



REIMAGINING BELONGING: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ETHNIC BOUNDARIES AND GENTILE INCLUSION IN THE GOSPELS AND POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

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Abstract

This paper examines the theological and sociopolitical implications of ethnic boundary-crossing in the Gospels' narratives of Gentile inclusion and their resonance with postcolonial African Christianity's struggles to navigate ethnic fragmentation. Drawing on postcolonial hermeneutics, social identity theory, and comparative case studies, the study argues that the Gospels' subversion of ethno-religious exclusivity offers a transformative framework for reimagining Christian identity in Africa, where colonial legacies and tribal divisions persist. Through analysis of key Gospel texts (e.g., Mark 7:24–30, Acts 10:1–48) and African contexts (e.g., post-genocide Rwanda, apartheid South Africa), the paper demonstrates how early Christian boundary-breaking practices parallel contemporary African efforts to reconcile ethnic diversity with communal belonging. However, it also critiques the limitations of this analogy, particularly the tension between Western-derived missionary theology and indigenous African cosmologies. The findings reveal that inclusive ecclesial practices, such as vernacular liturgies and grassroots reconciliation initiatives, can mediate ethnic divides when rooted in decolonial hermeneutics. This research contributes to global theological debates on identity and inclusion, offering practical insights for churches in pluralistic societies.

Keywords: ethnic boundaries, Gentile inclusion, postcolonial African Christianity, social identity theory, decolonial hermeneutics

Introduction

The tension between universal belonging and ethnic particularity has shaped religious communities across history, from ancient Israel's covenantal exclusivity to contemporary debates over multiculturalism. In the Gospels, this tension is epitomized by Jesus' radical interactions with Gentiles—those traditionally excluded from Israel's covenantal promises—which destabilized entrenched ethno-religious boundaries and redefined membership in the nascent Christian community. Similarly, postcolonial African Christianity grapples with the paradox of fostering unity amid ethnic diversity, a legacy exacerbated by colonial policies that codified tribal divisions and missionary endeavors that often conflated Western cultural norms with Christian identity. This paper interrogates the interplay between these two contexts, asking: *How might the Gospels' narratives of Gentile inclusion inform African Christian responses to ethnic fragmentation, and what limitations arise in translating these ancient texts into postcolonial realities?*

Theological Urgency: Redefining Belonging in a Divided World

The theological imperative to address ethnic boundaries emerges from the Gospels' radical redefinition of communal belonging. In first-century Judea, ethnic and religious identities were inextricably linked, with Jewish covenantal theology framing Gentiles as outsiders. Yet, the



Gospels depict Jesus transgressing these boundaries, offering a vision of the Kingdom of God that transcends ethnic exclusivity. For instance, his healing of the Roman centurion's servant (Matthew 8:5–13) and dialogue with the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24–30) subvert prevailing norms by prioritizing faith and compassion over ancestry. These narratives challenge not only the ethno-religious hierarchies of Jesus' time but also contemporary Christian communities grappling with exclusionary practices. As Wright (1992) argues, the early Christian movement's inclusivity was revolutionary, redefining the people of God around shared devotion rather than biological lineage. Today, this ethic resonates profoundly in pluralistic societies where churches navigate tensions between particularity and universality.

African Context: Colonial Legacies and Ecclesial Contradictions

The postcolonial African context provides a critical lens through which to examine these theological themes. Colonialism entrenched ethnic divisions through policies like indirect rule, which weaponized tribal identities to consolidate power (Mamdani, 2001). Missionary endeavors, though often well-intentioned, frequently conflated Western cultural norms with Christian identity, marginalizing indigenous practices. For example, in Rwanda, colonial racialization of Hutu and Tutsi identities laid the groundwork for the 1994 genocide, during which some churches tragically became sites of violence (Katongole, 2011). Conversely, South Africa's post-apartheid theology, epitomized by Desmond Tutu's *ubuntu* philosophy, reimagined Christian identity as a catalyst for reconciliation, asserting that "my humanity is bound up in yours" (Tutu, 1999). These contradictions underscore the dual role of African Christianity: a perpetuator of division and a potential agent of healing.

Original Contributions

This paper bridges biblical studies, postcolonial theory, and African theology to propose a decolonial hermeneutic for inclusive ecclesiology. By comparing Jesus' boundary-crossing practices with African initiatives like Rwanda's *gacaca* courts or South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the study reveals both the potential and pitfalls of translating biblical inclusivity into postcolonial praxis. It contributes to three fields:

1. **Biblical Studies:** Recontextualizes Gentile inclusion as a dynamic, non-Western paradigm.
2. **African Theology:** Proposes a framework for churches to mediate ethnic conflicts.
3. **Postcolonial Studies:** Challenges universalist assumptions in missionary Christianity.

Literature Review

Biblical Scholarship on Gentile Inclusion

The inclusion of Gentiles in the Gospels has been a focal point of New Testament scholarship. Dunn (2009) frames Gentile inclusion as a theological rupture within Second Temple Judaism, arguing that the early church's openness to non-Jews marked a decisive "parting of the ways" from its Jewish roots. Conversely, Fredriksen (2017) asserts that early Christian communities remained culturally Jewish while redefining covenantal boundaries. Levine (2006) cautions against retrojecting modern inclusivity onto first-century texts, emphasizing the Syrophenician woman's agency in subverting ethnic and gendered hierarchies.



African Theology and Postcolonial Critique

African theologians like Dube (2000) critique missionary complicity in colonial violence, advocating for indigenous hermeneutics. Bediako (1995) highlights the vitality of African Christianity through inculturation, while Katongole (2011) confronts the church's failure to transcend tribalism. Feminist theologians such as Oduyoye (2001) and Phiri (2012) expand this discourse, addressing intersecting ethnic, gender, and colonial oppressions.

Social Theory and Ethnic Boundaries

Barth's (1969) theory of ethnic boundaries as social constructs and Tajfel's (1979) social identity theory provide frameworks for analyzing identity formation. Postcolonial theorists like Bhabha (1994) and Mamdani (2001) critique colonial legacies, revealing how ethnic identities were weaponized in contexts like Rwanda.

Biblical Analysis: Ethnic Boundaries and Gentile Inclusion in the Gospels

Introduction to Ethnic Boundaries in the Gospels

The Gospels present a complex interplay between ethnic exclusivity and radical inclusion, particularly concerning Jewish-Gentile relations. The tension between maintaining Jewish identity and expanding the covenant community to include non-Jews is a recurring theme. This section examines how the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—navigate ethnic boundaries and advocate for Gentile inclusion, reflecting early Christian struggles with identity and belonging.

Matthew: The Fulfillment of Jewish Expectation and Universal Mission

Matthew's Gospel is deeply rooted in Jewish tradition, emphasizing Jesus as the fulfillment of Messianic prophecies (Matt 1:1-17, 5:17). However, it also challenges ethnic exclusivity through key narratives:

- **The Magi (Matt 2:1-12):** Gentile astrologers recognize Jesus' kingship, while Herod and Jerusalem's leaders reject him.
- **The Centurion's Faith (Matt 8:5-13):** Jesus commends a Roman soldier's faith, contrasting it with Israel's unbelief.
- **The Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20):** The command to disciple "all nations" (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) signifies a shift from a Jewish-centered mission to a universal one.

Matthew's tension between particularism (Jesus as Israel's Messiah) and universalism (Gentile inclusion) reflects early Jewish-Christian debates on belonging.

Mark: Breaking Boundaries Through Radical Inclusion

Mark's Gospel presents Jesus as dismantling ethnic and ritual barriers:

- **The Syrophenician Woman (Mark 7:24-30):** Jesus initially resists healing a Gentile's daughter, invoking the metaphor of "children's bread" (Jewish priority). Yet,



the woman's persistence leads to her inclusion, symbolizing Gentiles' place in God's kingdom.

- **The Roman Centurion at the Cross (Mark 15:39):** A Gentile soldier confesses Jesus' divinity, contrasting with Jewish leaders' rejection.

Mark's narrative subverts ethnic hierarchies, presenting faith, not lineage, as the criterion for belonging.

Luke-Acts: Universal Salvation and the Gentile Mission

Luke's two-volume work (Luke-Acts) most explicitly advocates for Gentile inclusion:

- **Jesus' Nazareth Manifesto (Luke 4:16-30):** Citing Isaiah, Jesus proclaims liberation, foreshadowing Gentile inclusion (cf. Elijah and the widow of Zarephath).
- **The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37):** A despised Samaritan exemplifies true neighborliness, challenging ethnic prejudices.
- **Acts 10-11 (Cornelius' Conversion):** Peter's vision ("Do not call anything impure that God has made clean") and Cornelius' baptism mark a theological shift, affirming Gentile inclusion without full Torah observance.

Luke's emphasis on the Spirit's role (Acts 15:8-9) redefines belonging beyond ethnic markers.

John: Dualistic Language and Hidden Inclusivity

John's Gospel uses stark contrasts ("Jews" vs. believers) but includes subtle Gentile inclusion:

- **Jesus and the Samaritan Woman (John 4):** Breaking ethnic and gender taboos, Jesus affirms worship "in spirit and truth" (not confined to Jerusalem).
- **"Other Sheep Not of This Fold" (John 10:16):** Alludes to Gentile believers.
- **Greek Seekers (John 12:20-23):** Their arrival signals the hour of Jesus' glorification, symbolizing global reach.

While John's dualism appears exclusionary, his narrative hints at a broader, transnational community.

Theological Implications: Reimagining Belonging in Early Christianity

The Gospels collectively redefine belonging:

1. **Faith Over Ethnicity:** Membership in God's people is no longer strictly genealogical (Rom 9:6-8; Gal 3:28).
2. **Critique of Exclusivism:** Jesus challenges Pharisaic and nationalist exclusivity (Matt 23; Luke 11:52).
3. **Missional Expansion:** The Gentile mission (Acts 13:47) fulfills Israel's Abrahamic calling (Gen 12:3).

This biblical framework informs contemporary discussions on ethnic and religious boundaries in postcolonial African Christianity.



Postcolonial African Contexts: Case Studies

Introduction: Colonialism, Christianity, and Ethnic Boundaries

Postcolonial African Christianity grapples with the legacy of colonial missions, which often imposed Eurocentric Christianity while marginalizing indigenous identities. This section examines case studies where churches negotiate ethnic belonging, syncretism, and inclusivity in ways that parallel Gospel narratives.

Case Study 1: The Aladura Movement in Nigeria (Indigenous Inclusivity vs. Denominational Exclusion)

The Aladura (prayer) churches (e.g., Cherubim and Seraphim, Christ Apostolic Church) emerged as anti-colonial movements blending Yoruba spirituality with Christianity.

- **Ethnic and Religious Hybridity:** Aladura prophets incorporated indigenous healing practices, challenging Western missionary exclusivity.
- **Conflict with Mainline Churches:** Initially dismissed as syncretistic, Aladura churches redefined belonging by affirming African spiritual agency.
- **Contemporary Tensions:** Some Aladura groups now replicate exclusionary tendencies, enforcing strict membership codes.

This mirrors Gospel tensions between preserving identity and embracing outsiders.

Case Study 2: The Legio Maria in Kenya (A Luo-Centric Christianity)

Legio Maria, a breakaway from Catholicism, blends Luo traditional religion with Catholic liturgy.

- **Ethnic Messianism:** Its founder, Simeo Ondeto, was venerated as a black Christ, challenging white missionary hegemony.
- **Inclusion of Marginalized Groups:** Legio Maria welcomes the poor and outcasts, akin to Jesus' ministry.
- **External Persecution:** Like early Christians, it faces state and church opposition, raising questions on religious tolerance.

This reflects how ethnic particularism can both resist oppression and create new boundaries.

Case Study 3: Pentecostalism in South Africa (Racial Reconciliation and New Divides)

Post-apartheid Pentecostal movements (e.g., Rhema Bible Church) preach racial unity but often reproduce class and ethnic divisions.

- **Multiracial Worship:** Churches like His People (now Every Nation) promoted racial integration in the 1990s.
- **Persistent Economic Barriers:** Prosperity gospel theology sometimes excludes the poor, echoing critiques of the Jerusalem church (James 2:1-7).



- **Xenophobia in Churches:** African migrant congregations face exclusion, paralleling Gentile-Jewish tensions in Acts 6.

This illustrates the struggle to realize Galatians 3:28 in postcolonial contexts.

Case Study 4: The Kimbanguist Church in DR Congo (From Prophetic Rebellion to Institutional Exclusion)

Founded by Simon Kimbangu, this church resisted Belgian colonialism but later enforced strict moral codes.

- **Early Inclusivity:** Kimbangu's followers included marginalized ethnic groups.
- **Later Exclusivity:** The church now bans polygamy and alcohol, disenfranchising some Congolese.

This mirrors early Christianity's shift from radical inclusion to institutional boundaries.

Comparative Analysis: Gospel Paradigms and African Realities

1. **Colonialism as a Pharisaic Force:** Like Jewish leaders, colonial missions often imposed rigid boundaries.
2. **Indigenous Movements as Gospel Subversions:** Aladura and Legio Maria, like Jesus, challenge religious elitism.
3. **New Forms of Exclusion:** Some African churches, like early Christian factions, now police belonging.

Conclusion: Toward a Postcolonial Theology of Belonging

The Gospels and African case studies show that belonging is continually renegotiated. A postcolonial African Christianity must:

- **Decolonize Faith:** Centering African hermeneutics while avoiding ethno-nationalist exclusivity.
- **Embrace Prophetic Inclusion:** Learning from Jesus' boundary-breaking ministry.
- **Challenge Neo-Colonial Divisions:** Addressing class, ethnicity, and xenophobia in churches.

Gentile Inclusion in the Gospels

The Syrophoenician Woman (Mark 7:24–30)

Mark's account of Jesus' encounter with the Syrophoenician woman epitomizes the destabilization of ethnic and gendered hierarchies. Jesus' use of "dogs" (κυνάρτιον) reflects a common Jewish pejorative for Gentiles (Levine, 2006), yet the woman's audacious reply reframes the metaphor, asserting Gentile inclusion in God's covenantal promises. Her faith (πίστις) transcends ethnic lineage (Wright, 1992), mirroring African women's struggles against patriarchal and colonial oppressions (Dube, 2000).



Cornelius' Conversion (Acts 10:1–48)

Acts 10 underscores divine agency in dismantling ethnic barriers. Peter's vision of unclean animals declared "clean" (10:15) signals the universalization of the covenant, fulfilling Joel's prophecy that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21; Gaventa, 2003). This parallels African Christians' reclamation of indigenous spirituality, as seen in Nigeria's *Aladura* movement (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005).

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)

Jesus' parable redefines "neighbor" as one who shows mercy across ethnic lines. The Samaritan's actions privilege compassion over ritual observance (Levine, 2014), aligning with South Africa's *ubuntu* theology (Nadar & Vellem, 2020).

Postcolonial African Contexts: Case Studies

Rwanda: Church Complicity and Reconciliation

Colonial racialization of Hutu and Tutsi identities sowed seeds for genocide (Mamdani, 2001). Post-genocide, churches now host "healing services" where survivors and perpetrators share testimonies (Katongole, 2011).

South Africa: Apartheid and Ubuntu Theology

Desmond Tutu's *ubuntu* Eucharist, celebrated with *umphokoqo* (maize meal), symbolically dismantles colonial hierarchies (Vellem, 2017).

Nigeria: Interfaith Tensions and CAN

Nigeria's Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) navigates Muslim-Christian tensions, yet ethnic favoritism persists in Igbo-dominated dioceses (Kalu, 2008).

Comparative Analysis: Decolonial Hermeneutics for Inclusive Missiology

Pauline Missions and African Initiated Churches (AICs)

Paul's engagement with Athenian Gentiles (Acts 17:22–31) mirrors AICs' contextual evangelism, such as Zimbabwe's *Vapostori* churches (Daneel, 1987).

Sacramental Decolonization: The Ubuntu Eucharist

South Africa's *ubuntu* Eucharist subverts colonial sacramental elitism (Vellem, 2017), echoing Jesus' table fellowship (Luke 5:29–32).

Youth-Led Digital Activism

South Africa's #YouthAgainstTribalism reinterprets Galatians 3:28 through memes (Ndlovu, 2022), democratizing theology for Gen Z.



Theological and Ethical Implications

Ecclesial Belonging as Border-Crossing

Rwanda's penitential pilgrimages exemplify churches as "borderlands" (Anzaldúa, 1987), where clergy confess complicity in genocide (Katongole, 2011).

Restorative Justice

Congolese "healing liturgies" mirror the prodigal son's return (Luke 15:11–32), emphasizing truth-telling and reparations.

Challenges and Critiques

Syncretism vs. Orthodoxy

Ghana's *Musama Disco Christo Church* integrates *abosom* shrines into worship (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005), challenging doctrinal purists like Mbiti (1969).

Colonial Hangovers

Nigeria's Anglican Church prioritizes Western-educated clergy over indigenous leaders (Kalu, 2008), necessitating structural reform.

Key Contributions:

The paper likely argues that the Gospel narratives (e.g., in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John) actively **challenge, transcend, or redefine ethnic and social boundaries** in favor of a more inclusive community centered on faith in Jesus.

Possible specific contributions may include:

1. **Breaking Down Jewish-Gentile Divides** – Demonstrating how the Gospels present Jesus as breaking traditional Jewish ethnic exclusivity, welcoming outsiders (e.g., Samaritans, Romans, Syrophoenicians).
2. **Reconceptualizing Identity** – Showing how early Christian identity shifts from ethnic (e.g., "children of Abraham") to faith-based (e.g., "children of God").
3. **Missional Inclusivity** – Highlighting passages (e.g., the Great Commission in Matthew 28, Peter's vision in Acts 10) that extend the Gospel beyond Israel to all nations.
4. **Ethnic Symbolism in Christ's Work** – Arguing that Jesus' death and resurrection dismantle ethnic hostility (e.g., Ephesians 2:14–16, though this is Pauline, some Gospels hint at this theme).

Conclusion

The Gospels' narratives of Gentile inclusion remain a prophetic challenge to postcolonial African Christianity. By reimagining Jesus' boundary-crossing ministry through decolonial hermeneutics—vernacular theologies, grassroots reconciliation, and digital activism—



churches can transcend ethnic fragmentation. Future research must explore diasporic hybridities and AI's role in missiology. Ultimately, the call to "reimagine belonging" invites African Christianity to model a transformative witness, heralding the reconciling power of the Gospel in a fractured world.

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