moreover, the African church confronts internal fragmentation from denominational proliferation, theological controversy, ethnic tensions and competing visions of ecclesial identity.

This article critically examines the paradox of unity in the early Church and traces its implications for contemporary African Christianity. It proceeds in four movements. First, it studies the theological foundations of unity in the New Testament, examining the vision of *koinonia* articulated in Acts and the Pauline corpus. Second, it analyses the sources and management of conflict in the early Church, with particular attention to the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) as a paradigm of conciliar decision-making. Third, it investigates the contemporary African context, examining both the challenges to unity—denominational fragmentation, the prosperity gospel, ethnic divisions, and colonial missionary legacies—and the constructive cultural and theological resources available for ecclesial reconciliation. Finally, it proposes pathways toward renewed unity grounded in both apostolic practice and African communal ethics.

The argument advanced is that the early Church's experience offers not a romanticised model of perfect harmony but a realistic paradigm of Spirit-guided conflict resolution that holds constructive potential for African Christianity. The African church need not choose between doctrinal fidelity and contextual relevance; rather, the apostolic model demonstrates that unity amid diversity is possible through conciliar practices, theological discernment and the cultural resources of African communal life.

Theological Foundations of Unity in the Early Church

1 The Vision of Koinonia in the Jerusalem Community

The book of Acts presents a foundational portrait of early Christian unity. Following the Pentecost event, Luke describes the nascent community in terms that have shaped ecclesiological imagination ever since: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). This fourfold description encompasses didache (teaching), koinonia (fellowship), eucharistic practice, and communal prayer—elements that together constitute the essential fabric of ecclesial life.

The subsequent verses expand this portrait with remarkable social and economic dimensions: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44–45). The summary statement in Acts 4:32 intensifies this vision: "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common."

Scholars have debated the historical accuracy and normative significance of these passages. John Stott (1979) interprets them as descriptive rather than prescriptive, yet theologically significant as a witness to the Spirit's power to create genuine community. The unity depicted is not merely spiritual or invisible but manifests in tangible practices of mutual care and economic sharing. This material dimension of unity—the conviction that fellowship in Christ entails responsibility for one another's concrete well-being—holds particular relevance for African contexts where economic disparity and communal obligation remain pressing concerns.

The theological foundation of this unity is clearly articulated: it flows from shared participation in Christ through the Spirit. As Stott (1979) emphasises, "Christian unity is not something we create; it is something we are called to preserve." The unity of the Church is a divine gift, rooted in the reconciling work of Christ (Ephesians 2:14–16) and sustained by the Spirit's indwelling presence (Ephesians 4:3–6). Believers do not manufacture unity but receive it as an inheritance and are summoned to guard it through humility, patience, and love.

2 Pauline Ecclesiology: The Body of Christ

The Apostle Paul provides the most developed theological articulation of early Christian unity through his metaphor of the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul writes: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12). This organic image accomplishes several theological tasks simultaneously.

First, it affirms diversity as essential to ecclesial life. The body does not consist of one member but of many (1 Corinthians 12:14); each part has a distinct function that contributes to the whole. Paul's insistence on this point directly counters the Corinthian tendency toward factionalism and spiritual elitism. Those who would elevate one gift (tongues, prophecy or apostolic association) above others misunderstand the nature of the body, where the "weaker" members are indispensable (1 Corinthians 12:22).

Second, the body metaphor establishes mutual interdependence as the structure of Christian community. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you" (1 Corinthians 12:21). This mutual recognition and dependence constitute the practical expression of unity. There can be no division within the body; rather, members must "have the same care for one another" (1 Corinthians 12:25).

Third, Paul locates the source of this unity in the Spirit's distributing gifts "to each one individually just as he chooses" (1 Corinthians 12:11) and in the common confession that "Jesus is Lord" (1 Corinthians 12:3). Unity is therefore pneumatologically grounded and christologically oriented. The diversity of gifts serves the upbuilding of the one body, and the body's unity witnesses to its one Lord.

Stott's (1979) interpretation of Ephesians 4 reinforces this understanding: "Unity does not mean uniformity." The Pauline vision rejects both the chaos of unchecked diversity and the tyranny of enforced homogeneity. Rather, the church embodies "a shared commitment to Christ amid legitimate diversity." This theological insight proves crucial for evaluating both early Christian conflicts and contemporary African ecclesial realities.

3 The Paradox Emergent: Unity Amid Tension

The New Testament witness does not permit a romanticised reading of early Christian harmony. The same texts that proclaim profound unity also document significant tensions. The book of Acts, immediately following its portrait of communal sharing, records the dispute between "Hellenists" and "Hebrews" over the daily distribution of food (Acts 6:1). This conflict—rooted in cultural and linguistic differences within the community—required institutional innovation through the appointment of the seven deacons.

More significantly, the inclusion of Gentile believers precipitated a crisis that threatened the very identity of the fledgling movement. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) convened specifically to address whether Gentile converts must observe Jewish law, particularly circumcision. The intensity of this dispute is evident in Paul's letter to the Galatians, where he describes opposing Peter "to his face" at Antioch over the issue of table fellowship with Gentiles (Galatians 2:11–14). Paul's characterisation of certain opponents as "false believers secretly brought in" who "slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 2:4) reveals the high stakes and deep passions involved.

The Corinthian correspondence reveals further fractures: factions aligned with Paul, Apollos, and Cephas (1 Corinthians 1:10–13); ethical failures requiring apostolic correction (1 Corinthians 5);

disputes over food offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8); and theological controversies concerning the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15). Chadwick (1993) aptly characterises the situation: "The Early Church's unity was a unity of faith and fellowship rather than a uniformity of organisation." The early Christians shared core convictions about Christ while differing on numerous practical and theological matters.

This paradox—simultaneous unity and division—constitutes not a failure of the early Church but a realistic portrait of ecclesial life. The church exists in the tension between the eschatological "already" and "not yet," between the Spirit's transformative presence and the persistence of human limitation. What distinguishes the early Church is not the absence of conflict but the development of mechanisms for addressing it without dissolving communion.

Conflict and Its Management in the Early Church

1 Sources of Division in Early Christian Communities

The New Testament literature permits identification of several recurring sources of conflict within early Christianity. Cultural and ethnic tensions feature prominently, as evidenced by the Hellenist-Hebrew dispute in Acts 6 and the more fundamental controversy over Gentile inclusion. These conflicts arose not from theological error per se but from the challenge of embodying unity across cultural boundaries. The early Church's expansion beyond its Jewish matrix inevitably raised questions about the relationship between gospel and culture, questions that could not be resolved by simple appeal to precedent.

Doctrinal disputes constitute a second major source of division. The Galatian controversy concerned the very conditions of salvation: must Gentile believers become Jews to be fully Christian? The Corinthian disputes over resurrection theology touched the heart of Christian hope. These were not peripheral matters but questions touching the substance of the faith. Kelly (1978) observes that the Church's unity was sustained through the "rule of faith"—a summary of apostolic teaching that provided theological coherence amid diversity. The development of creeds, particularly the Nicene Creed, represents the Church's response to doctrinal conflicts that threatened to fragment its communion.

Leadership rivalries further complicated early Christian unity. The Corinthian factions—"I belong to Paul," "I belong to Apollos," "I belong to Cephas" (1 Corinthians 1:12)—demonstrate how legitimate appreciation for particular teachers could harden into partisan identity. Even the apostles themselves were not immune to tension, as the Antioch incident (Galatians 2:11–14) reveals. Paul's public rebuke of Peter, whatever its immediate resolution, indicates that apostolic leadership did not guarantee automatic agreement on all matters of practice.

Moral and ethical failures also disrupted community life. The Corinthian church's tolerance of sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 5) and its abuse of the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:17–22) threatened the integrity of its witness and required apostolic intervention. These failures remind us that unity is not merely doctrinal but ethical; communities divided by unaddressed sin cannot embody credible fellowship.

2 The Jerusalem Council: A Paradigm of Conciliar Decision-Making

The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) stands as the most significant early Christian experiment in conflict resolution and provides a paradigm of enduring importance. The controversy arose when "certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved'" (Acts 15:1). This teaching struck at the heart of the Gentile mission and threatened to impose Jewish identity as a condition for Christian belonging.

Luke's account reveals several features of the council's procedure. First, the issue was publicly debated: "After there had been much debate" (Acts 15:7), Peter, Barnabas, and Paul addressed the assembly. The apostolic leaders did not simply impose a decision but engaged in communal discernment. Second, appeal was made to experience—specifically, to the manifest work of the Spirit among Gentiles, who had received the Holy Spirit just as the Jewish believers had (Acts 15:8–9). Third, Scripture was invoked, as James cites the prophets in support of Gentile inclusion (Acts 15:15–18). Fourth, the council reached a decision that preserved both doctrinal integrity and practical wisdom: Gentile believers were not required to be circumcised but were asked to abstain from certain practices offensive to Jewish Christians (Acts 15:19–20, 28–29).

Mbachu's (1995) study of the Jerusalem Council illuminates its significance for African contexts. He argues that "inculturated evangelisation is the theme of the Jerusalem Council theology of Acts 15." The council's resolution affirmed that people of all cultures are saved not by observing the law of the gospel's carrier-culture but by faith in the grace of the Lord. Mbachu (1995) demonstrates

how the first-century resolution of faith-culture conflict between Jewish and Gentile cultures can be employed for resolving similar tensions in African churches today. The council neither imposed Jewish culture as normative for Gentile believers nor sanctioned an a cultural gospel; rather, it discerned the essential matters while permitting cultural diversity in non-essentials.

The council's concluding letter frames its decision in striking terms: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). This formulation claims divine guidance for the council's discernment while acknowledging human participation in the process. The council did not claim infallibility but testified to the Spirit's leading as the community wrestled with a contentious issue. Zizioulas (1985) develops this insight theologically, arguing that true unity in the early Church was conciliar and eucharistic in nature—each local church gathered around its bishop in the Eucharist embodied the fullness of the universal Church, and councils expressed the communion of these local churches in shared discernment.

3 Apostolic Authority and Theological Coherence

The Jerusalem Council exemplifies but does not exhaust the mechanisms by which the early Church maintained unity. Apostolic authority played a crucial role, as Paul's letters demonstrate. When communities faced confusion or deviation, the apostle intervened with theological instruction, moral exhortation, and, when necessary, stern warning. The existence of a recognised apostolic voice provided a means of correction that could, in principle, transcend local divisions.

Yet apostolic authority was not exercised in isolation. Paul's letters reveal ongoing consultation with other leaders (Galatians 2:1–2, 9–10) and dependence on the traditions he had received (1 Corinthians 11:23; 15:3). The apostle who could assert his independence from human authorities (Galatians 1:11–12) also sought confirmation from the Jerusalem pillars and submitted his gospel to communal discernment.

Kelly (1978) emphasises the role of the rule of faith in sustaining theological coherence. Before the development of the canonical creeds, early Christians possessed summary statements of apostolic teaching that provided parameters for authentic faith. These rules did not answer every question but established boundaries within which theological diversity could be tolerated. Irenaeus of Lyons, writing against Gnostic teachers in the late second century, appeals to this rule as the common faith received from the apostles and preserved in the churches.

Contemporary African Christianity: Contexts and Challenges

1 The Demographic Transformation and Its Implications

Any examination of unity in contemporary African Christianity must begin by acknowledging the extraordinary demographic transformation that has made Africa a—if not the—heartland of world Christianity. Zurlo (2020) documents this shift: from approximately 9 percent Christian in 1900 to nearly 50 percent Christian in 2020. This growth represents "the most dramatic shift anywhere in the world" in religious demographics. By 2050, Africa's overall population is expected to exceed 2.5 billion, with Christians continuing to constitute a significant majority in many regions.

This transformation carries profound implications for Christian unity. The African church is not a monolith but a complex reality encompassing multiple traditions. Zurlo (2020) notes that "all four major traditions (Catholics, Independents, Orthodox and Protestants) are substantially present," with thousands of denominations having grown from African soil. The Independent churches—those that emerged from African initiative rather than missionary planting—constitute "the most diverse and fastest-growing movement within Christianity."

African Christians increasingly provide leadership in global Christian forums, both within and across denominations and Christian organisations in Africa and the West. This emerging leadership role carries responsibility for articulating African perspectives on contested issues and for contributing to global ecumenical conversations. Yet it also raises questions about the relationship between African Christianity and its Western counterparts, particularly when significant disagreements arise over doctrine, ethics or practice.

2 Denominational Fragmentation and Missionary Legacies

The denominational fragmentation that characterises contemporary African Christianity has multiple sources. The missionary legacy remains particularly significant. As Hove (2025) documents in the Zimbabwean context, Western missionaries brought with them their own theological, ecclesial and cultural traditions, transplanting European divisions to African soil. The "comity agreement" of 1934, through which missionaries allocated distinct geographical regions to different denominations,

perpetuated these divisions by establishing denominational zones (Söderström, 1984). A person crossing from one region to another could find themselves a "foreigner" in the church due to denominational boundaries.

This missionary legacy continues to shape African Christianity in complex ways. Some former missionary churches maintain ongoing relationships with their "mother churches" in the West, receiving financial support and other resources. Zwana (2009) argues that this dependence has sometimes hindered ecumenical engagement, as denominations remain loyal to their Western sponsors rather than pursuing local unity.

The emergence of neo-Pentecostal denominations and prophetic movements has added new dimensions to denominational fragmentation. Hove (2025) observes that in Zimbabwe, these newer movements "exacerbate antagonism and division among Christians, posing a threat to the unity of the Body of Christ." The proliferation of independent ministries, each with its own founder, vision and practices, creates a complex landscape in which cooperation cannot be assumed but must be intentionally cultivated.

Uzukwu (2024) provides a broader African perspective on this denominational complexity. He notes that colonial Christianity propagated a divisive agenda, yet this agenda was "contained, thanks to the initiative of African leadership, guided by the Holy Spirit." African Christians were not passive recipients of missionary divisions but active agents in shaping ecclesial life. The response to denominational rivalry in eastern Nigeria and East Africa included deliberate steps toward unity, with Protestant communities working to eliminate or reduce competition except with Roman Catholics.

3 The Prosperity Gospel and Its Ecclesial Impact

The prosperity gospel constitutes one of the most significant and contested developments in contemporary African Christianity. Asamoah-Gyadu (2013, p. 1) defines it as "mainly associated with contemporary Pentecostal teachings," distinguished from classical Pentecostalism by its emphasis on material things as indicators of divine favour. The prosperity gospel promotes the belief that God's will for believers includes physical health and material wealth, often understood as accessible through faith, positive confession, and donations to ministry.

Mashau (2018) observes that "Christianity in post-colonial Africa is highly influenced and shaped by the prosperity message." This "popular and materialistic gospel is sweeping across the continents like a gale-force wind, which is irresistible." The explosive growth of prosperity teaching has received substantial scholarly attention, yet Mashau argues it "requires appraisal from time to time" because of the massive nature of its influence.

Several factors account for the prosperity gospel's appeal in African contexts. Asamoah-Gyadu (2005a, cited in Mashau, 2018) notes that Pentecostalism and prosperity teaching draw attention to the gospel's restorative power, promising transformation manifested in spiritual and physical abundance. Lioy (2007, cited in Mashau, 2018) adds that the health-and-wealth message "plays right into the traditional African value system that tends to link material success and abundance (wealth) to spiritual growth." The prosperity gospel aligns with existing cultural frameworks even as it transforms them.

The impact of prosperity teaching on ecclesial unity is complex and contested. On one hand, prosperity-oriented churches often attract large followings and provide their members with communities of support and belonging. On the other hand, the emphasis on individual success and upward mobility can undercut communal commitment and mutual responsibility. Asamoah-Gyadu (2013) warns that "prosperity-oriented Christianity often emphasizes success and upward mobility at the expense of sacrificial discipleship." The focus on material indicators of divine favour can distort Christian identity and weaken the bonds that unite believers across economic lines.

Ukpong (2008) offers a Nigerian perspective: "It seems that whenever and wherever there is a spiritual reawakening in the population, the ministers are the first to benefit from it materially." Material success becomes "a yardstick for measuring validity of ministers," creating "a kind of ministerial jealousy in Nigeria." This "cancer in Pentecostal world is spreading wide in Nigeria Christendom." The competitiveness engendered by prosperity teaching can exacerbate denominational rivalry and impede cooperation.

4 Ethnicity, Culture and Ecclesial Division

Ethnicity constitutes another significant factor in African ecclesial dynamics. The missionary practice of establishing denominational zones sometimes aligned with ethnic boundaries, creating churches identified with particular peoples. Even where explicit ethnic divisions were not intended, the

reality of African Christianity's inculturation means that churches inevitably bear the marks of their ethnic contexts.

Yet culture also provides resources for unity. The Karanga people of Zimbabwe, as Hove (2025) describes, possess cultural principles that align closely with Christian teachings. These include "the value for family and communal lifestyle," "the philosophy of 'Munhu wese ihama yako' (every human being is your relative)," and conflict resolution practices based on "dialogue and communal mediation to promote forgiveness and reconciliation." These cultural resources can support ecumenical engagement when intentionally deployed.

Uzukwu (2024) makes a similar argument regarding the broader African context. Despite the anti-cultural propaganda of colonial denominational Christianity and the denunciation of African culture by some contemporary Pentecostal movements, "the preference for comity, in the efforts towards unity among Christians in Africa, displays the genius of African cultures." The African sense of co-humanity–the conviction that one's humanity is inextricably bound to others–"relativises to a certain extent colonially transmitted denominationalism."

Feminist African theologians, led by Amba Oduyoye, have insisted that these humanistic values "must be recovered by African women and theologians for the liberation of women, men and all people." By challenging colonising Western patriarchal denominational Christianity, inclusivist African values "help to set the stage for the reinvention of Christianity" (Uzukwu, 2024). Culture, in this reading, is not merely a problem to be overcome but a resource to be retrieved for the sake of unity.

Implications for African Christianity: Constructive Pathways

1 Recovering Conciliar Practices

The Jerusalem Council offers a paradigm of particular relevance for African Christianity. As Mbachu (1995) demonstrates, the council's resolution of the faith-culture controversy provides a model for addressing similar tensions in African churches today. The council neither imposed the carrier-culture's practices as normative nor sanctioned an acultural gospel. Rather, it discerned the essential matters while permitting diversity in non-essentials.

This conciliar model holds several implications for African Christianity. First, it affirms that difficult disputes require communal discernment rather than unilateral imposition. The council engaged in "much debate," heard multiple witnesses, and reached a decision that commanded widespread assent. African churches facing contested issues–whether theological, ethical or practical–need analogous spaces for genuine dialogue.

Second, the council appealed to multiple authorities: Scripture, apostolic witness, the Spirit's manifest work, and practical wisdom. African ecumenical engagement can draw on a similarly rich array of resources, including biblical teaching, theological tradition, contextual experience and cultural wisdom. No single authority suffices for all questions; discernment requires the interplay of multiple witnesses.

Third, the council's decision balanced principle and accommodation. The core affirmation—salvation by grace through faith, apart from law—remained inviolable. Yet the council also requested Gentile believers to accommodate Jewish Christian sensibilities on certain matters. This distinction between essential and non-essential, between principle and prudence, offers a framework for navigating contemporary disputes.

2 Retrieving Cultural Resources for Unity

African cultures contain significant resources for ecclesial unity that await fuller retrieval and deployment. The communal values emphasised throughout sub-Saharan Africa–ubuntu in southern Africa, ujamaa in East Africa, the kinship ethics described by Hove (2025) among the Karanga–provide cultural frameworks for understanding and practising unity.

These values are not automatically ecumenical; they can be claimed by individual denominations to reinforce internal cohesion without extending to broader fellowship. Yet they can also be mobilised for wider unity when Christians recognise that their belonging in Christ transcends denominational boundaries. The African sense of co-humanity, of being bound together in a common life, challenges the notion that denominational identity should determine the boundaries of fellowship.

Uzukwu (2024) points to concrete examples of such cultural retrieval. The response to denominational rivalry in eastern Nigeria and East Africa, where Protestant communities took steps toward unity, drew on African capacities for communal discernment. The liturgical melding of Christian denominations in Charismatic and Pentecostal patterns of worship represents another form of cultural

practice that transcends denominational boundaries. These examples suggest that African Christians possess cultural resources for unity that can supplement—and sometimes correct—inherited Western denominationalism.

3 Rethinking Wealth, Poverty and Ecclesial Identity

The prosperity gospel's prevalence in African Christianity demands theological engagement that goes beyond simple acceptance or rejection. The underlying questions–about God's relationship to material reality, about the meaning of blessing, about the church's responsibility for members' well-being–are legitimate and pressing. African Christians rightly ask what the gospel promises for their concrete lives, including their economic circumstances.

Yet the prosperity gospel's answers require critical evaluation. Its tendency to measure divine favour by material success can distort Christian identity and weaken communal bonds. The individualism it promotes can undermine the mutual responsibility that marked the early Church's common life. The competitiveness it encourages can exacerbate denominational fragmentation.

Alternative theological frameworks exist within African Christianity. The early Church's practice of sharing possessions and distributing to those in need (Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–35) offers a model of economic fellowship that differs significantly from prosperity teaching. This model does not promise wealth to all but calls all to responsibility for one another. It does not measure blessing by accumulation but by generosity. It does not view material resources as indicators of individual spirituality but as means of communal care.

African theologians have begun developing such alternative frameworks. Theologies of Ubuntu, of communal responsibility, of solidarity with the poor, provide resources for an economic ethic that resists both the prosperity gospel's excesses and the indifference of wealthier churches to their poorer members. Zurlo's (2020) question—"What does it mean to be part of a global Christian family when such disparity exists between brothers and sisters?"—demands theological as well as practical answers.

4 Ecumenical Engagement and Mutual Accountability

The ecumenical movement, both global and regional, provides structured opportunities for pursuing unity. The World Council of Churches, the All Africa Conference of Churches, and various national and regional councils create spaces for dialogue, cooperation and common witness. These bodies have produced significant theological agreements and facilitated practical collaboration.

Yet ecumenical engagement cannot be limited to official structures. Uzukwu (2024) points to the ecumenical significance of grassroots liturgical practice, where Christians from different traditions worship together and recognise one another's faith. The story of Kongo-Angola enslaved Catholics seeking communion from Anglican ministers in early eighteenth-century South Carolina illustrates a form of ecumenism driven not by theological commissions but by the Spirit's prompting and the recognition of shared faith.

African Christianity's demographic weight carries responsibility for ecumenical leadership. As African Christians increasingly shape global Christian conversations, they bring distinctive perspectives and concerns. The question of unity cannot be separated from questions of justice, including the economic disparities that divide Christians across regions. Mutual accountability–the recognition that churches in different contexts belong to one another and bear responsibility for one another–constitutes an essential dimension of ecclesial unity.

Conclusion

The paradox of unity in the early Church offers both warning and guide for contemporary African Christianity. The early Church was not a golden age of perfect harmony but a community that experienced real conflicts even as it proclaimed profound unity in Christ. What distinguished the early Christians was not the absence of division but their capacity to address conflict through Spirit-guided discernment, apostolic teaching, and conciliar practice.

The African church inherits this apostolic legacy alongside its own rich cultural traditions. The demographic transformation that has made Africa a heartland of world Christianity carries both opportunity and responsibility. The challenges facing African Christianity–denominational fragmentation, prosperity gospel distortions, ethnic tensions, economic disparity–are substantial. Yet the resources available–conciliar practices, communal values, theological creativity, ecumenical structures–are equally significant.

The Jerusalem Council's resolution remains paradigmatic: "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). This formulation captures the mystery of ecclesial discernment, in which human deliberation and divine guidance converge. African churches, facing their own contentious issues, can claim this same confidence. The Spirit who guided the first-century church continues to lead Christ's people into truth and unity.

Jesus' prayer "that they may all be one" (John 17:21) remains both imperative and promise. It is imperative because division wounds the body and hinders mission; it is promise because the unity for which Christ prayed is not merely human achievement but divine gift. The African church, drawing on apostolic precedent and cultural wisdom, can embody this unity in ways that enrich the whole Christian world. The paradox of unity—simultaneously gift and task, already given and yet to be realised—remains the enduring shape of ecclesial existence until the day when all things are gathered up in Christ.

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