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DENOMINATIONALISM IN THE NIGERIAN CHURCHES AND HERMAN BAVINCK'S  
ECCLESIOLOGY

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BY

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## ABSTRACT

This research examines denominationalism in Nigerian churches and Herman Bavinck's ecclesiology on the church's unity.

The main objective of this research is to describe and analyze the denominational dividedness of the Nigerian Church and identify lessons the Nigerian Baptist Denomination can learn from Herman Bavinck's ecclesiology to strengthen the unity of Churches in Nigeria. This research also examined how denominationalism has evolved within the Nigerian Church and the factors that shaped its development. It explored African ecclesiological models relevant to the church's unity and examined the Reformed perspective on ecclesiology and the church's unity with special attention on Herman Bavinck's ecclesiology.

A two-pronged approach involving literature and empirical research was employed to achieve the research objectives. The literature research included African resources on Christianity in Nigeria, the evolution of denominations in Nigeria, and African ecclesiology. Western resources included Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics. To gain deeper insights into the reasons for many denominations in Nigeria, I conduct empirical research by interviewing key figures and members of the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC). The Believing, Belonging, Behaving, and Experiencing (BBBE) model will be utilized to design, and structure the interview questions and discuss research outcomes through an intercultural conversation.

The research revealed some areas of convergence and divergence between NBC and Bavinck's ecclesiology. They agreed on Christ as the head of the church, the election of believers, and the need for unity in the church. However, while Bavinck focused on the spiritual unity of the church, NBC emphasized structural unity. In addition, while NBC emphasized membership by baptism and faith in Christ, Bavinck emphasized faith in Christ as the only criteria for belonging to the body of Christ.

This study has contributed to the theological discourse on denominationalism and the unity of the church in Nigeria. Its relevance lies in its intercultural theological dialogue, identifying factors influencing denominationalism and offering fresh perspectives from Bavinck's ecclesiology to the Nigerian Baptist denomination and beyond.

## CHAPTER ONE

### 1.0. INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. Problem Statement

**The problem:** The rapid growth in the number of churches and denominations in Nigeria, driven by many reasons, raises questions about the significance of unity among the various denominations and spiritual identity of the Church in Nigeria,

Even though I have a Baptist background, I was privileged to pastor a Pentecostal Church for two years in Nigeria before coming to the Netherlands. Our church venue was a rented space within a facility that housed a second Church from another denomination. During a typical Sunday service, the sound from one church would interfere with the other, this made our Church relocate. Over time, our new location became host to two other Churches, from different denominations, repeating the previous experience and challenges. Our guests often find themselves in the “wrong” Church due to the proximity of the Churches. This experience is common in Nigeria, as new churches and denominations spring up rapidly, with church members cross-carpeting from one denomination to another, creating unnecessary competition among the different denominations. Theological issues such as baptism, women in church leadership, and the prosperity gospel have caused division among Nigerian churches. In addition, individuals aspiring to become founders or leaders of churches often seem to pursue their ambitions. Also, other ethical matters such as divorce, alcoholism, and polygamy trigger divisions in the church which often result in new denominations. In addition, denominations establish new branches to ensure they do not lose members who cannot attend Church programs due to the challenges of geographical distance such as convenience of Church attendance, travel time, and cost of transportation. This may be considered a genuine response to a need, but the outcome of such decisions should be evaluated given the need for the church to be united. Church leaders rarely suggest Churches outside their denomination to members and new converts, because they intend to shield them from false teachings and heresies possibly.

Church pastors who are not founders but serving under a founder are sometimes given membership targets, based on which they will be appraised. They invent strategies to increase Church

attendance and membership, with less consideration for the spiritual status of the Church. Many Churches now provide material incentives e.g., call credit for Church members to bring a guest, and those who can retain such guests get more incentives e.g. a mobile phone. Unbelievers are aware of the desperation of the Church and use it to their advantage by hopping around Churches, and even pretending to be new converts. In this way, the churches become filled up, however, with a mixed crowd of members who are saved and those who are unconverted and are not required to be converted as long as they remain members and regularly attend Church programs. Increasing denominational membership or Church attendance has also become a core goal for many denominational mission activities of the Church. The creation of new branches also necessitates the ordination of Church pastors and leaders who are not committed to discipleship.<sup>1</sup> Some pastors living in sin are not held accountable because of the absence of proper leadership structures.<sup>2</sup> New Churches in a bid to fill up leadership positions select Christians who are incapable of handling leadership positions.<sup>3</sup>

These experiences made me reflect on the following questions: what are other possible reasons for the multiplication of Churches and denominations in Nigeria? Which ecclesiology, which theological or other views support the multiplication of the churches in Nigeria? What is the motivation behind new members joining a particular denomination?

Through this research, I wish to explore how denominationalism has evolved within the Nigerian Church context and the factors that contributed to the evolution. I will then examine underlying African ecclesiological models, that address unity as one of the attributes of the church . Subsequently, I will then investigate the Reformed perspective on ecclesiology, with special attention on Herman Bavinck's ecclesiology. I will then compare the reflections of the African and Reformed perspective to the problem of denominationalism and pay special attention to what the Nigerian Church can learn from Bavinck's ecclesiology. Despite his seceded position, Bavinck attempts to address divisions within the church. He characteristically “converses with numerous

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<sup>1</sup> Ayuk Ausaji Ayuk, “The Pentecostal Transformation of Nigerian Church Life,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, 2002, 199, <https://www.aptspress.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/02-2-Ayuk.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Nkechi Onah and Robinson Agbo, “Church Proliferation and Immorality in Nigeria: Interrogating the Paradox,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77, no. 01: 5, accessed October 6, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i1.6387>.

<sup>3</sup> Ayuk, “The Pentecostal Transformation of Nigerian Church Life,” 198.

discussion partners (with different views), listens to their arguments, problematizes the issues, in order to reach a nuanced position in which there is always a certain warmth of spirituality.”<sup>4</sup> Being part of a secession, Bavinck understands the pain and gains of denominational splits and avoids the extremes of rigid denominationalism. Kamphuis criticized this approach as having a tendency to be inconsistent.<sup>5</sup> Vlastuin also acknowledged an ambivalence around Bavinck’s theological approach. Quoting Bremmer, He says “On the one hand he accepts the pluriformity of the church, while on the other hand, he opposes a continued fragmentation of the church.”<sup>6</sup> Despite these criticisms, Kamphuis states that “Bavinck’s views are very relevant to our current cultural context. In a globalizing world and an ever-increasingly multicultural society, it is important to proclaim that God wants to save the world through the cross of Jesus Christ.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, Bavinck’s approach is relevant in this research as it presents a theology open to multiple views and presents Christ as the centre of the Church of God.

Lastly, I will reflect on my findings and draw some conclusions.

## **1.2. Motivation**

The research is motivated by personal experiences and challenges that I faced as both a church pastor and church member in Nigeria. The continuous proliferation of Churches under different denominations continues to bring unhealthy competition and rivalry among the pastors and church members. I wish to investigate, how this affects unity among different Nigerian denominations. By exploring Herman Bavinck's ecclesiology, I aim to contribute to understanding denominational dividedness and to reflect on the meaning of church unity in the Nigerian context. I believe the leadership of the Nigerian churches and denominations need to reflect and dialogue on God’s intention for the Church, and how the Church can remain united as Christ desires it.

## **1.3. Overview of the Topic**

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<sup>4</sup> W. van Vlastuin, *Catholic Today: A Reformed Conversation about Catholicity*, 1st edition, Reformed Historical Theology, volume 66 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co, 2020), 128.

<sup>5</sup> Barend Kamphuis, “Herm an B Avinck ©n C a Th o Lic Ity,” n.d., 104.

<sup>6</sup> Vlastuin, *Catholic Today*, 139.

<sup>7</sup> Kamphuis, “Herm an B Avinck ©n C a Th o Lic Ity,” 104.



This overview explores the dynamic and diverse nature of denominations in Nigeria. It also highlights the different groups existing in the body established to unite the diverse church denominations in the country.

Christianity has become a global religion, moving from the “global North to the global South over the centuries.”<sup>8</sup> This has resulted in the growth of the Church, both numerically and in composition. According to Karkkainen, “the composition of the global Church has changed dramatically, with half of all Christians Roman Catholics, a quarter Pentecostals, and the others eastern Orthodox Christians.”<sup>9</sup> The increase of denominations is also present in the Church in Nigeria where the Christian religion continues to increase in the number of members and denominations. A 2011 Pew report found about one-third of Christians in Nigeria are Roman Catholic, over half are Protestants, and a small proportion are Orthodox and Pentecostal.<sup>10</sup> The number of Pentecostal members has increased rapidly over the last decade.

The Christian Association of Nigeria is an Association of Christian Churches, established in 1976 and originally contained only Roman Catholic and mainline protestant groups. The membership was expanded to include Pentecostal Churches. Her first objective is “To serve as a basis of response to the unity of the Church, especially as contained in Lord’s prayer: ’That they all may be one’- John 17:21.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, the association was established to bring together different denominations that make up the Church in Nigeria. The association consists of five Church Groups namely the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN); Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN); Christian Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (CPFN)/ Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN); Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC) and the The Fellowship of Churches of Christ in Nigeria (TEKAN) and ECWA Fellowship. These subgroups have different denominations under them.<sup>12</sup> This subgrouping also suggests the need for denominations to have a unique identification, for example, the Catholic Secretariat remains a standalone group. In Nigeria, many Churches have

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<sup>8</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Hope and Community, A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*, volume 5 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), 237.

<sup>9</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Hope and Community, A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*, Volume 5 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), 237.

<sup>10</sup> Pew Research Center, “Global Christianity A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population,” *Pew Research Center*, December 2011, 55, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>.

<sup>11</sup> “Constitution Of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)” (CAN, 2004), <https://canng.org/>.

<sup>12</sup> “Constitution Of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)” (CAN, 2004), <https://canng.org/>.

their identity majorly on what makes them different from other denominations, for example, the Baptists believe in baptism by total immersion. Christian denominations in Nigeria must review the mission of the Church in Nigeria, as the Increase in Church denomination does not automatically translate to an increase in the number of Christians that are saved, creating a circulation of saints situation. So far, we can observe that denominations are very particular about what makes them distinct from others. While some churches remain standalone in the general Christian association, others are subgroups with other Churches that share similar doctrinal beliefs, establishing the significant role denominationalism plays in the unity of churches in Nigeria.

#### **1.4. Research Objective**

The main objective of this research is to describe and analyze the denominational dividedness of the Nigerian Church and to identify lessons the Nigerian Baptist Denomination can learn from Herman Bavinck's ecclesiology to strengthen the unity of Churches in Nigeria. Other objectives include:

1. Examine how denominationalism has evolved within the Nigerian Church and identify the various factors that have played a role in shaping its development.
2. Explore the perspective of African theologians on the unity of the Church.
3. Examine the Reformed perspective on ecclesiology with special attention on Herman Bavinck's ecclesiology.

#### **1.5. Relevance of the Study**

Although much research has been conducted on African ecclesiology, it remains a theological field under construction.<sup>13</sup> There is also a need for the African Churches to remain focused on the mission of reaching the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is in doing this that the church will find unity of purpose. This is much more relevant with the rapid growth of Churches and denominations in Africa and Nigeria. This research aims to identify how Bavinck's ecclesiology can contribute fresh perspectives to ecclesiology and the practice of Nigerian Baptist churches through an intercultural theological conversation. This study is consequently relevant as "Ecclesiology offers a prescriptive theology, that shows the churches the need to change, through

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<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Orobator, "Perspectives and Trends in Contemporary African Ecclesiology," n.d., 280.

the reforming light the word of God, to conform more closely to the nature of the church of Jesus Christ, which it confesses in the Nicene Creed to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.”<sup>14</sup>

## **1.6. Research Question**

What can the Nigerian Baptist Denomination learn from Herman Bavinck’s Ecclesiology for dealing with the question of denominationalism and unity of the church?

### **Sub-Questions**

1. How has denominationalism evolved within the Nigerian Church context, and what factors contributed to this evolution?
2. What do African theologians think about the unity of the church?
3. What are the core elements of Herman Bavinck’s ecclesiology especially with regard to the unity of the church?
4. What fresh perspectives does Bavinck’s ecclesiology pose to the ecclesiology and practice of the Nigerian Baptist churches?

## **1.7. Position as a Researcher**

My research on the Denominations in the Nigerian Church and Herman Bavinck's ecclesiology stems from a convergence of personal and academic interests. The Nigerian Church is a vibrant and rapidly growing community of many denominations, and numerous Church branches, presenting an intriguing case study. This topic holds particular significance for me because as a Nigerian who has had the opportunity to serve as a pastor in two different denominations, (Baptist and Pentecostal), I have first-hand experience contending with the demand for both the spiritual and numerical growth of the Church. This personal connection fuels my desire to contribute to a deeper understanding of how the Nigerian Church can establish a theological foundation that ensures its unity in Christ.

Herman Bavinck's work intrigues me because of his reformed emphasis on the invisible Church. He also linked the visible Church's attributes closely with the Church's mission. Exploring how Bavinck's ideas might inform the Nigerian Church offers a unique opportunity to connect Western

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<sup>14</sup> Avis, *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, 2018, 11.

theological perspectives and Nigerian denominational contexts. However, I recognize that my background as an ordained Baptist Pastor could introduce biases into my research. To mitigate this, I am committed to presenting a balanced perspective, drawing on diverse theological voices, and historical sources in the Nigerian Church context. Consulting different historical viewpoints will provide a more balanced understanding of the topic. Ultimately, my goal is to produce research that is not only academically rigorous but also contributes to a meaningful dialogue among Nigeria's various Christian churches and denominations.

### **1.8. Methodology**

To answer my research questions, I'll be employing a two-pronged approach. This will involve thorough literature and empirical research using a theological and historical systematic approach.

#### **a. Literature Research**

This will involve utilizing library resources and online databases to access relevant books, articles, and other materials.

African and Nigerian resources will be utilized to examine existing scholarship on the history of Christianity in Nigeria, the evolution of denominations in the Nigerian Church, factors contributing to denominationalism, and African ecclesiology concerning the unity of the Church. Western resources (with special attention on Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatic) will also be put into dialogue to provide theological perspectives from a particularly reformed context on ecclesiology, and the unity of the Church.

The research will compare African resources and Bavinck's perspective on ecclesiology to give an integrated description of the 'state of the art' of ecclesiology with special attention to the church's unity. These varied resources will also be used to identify lessons and draw conclusions on the research.

The quality and credibility of the literature will be critically evaluated based on factors such as the author's credentials, speciality in the subject field, and relevance to the research questions. The comprehensive research of existing literature will be documented including citations, and critical reflections, adhering to the recommended academic referencing standards.

#### **b. Empirical Research**

To gain deeper insights into the reasons for many denominations in Nigeria, I will conduct six in-depth interviews with key figures (such as Pastors, and theologians) and church members from the Nigerian Baptist Church. The interview aims to investigate why people join and belong to a church and their perspective of other denominations. The Believing, Belonging, Behaving, and Experiencing (BBBE) model will be utilized to design and structure the interview questions and discuss the outcome of the interviews. The BBBE model (Believing, Belonging, Behaving, and Experiencing) is an appropriation concept designed by Jos Colijn that can be used in empirical research.<sup>15</sup> This model is appropriate for this study because it can be used to “design, collect, and analyze empirical data from different contexts,”<sup>16</sup> in this case, different Church denominations. Believing refers to “knowing, affirming, and trusting.”<sup>17</sup> In this context, I am using believing as relating to church denominations. Belonging as a concept refers to the “attraction, identification, and cohesion of an individual”<sup>18</sup> and in this context, I am using belonging as relating to a denomination. Behaving refers to “rites, practices, traditions, and morality in personal or communal life.”<sup>19</sup> This is also used in this context for Church denominations. Behaving will help in analyzing what? how? and why? questions about denominationalism in the Nigerian Churches. Experiencing relates to “people’s perceptions of themselves and their relationship with God and others around them.”<sup>20</sup> This refers to people’s encounters and emotions. In this context, Experience will help identify and analyze Christians' perception of denominationalism in Nigeria and how it affects their relationship with God and people of other denominations.

The interviews will be conducted online using a video conferencing platform like Zoom or Google Meet. This allows for flexibility and accessibility for participants in different parts of Nigeria. The video also allows observation of participants' body language and facial expressions providing better engagement and insights into their emotions and response to questions. Interviews will offer firsthand perspectives from church leaders on the reason for denominationalism and capture lived experiences. A pilot interview will be conducted to test the interview guide, and video platform functionality, to ensure a smooth interview process. With informed consent, interviews will be

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<sup>15</sup> Colijn, Jos J A, *Testing the Waters: Infant Baptism as a Case Study for Doing Reformed Theology Interculturally.*, 2023, 18.

<sup>16</sup> Colijn, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Colijn, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Colijn, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Colijn, 20.

<sup>20</sup> Colijn, 20.

audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for detailed analysis. Based on the Dutch Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, I will be honest and open about uncertainties during the research and will not falsify sources. I will also make correct citations and ensure every part of the research is verifiable.<sup>21</sup> As I undertake this research, I shall integrate spiritual reflections in my work, to ensure my study aligns with the Bible.

Ecclesiology is very broad as it “encompasses the church’s identity about its origins, mission, ministry, governance, authority, liturgy, sacraments, unity, and diversity of the church, including its relation to the state and civil society.”<sup>22</sup> In this research, I consider how the Baptists and the Reformed understand the church’s unity and compare it to their ecclesiology and practice. The scope is limited for two reasons, firstly, the study period will not permit a broader consideration, and secondly, these themes are important and relevant in the context of the challenges of denomination in the Nigerian context.

## **1.9. DEFINITION OF KEYWORDS**

### **1.9.1. Denomination**

The dictionary of theological terms defines denomination as “a group of local churches who work together and are organized together because they believe the same things, practices, form of church government (polity) and traditions.”<sup>23</sup> Most of the earliest church denominations were assigned names based on descriptive elements related to their practices or historical background, which subsequently became their official designations.

### **1.9.2. Denominationalism**

“Denominationalism” is defined as “a narrow-minded adherence to a particular sect or party or denomination.”<sup>24</sup> Put in another way, it is an attitude of mind especially one that favors one

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<sup>21</sup> “Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity,” 2018, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Avis, *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, 2018, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Debbie Dodd, *Dictionary of Theological Terms in Simplified English: A Resource for English Language Learners* (Wheaton, Ill: EMIS, Evangelism and Missions Information Service, 2003), 46–47.

<sup>24</sup> “Dictionary, s.v. ‘Denominationalism,’” in *Vocabulary.Com*, n.d., accessed June 27, 2024.

alternative over others”<sup>25</sup> These definitions suggest denominationalism can be a barrier to unity in the body of Christ as it strives for superiority over others in an exclusive or self-seeking way.

### 1.9.3. The Church

From the dictionary of theological terms, the term church has been defined as “a group of believers who gather together regularly in a certain place.”<sup>26</sup> The visible church is defined as “all who are a part of the organized church on the earth today whether saved or unsaved,”<sup>27</sup> while the invisible church includes “all who are spiritually united to Christ.”<sup>28</sup>

The word church was never mentioned in the Old Testament. Jesus Christ founded the Church, being the first to use the word “Church (Matt. 16:18; 18:17). “The Greek word ἐκκλησία stresses the truth that the church consists of those who have been called by God, out from the world by His Word and also by His Spirit; this He did irresistibly, effectually”.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the Church is more than a structure built with human hands, but rather a “communion of saints”<sup>30</sup> called out of the world.

### 1.9.4. Ecclesiology

The term ecclesiology is derived from the Latin words *Ekklesiā*- Church and *logos* word, discourse. Ecclesiology is thus rational discourse about the church.<sup>31</sup> This discussion about the church includes “what the church is, what it is to do, how to be a part of it, and how to organize it.”<sup>32</sup> Apart from its mention in the Gospel of Matthew, the word Church was not mentioned again until the epistles in the Epistles. The identity of the Church is thus central to any ecclesiological discussion. This identity according to Avis, “is based on Scripture, tradition, and the perception of unbelievers.” In addition, it may also include how different denominations perceive themselves and how others perceive them.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> “Dictionary, s.v. ‘Denominationalism.’”

<sup>26</sup> Dodd, *Dictionary of Theological Terms in Simplified English*, 33–34.

<sup>27</sup> Dodd, 34.

<sup>28</sup> Dodd, 34.

<sup>29</sup> Rienk B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ: A Scriptural Appreciation of the One Holy Church* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 36–37.

<sup>30</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 273.

<sup>31</sup> Avis, *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, 2018, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Dodd, *Dictionary of Theological Terms in Simplified English*, 51.

<sup>33</sup> Avis, *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, 2018, 3.

## CHAPTER TWO

### 2.0. EVOLUTION OF DENOMINATIONALISM IN NIGERIA

For clarity, “denominationalism” in this chapter is defined as “a narrow-minded adherence to a particular sect or party or denomination.<sup>34</sup> Put in another way, it is an attitude of mind especially one that favors one alternative over others”<sup>35</sup> These definitions suggest denominationalism can be a barrier to unity in the body of Christ as it strives for superiority over others in an exclusive or self-seeking way.

### 2.1. HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY AND EVOLUTION OF DENOMINATIONALISM IN NIGERIA

#### 2.1.1. Introduction

This chapter will answer the question of how denominationalism has evolved in Nigeria, including the factors responsible for it. I shall also discuss the results of empirical research conducted among leaders and members to identify contemporary reasons for denominationalism and many denominations in Nigeria. I will conclude the chapter by reflecting on the history and reasons for the many denominations in Nigeria and the results of the empirical research.

#### 2.1.2. Brief History of Christianity in Africa

Christianity in Africa has an extensive and complex historical background. During the 1st Century,<sup>36</sup> Christianity arrived in Egypt, and Ethiopia in North Africa. Challenges did not allow the religion to withstand the introduction of Islam. In the 15th Century, Catholic missionaries traveled with European explorers and established some churches along the African coastal region. Between the 18th and 19th Centuries, Protestant missions found solid ground in West, South, and East Africa, with Africans playing a significant role in the spread of Christianity. The colonization of Africa in the late 19th to early 20th Centuries fostered the expansion of Western mission churches. Some other new churches such as the African Independent Churches were later established as a reaction to racial prejudice and white supremacy thinking in the mission churches. In the mid-20th Century,

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<sup>34</sup> “Dictionary, s.v. ‘Denominationalism.’”

<sup>35</sup> “Dictionary, s.v. ‘Denominationalism.’”

<sup>36</sup> Gerard Mannion and Lewis S Mudge, “*The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*,” n.d., 291.



Africans began to occupy leadership positions in churches, and theological discussions began to emphasize the need for the integration of African heritage into Christian teachings – a process that has continued till today. By 1990, Christianity had become the predominant religion in Africa, boasting nearly 300 million followers.

Studies discern six major Church groups in Africa.<sup>37</sup> The oldest are the Orthodox Churches in Egypt and Ethiopia, with 40 million members each. The Roman Catholic Church has about 140 million members spread across Africa. Mainline Protestant churches such as Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, and Methodist form most of the All-Africa Conference of Churches membership. Some Protestant churches identify as 'Evangelical' and have a total membership of around 100 million. The African Initiated Churches, founded by African prophets, offer a blend of Christian beliefs and African culture with about 40 million members. The newest churches in Africa are Pentecostal or Neo-Pentecostal ministries and are rapidly growing with membership of between 10 and 30 million. The above briefly highlights “the size, and complexity of the myriads of cultural, social, political, and religious contexts of Africa.”<sup>38</sup> Theologians must consider the specific cultural, social, political, and religious context of each region or even individual church community to understand the Church in Africa.

## **2.2. History Of Christianity And Evolution Of Denominations In Nigeria**

### **2.2.1. Early Mainstream Churches**

The introduction of Christianity into Nigeria has been summarized into 3 phases based on the geographical point of entry and the efforts of different missionary groups. The first phase began in the 15th century when the Portuguese Roman Catholic Mission arrived in Benin, the Niger Delta region of the country in 1485.<sup>39</sup> Although they came on invitation from the then Kings of the Benin Kingdom, they faced much resistance as the inhabitants of the Benin Kingdom was committed to their indigenous religion. Ogunrinade, a Nigerian Historian reports that the missionaries were unsuccessful because they were more interested in trade and commerce than in mission. He further reveals that they transitioned from trading in wood to the slave trade.<sup>40</sup> Some minimal success was

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<sup>37</sup> Mannion and Mudge, 293.

<sup>38</sup> Veli-Matti Krkkinen, “*An Introduction to Ecclesiology*,” n.d., 112.

<sup>39</sup> Rimamsikwe Habila Kitaase and Hilary Chukwuka Achunike, “*Religion in Nigeria from 1900-2013*,” 2013, 47.

<sup>40</sup> Ogunrinade Adewale O. and Ogbale Friday Abu, “Christianity in Nigeria before Pentecostalism,” *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, July 1, 2013, 122, <https://doi.org/10.5901/ajis.2013.v2n2p121>.

realized in the 16th century when some Roman Catholic Church parishes were started in the royal court. According to Kitause a Nigerian sociologist, much later, Spanish Capuchins, Augustinian monks, and missionaries from the Sacred Congregation de propaganda Fidei attempted to penetrate the Benin and Warri Mission field at different times with mixed responses each time. Although “How far this Benin mission expanded is not known,”<sup>41</sup> the discovery of crucifixes, and other Catholic symbols in the Benin royal court many years later may suggest some success in the missionary endeavor.

The second phase, starting in 1842,<sup>42</sup> saw the spread of Christianity to the Western and Southern regions of Nigeria through the Wesleyan Methodist Mission and the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S). According to Ogunrinade, the missionary work this time was “fully a mission-oriented escapade as the missionary movements were aware of the past failures whereby Christian influence was made to depend on success in commerce, and were ready to avoid making the same mistake.”<sup>43</sup> Individuals like Samuel Ajayi Crowther, Mary Slessor, and King Eyo Honesty were instrumental in this effort. The CMS during this period founded an Anglican Mission in Badagry.

The Baptist Mission in Nigeria commenced on February 22, 1849, when a team from America, led by Thomas Bowen arrived in Nigeria. They settled in Abeokuta Southwest Nigeria and established a chapel in Ijaye in 1854.<sup>44</sup> The American missionaries had to leave the country during the heat of the Civil War in 1869-1874. Their absence made the African Christians independent and this led to the first schism in 1888.<sup>45</sup> The new congregation was known as the native Baptist church. In 1903, there was a further secession in the Ebenezer Baptist Church, which led to the formation of the Araromi Baptist Church, in Lagos. “The division of the denomination into two bodies (the American mission churches and the native churches) though undesirable helped greatly the extension of the Baptist work to many new areas.”<sup>46</sup> Over the years, the denomination expanded beyond the Western region to all other regions in the country. The Nigerian Baptist Convention

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<sup>41</sup> Kitause and Achunike, “*Religion in Nigeria from 1900-2013*,” 47.

<sup>42</sup> Kitause and Achunike, 47.

<sup>43</sup> O. and Abu, “*Christianity in Nigeria before Pentecostalism*,” 124.

<sup>44</sup> O. and Abu, 126.

<sup>45</sup> Babatunde Adekunle, “*The Nigerian Baptist Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: A Critical Reflection*,” 2018, 4, [https://www.academia.edu/download/57739686/The\\_Nigerian\\_Baptist\\_\\_Yesterday\\_\\_Today\\_and\\_Tomorrow.pdf](https://www.academia.edu/download/57739686/The_Nigerian_Baptist__Yesterday__Today_and_Tomorrow.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> Adekunle, 5.

was formally established in 1914.<sup>47</sup> Today, there are different Baptist groups like the - Gospel Baptists, Evangelical Baptists, African Baptists, Independent Baptists, and Pilgrim Baptists - that broke away from the Nigerian Baptist Convention for various reasons such as the desire for autonomy. Reni, a Nigerian Baptist scholar suggests that “the diversity among Baptist people is the belief in and practice of freedom, which allows for individual biblical interpretation in terms of theology.”<sup>48</sup> The NBC is the largest Baptist Body in the country and has grown from one church and 24 members to a denomination of over 20,000 churches and over 10 million registered members.<sup>49</sup>

The catholic mission also gained entrance into Nigeria in the second phase through the Society of African Mission (SMA) vicariate Apostolic of Dahomey when Father Francesco Borghero, an Italian priest led the first team of missionaries to Dahomey in 1861. The Catholic mission in Lagos was confirmed in 1877 and the construction of the Holy Cross Cathedral was completed in 1881.<sup>50</sup> In 1846, The Scotland Missionary Society started the Presbyterian Church through the Jamaican Presbytery under the leadership of Rev. Waddel, and his wife.<sup>51</sup> The Qua Iboe Churches, founded by an Irish missionary (Samuel A Bill) with support from friends in North Ireland, penetrated Eastern Nigeria as an interdenominational mission in 1887.<sup>52</sup> Even though the missionaries were accused of dabbling into the politics of the then Yoruba Kingdom, they equally improved their enterprise. They trained the people in carpentry and brickmaking, introduced them to modern and commercial agriculture, and established a printing press where texts in the local language were produced.<sup>53</sup>

The third phase, beginning around 1870,<sup>54</sup> marked the entrance of Protestant missionaries into Northern Nigeria. This initially achieved minimal success as there were no recorded converts

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<sup>47</sup> C Olu Oyemomilara, “Towards a Contextualization of Worship: A challenge to the Nigerian Baptist Convention,” n.d., 106.

<sup>48</sup> A Joseph Reni, “History and Beliefs of Baptist People: An Outline of Teaching given at the Training of Newly Selected Deacons of Calvary Baptist Church, Samaru, Zaria .,” 2012, 3, [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.academia.edu/8866567/The\\_History\\_and\\_Beliefs\\_of\\_Baptist\\_People&ved=2ahUKEwiqwpSQg](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.academia.edu/8866567/The_History_and_Beliefs_of_Baptist_People&ved=2ahUKEwiqwpSQg).

<sup>49</sup> “Nigerian Baptist Convention Home Page,” *Nigerian Baptist Convention* (blog), accessed June 18, 2024, <https://www.nigerianbaptist.org/>.

<sup>50</sup> O. and Abu, “Christianity in Nigeria before Pentecostalism,” 127.

<sup>51</sup> O. and Abu, 126.

<sup>52</sup> O. and Abu, 128.

<sup>53</sup> O. and Abu, 125.

<sup>54</sup> Kitause and Achunike, “Religion in Nigeria from 1900-2013,” 48.

although connections were established. Kitause writes that the people discredited the missionaries because their work was associated with British imperialism.<sup>55</sup> In 1893, the CMS sent the Sudan Interior Mission, but they were still unable to establish a Church and two out of the three missionaries died. The Hausa Party sent by the CMS in 1897 was humiliated and barely escaped death. There was finally success in 1901 when the Patigi Mission was established in Patigi, a Nupe town in Northern Nigeria.<sup>56</sup>

### **2.2.2. Indigenous Religion and Christianity**

Nigerians are very religious and knew about God's existence long before the introduction of Christianity by the missionaries. They associated the supernatural or unexplainable occurrences as acts of a supernatural being and worshipped one form of deity or the other.<sup>57</sup> Although the introduction of Christianity by the missionaries brought with it education and an improved healthcare system among others, it also threatened the cultural identities and traditional beliefs of Nigerians. Many of the early Christians in Nigeria "struggled with being authentic Christians and at the same time proud Africans, as they were compelled to choose between denominational belonging and cultural identity."<sup>58</sup> Although some of the traditions and cultures (such as the killing of twins, and human sacrifice)<sup>59</sup> disapproved by the missionaries were outright disobedience to Scriptures, being a Christian as prescribed by the Western missionaries became more difficult for some of the early Christians in Nigeria.

### **2.2.3. Indigenous Churches in Nigeria**

The African Independent Churches were established by African clergy and laymen of the mission Churches out of protests against the behaviour of the Western missionaries towards the African clergies. They claimed the Western missionaries ill-treated the African clergies, denied them the right to perform some sacraments -such as baptism- and disregarded the African culture.<sup>60</sup> They

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<sup>55</sup> Kitause and Achunike, 48.

<sup>56</sup> Ayodeji Abodunde, *A Heritage of Faith: A History of Christianity in Nigeria*, 2. edition (Lagos, Nigeria: Pierce Watershed, 2017), 148–54.

<sup>57</sup> Kitause and Achunike, "Religion in Nigeria from 1900-2013," 46.

<sup>58</sup> Isaac C. Sserunjogi and George O. Achar, "Denominationalism and African Christian Identity," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* VII, no. VII (2023): 978, <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRIS.2023.70775>.

<sup>59</sup> Kitause and Achunike, "Religion in Nigeria from 1900-2013," 48.

<sup>60</sup> O. and Abu, "Christianity in Nigeria before Pentecostalism," 128–29.

seceded from their missionary Churches and got new names. The first division in 1888 saw the creation of the Native Baptist Church from the Southern American Baptist Convention,<sup>61</sup> and later African Church Bethel from the Anglican Communion.<sup>62</sup> AIC however emphasized the need to “differentiate between the “essential and the non-essentials as preached by the Western missionaries to ensure the successful, yet distinct African Church.”<sup>63</sup> Thus the earliest breakaway in Nigeria was in protest of unfair treatment and disregard for traditional culture. The second wave of Indigenous Churches took place in the early 20th century<sup>64</sup> out of the need to offer a Christianity that was more relevant to the needs and culture of the people. In what some described as a blend of African Traditional Religion and Christianity, the Aladura Church movement offered more indigenous music and charismatic gifts (such as healing and prophecy).<sup>65</sup>

#### **2.2.4. Pentecostal Movement**

The Pentecostal movement in Nigeria has also evolved in 3 phases.<sup>66</sup> This period, which also marked the third wave of local Christianity – different from the mission Churches and AIC<sup>67</sup> was ushered in the mid-1920s. <sup>68</sup> It was characterized by improved knowledge of the scriptures, exposure to foreign resources, Pentecostalism, and acknowledgment of cultural contexts.<sup>69</sup> It seems that time and experience paved the way for a better and more contextual interpretation of the Scriptures, producing more mature Christians, committed to passing the faith to the members of their community. Ukah describes “three discernable strands of local Christianity associated with this period: first, the classical indigenous Pentecostal churches – established in the 1940s for example gospel faith mission and Salem gospel mission, second, charismatic movements with the structures of the mission Churches – started in the 1960s and 1970s, were renewal movements of churches such as the Roman Catholic and the Anglican churches. The third strand was the neo-pentecostal Churches with distinctive theological and leadership structures like the Redeemed

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<sup>61</sup> Asonzeh Franklin-Kennedy Ukah and J. D. Y. Peel, *A New Paradigm of Pentecostal Power: A Study of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>62</sup> O. and Abu, “*Christianity in Nigeria before Pentecostalism*,” 128–29.

<sup>63</sup> Abodunde, *A Heritage of Faith*, 251.

<sup>64</sup> Ukah and Peel, *A New Paradigm of Pentecostal Power*, 3.

<sup>65</sup> Ukah and Peel, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Dr Michael A Ogunewu, “*Reflecting on Tendencies in Nigerian Pentecostalism*,” n.d., 2–4.

<sup>67</sup> Ukah and Peel, *A New Paradigm of Pentecostal Power*, 4.

<sup>68</sup> Abodunde, *A Heritage of Faith*, 373–400.

<sup>69</sup> Ukah and Peel, *A New Paradigm of Pentecostal Power*, 4.

Christian Church of God, and the Deeper Life Bible Church.”<sup>70</sup> A significant feature of this movement was its phenomenal growth. According to scholars, the decline in the oil boom in the 1980s led to severe poverty and hardship in Nigeria. The economic crisis, coupled with government failure, created a void that was filled by Pentecostal movements that offered strength, purpose, and hope. People sought not just individual salvation, but also a supportive community that provided moral and practical help during hardship. All these created a fertile ground for the rise of diverse Pentecostal movements in the country.<sup>71</sup>

### **2.3.0. Factors Responsible for New Denomination in Nigeria**

The increase in Churches in Nigeria is due to the establishment of new denominations and new Church branches within the same denomination. Multiple factors have been claimed to be responsible for the proliferation of Churches of various denominations in Nigeria. The initial AIC and earlier Pentecostal movements came out of the need to have a Church that is truly African, that allowed Africans to worship God on the same level as the Westerners. To establish a proper relationship between the AIC and the older Western Churches, the World Council of Churches organized a consultation on AIC movements with support from the All Africa Church Conference.<sup>72</sup> They identified many factors as responsible for the breakaway. Apart from the obvious human element, “cultural, political and, above all, racial tensions”<sup>73</sup> were identified as key reasons. The consultation team also reported that a “divine factor”<sup>74</sup> should not be ruled out as a possible hand behind establishing the AIC. Acknowledging the mixed motivations and weakness of the Western missionaries, and older Churches, the consultation unequivocally stated that the “Christian Church is not man’s creation, nor can any Christian congregation afford to cut itself off from the heritage of centuries of Christian thought and experience.”<sup>75</sup>

God has been identified as the founder of many Pentecostal movements in Nigeria. Founders of many Pentecostal denominations have narrated how their denominations were founded in

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<sup>70</sup> Ukah and Peel, 4.

<sup>71</sup> Abimbola O Adesoji, “The New Pentecostal Movement in Nigeria and the Politics of Belonging,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 52, no. 8 (December 2017): 1164, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909616649209>.

<sup>72</sup> Victor E. W. Hayward, “African independent church movements,” *International Review of Mission* 52, no. 206 (April 1963): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6631.1963.tb02441.x>.

<sup>73</sup> Hayward, 2.

<sup>74</sup> Hayward, 2.

<sup>75</sup> Hayward, 3.

obedience to the voice of God.<sup>76</sup> These instructions came through dreams, visions, prophecies, and scriptural revelations. Through visions and dreams, founders received specific instructions on the message they were sent to proclaim, accompanied by signs and wonders. Babalola of the Christ Apostolic Church specifically received a message to dissuade people from using traditional herbs for healing, but rather put their trust in God.<sup>77</sup> Through these ministries, individuals and communities received salvation, healing, hope, and joy as men responded in obedience to God. This narrative differs from the opinion of some scholars that new denominations are avenues for the clergy to amass wealth. Cho quoted Mayrargue “that it is not enough to dismiss African Pentecostals as ‘local religious entrepreneurs’; rather there is a need to see them as Africa’s unique contextualization of the faith and a reflection of the diffused centres of influence in World Christianity.”<sup>78</sup> This reminds us to consider a broader context while researching the motivation for establishing new denominations in Nigeria.

New denominations have also been established due to disagreement in the Church. These divisions may be due to doctrinal issues,<sup>79</sup> constraints in manifesting spiritual gifts, or a perceived lack of submission (leading to expulsion),<sup>80</sup> political reasons such as the civil war, military rule, and the long-standing poor socioeconomic situation of the country.<sup>81</sup> This is expected as the vulnerable masses can only turn to a higher being for intervention when the existing structures cannot provide for basic human needs such as food, shelter, and security. The prosperity message associated with the Pentecostal movement is also attractive<sup>82</sup> as it creates hope in a hopeless situation, driving increased membership and fueling the establishment of new denominations. Technology and social media have increased the visibility of Churches and expanded their reach. This increases membership and financial asset base supporting the creation of new Church branches.<sup>83</sup> Against the opinion that many denominations in Nigeria were founded out of joblessness, many Pentecostal

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<sup>76</sup> Abodunde, *A Heritage of Faith*, 344–45.

<sup>77</sup> Abodunde, 345–47.

<sup>78</sup> Avis, *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, 2018, 631.

<sup>79</sup> Abodunde, *A Heritage of Faith*, 413.

<sup>80</sup> Ukah and Peel, *A New Paradigm of Pentecostal Power*, 20–33.

<sup>81</sup> Ukah and Peel, 5–6.

<sup>82</sup> Matthew Michael, *Christian Theology and African Traditions*, 1st ed. (The Lutterworth Press, 2013), 169, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1cg4mp2>.

<sup>83</sup> Ukah and Peel, *A New Paradigm of Pentecostal Power*, 6.

Church founders in the 1970s and 1980s were widely read and accomplished professionals before they were called into full-time ministry.<sup>84</sup>

### 2.3.1. Evolution of Denominationalism in Nigeria

Okeke, a Nigerian theologian contends that for the average Nigerian Christian, the shared belief in Jesus takes precedence over denominational distinction as “deep in the minds of many Africans, all these churches are the same since they all worship the same God and call on the same Jesus Christ.”<sup>85</sup> This is understandable because “most people cannot understand the theological, psychological, cultural, nationalistic, and geopolitical factors that bred the division.”<sup>86</sup> Even though the beliefs and practices of different denominations have been passed down many generations in Nigeria, many Christians in Nigeria may not be able to articulate or understand the historical or theological foundations of such practices or beliefs.

Nigerian theologians mention various reasons for denominationalism in Nigeria to include:

1. Arrival of foreign missionaries: Obineche, a Nigerian theologian argues that “missionaries came to Africa with their national animosities against each other under the cover of religion.”<sup>87</sup> Okeke supports this position that denominational division and rivalry in Nigeria were inherited from the missionaries along with the introduction of Christianity into the country.<sup>88</sup> Obineche’s claim sounds judgmental as it presents division as the primary agenda of the Western missionaries.
2. Rivalry of Pentecostal movement with Orthodox churches: Okeke contends that although the denominationalism was initially between the mainline Orthodox churches, the Pentecostal movement also began another type of rivalry with the Orthodox churches with the Catholic denomination bearing most of the attack.<sup>89</sup>

Perhaps the trigger for denominationalism in Nigeria has evolved over the years with the establishment of newer denominations and the downward turn of the socio-economic situation

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<sup>84</sup> Abodunde, *A Heritage of Faith*, 621–23.

<sup>85</sup> Okeke, Hilary. “African Perspective in Ecumenical Dialogue,” *Bigard Theological Studies* 117 (1997): 46.

<sup>86</sup> Okeke, 45.

<sup>87</sup> Obineche, John. “The early Church Controversies and the Problem of Ecumenism in Nigeria,” *International Journal of Social Sciences and Management Review* 02, no. 05 (2019): 83.

<sup>88</sup> Okeke, “African Perspective in Ecumenical Dialogue,” 46.

<sup>89</sup> Okeke, 52.



of the country. While the argument about its origin and driving force continues, denominationalism in Nigeria has moved beyond the initial one associated with the mainline foreign churches spreading across indigenous and foreign denominations.

## **2.4. Empirical Research**

### **2.4.1. Interviews**

To gain deeper insights into the reasons for many denominations in Nigeria, I conducted six in-depth interviews with key figures (such as a theologian and a pastor) and church members from Nigerian Baptist Churches. The interview aims to investigate why people join and belong to a church and their perspective of other denominations. The interview was semi-structured and the questions were designed using the Believing, Belonging, Behaving, and Experiencing (BBBE) model.<sup>90</sup> The interviews were conducted online using the Zoom video conferencing platform to allow flexibility and accessibility for participants in different parts of Nigeria. All interviews were conducted in English language. I interviewed each respondent separately to ensure Church members were free to express themselves. The interviews started with a general introduction and the questions were essentially the same for the leaders and the members, but leaders were asked why new denominations were established. Verbal informed consent was obtained from each respondent before each interview commenced. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for detailed analysis.

### **2.4.2. Analysis of Respondent Interviews Using The BBBE Model**

In this section, with the aid of BBBE model,<sup>91</sup> I will evaluate people's worldviews about the proliferation of denominations in Nigeria. I interviewed six people, (from the Baptist denomination) and asked them questions concerning how denominations are formed and the unity of the Church.

### **2.4.3. Believing**

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<sup>90</sup> Colijn, J.J.A., 'Testing the Waters. Infant Baptism as a Case Study for Doing Reformed Theology Interculturally'. (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Protestantse Theologische Universiteit., 2023), 18–24.

<sup>91</sup> Colijn, 18-24.

I will be discussing believing based on the following questions directed to respondents. What are the reasons for you to join your denomination? What might be the reasons there are so many Christian denominations in Nigeria? What do you think about the unity of the church, the importance of the unity of the church? Do you think there is a relationship between the calling of the church and the unity of the church? What are the advantages and disadvantages of many denominations? In this context, Believing refers to “knowing, affirming, and trusting.”<sup>92</sup>

#### **2.4.3.1. Reasons for denominations**

Respondent 1, (a theologian and leader in the Nigerian Baptist Convention) joined the denomination because the teaching practices of his denomination conform with the word God. He emphasized the belief that everyone has equal rights and access to God as a strong motivation. Respondent 2 (a Baptist deaconess) formally a member of a Pentecostal church believes she was led to join her denomination when she relocated to her new location. Respondents 3, 4 and 5 (members) disclosed that they joined The Baptist church because they were born into the denomination. Respondent 4 added that although he was raised a Baptist, he left the denomination for a while due to some controversies on the role of the Holy Spirit in the church, but returned when the Baptist denomination reviewed its doctrine on the Holy Spirit. Respondent 5 mentioned the Baptist doctrines as an additional reason, while respondent 6 (a Baptist Pastor) stated he belongs to the denomination based on his belief in the Baptist beliefs and practices.

Respondents believe that there are various reasons for the many denominations in Nigeria. A member mentioned disagreement, doctrinal issues, the absence of regulation over church establishment by the Nigerian government, and desire for personal benefits as factors responsible for the emergence of different denominations. The Pastor suggested the failure of the orthodox churches to adequately engage the youth in e.g youth friendly programs as a possible reason. The convention leader believes that many Churches are established out of the desire for self-importance and power. The Baptist deaconess mentioned that though some denominations came out of strife and dissatisfaction with the former leadership, some were born out of the need to propagate the gospel. She highlighted that not all denominations are a result of disagreement as some new denominations are commissioned by the former church leadership who continue to provide

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<sup>92</sup> Colijn, *Testing the Waters: Infant Baptism as a Case Study for Doing Reformed Theology Interculturally.*, 19.

oversight functions. Other reasons suggested by members include the need to exercise the gifts of the Holy Spirit, a genuine call in response to need, and increased religiosity due to economic hardship. A member said “Some denominations promise people heaven on earth which matches what people are looking for,”<sup>93</sup> supporting the suggestion that the country’s harsh economy may promote the establishment of many denominations. The Pastor however viewed the multiplication of denominations as a means of getting the gospel to every nook and cranny while pointing out that some individuals use this to gain popularity.

#### **2.4.3.2. Believing in the Unity and the Calling of the Church**

“Unity is part of the image of God that is inbuilt in us.”<sup>94</sup> All the respondents believe that the church regardless of their denomination should be united, referring to Jesus’ statement in John 13:35. All the respondents believe that with disunity, the Nigerian church (comprising all the denominations) cannot fully achieve its calling to reach the unsaved. This is especially important in penetrating the Muslim community. A member believes that the unity of the church is very important because “Christ is coming for a church, not a denomination.”<sup>95</sup> She further explained referencing different bible passages such as John 3:3, John 3:16-18, John 3:36, and Romans 10:9-10 that “by the church, I mean the body of Christ as a whole; the company of those who have confessed Christ as their Lord and personal Savior, from numerous denominations with similar or different doctrinal beliefs, policies and teachings.”<sup>96</sup> Another member also affirmed that the unity of the Church is the only way to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. While supporting another member, the pastor mentioned that Jesus’ prayer for his disciples in John 17 emphasized the importance of unity in the church. Quoting Psalm 133:1, another member stated unity as nonnegotiable for corporate anointing in the church. Sensationalism of new denominations was identified by a member as a threat to unity. The Convention leader suggested that “assets, pride, individuality”<sup>97</sup> are major causes of disunity in the body of Christ. A member however added that “dispute in the church has always advanced the cause of the church”<sup>98</sup> citing the disagreement in early church as an example. Regarding unity and calling of the church, a member said the calling

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<sup>93</sup> Respondent 4, (member)

<sup>94</sup> Respondent 1, (Nigerian Baptist Convention leader)

<sup>95</sup> Respondent 3 (Member)

<sup>96</sup> Respondent 3 (Member)

<sup>97</sup> Respondent 1, (Nigerian Baptist Convention leader)

<sup>98</sup> Respondent 4, (Member)

of the church is to make disciples, while another member mentioned that unity will help the church achieve its. Another member alligns with this and said that “unity makes our outreaches to the unbelievers convincing because we will preach the same message.”<sup>99</sup> The Pastor also supported this position, stating that the divided church will not be able to stand.

#### **2.4.3.3. Believing in the advantages and disadvantages of new denominations**

The convention leader identified the opposition to unscriptural practices as an advantage of new denominations, citing the Reformation led by Martin Luther. The Deaconess believes that new denominations can be a blessing in disguise as it may ultimately benefit the body of Christ. Some disadvantages mentioned by the respondents include strife among churches, excessiveness in the church, focus on material reward, division in theology, and different interpretations of scriptures, which undermines the credibility of the gospel and may lead believers astray. A member stated that an advantage of diverse denominations is that he never feels like a stranger in any Baptist denomination he fellowships across the country. Another member believes that having different denominations allows the church to reach more people and offers options for worship styles. The Pastor stated “Having many denominations is a blessing”<sup>100</sup> because it helps the church reach people of different ages and cultures. He added that it also exposed orthodox churches to Pentecostalism. “This helped the Orthodox churches accept practices like speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, and healing ministry.”<sup>101</sup> He however said that the potential for heresy may be a major disadvantage of many denominations in Nigeria.

#### **2.4.3.4. Reflections on Believing**

From the interview responses above, Christians in Nigerian churches join their denominations for various reasons, including doctrinal alignment, divine guidance, upbringing, and the Church beliefs and practices. The respondents suggest that the proliferation of denominations may be due to doctrinal distinctions, a personal conviction of a call, the need for expansion to unreached groups, increased religiosity due to economic hardship, and a desire to express spiritual gifts. Some denominations may also be formed out of disagreement with leadership, the desire for power

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<sup>99</sup> Respondent 5, (Member)

<sup>100</sup> Respondent 6, (Baptist Pastor)

<sup>101</sup> Respondent 6 (Pastor)

or popularity, and other personal ambitions. There is a consensus that unity among Churches is the will of God and it is important for the Church to fulfill its calling.

#### **2.4.4. Belonging**

In this section, I will discuss belonging based on the following questions: How important is it for you to belong to the Baptist denomination? How does your belonging to your denomination influence your relationship with God? What is your relationship with other Christians belonging to other denominations?. In this context, to belong means the “attraction, identification, and cohesion of an individual”<sup>102</sup>

##### **2.4.4.1 Belonging to a denomination**

The convention leader said, “I’m proud to be a Baptist, it is very important to me, and I cherish it.”<sup>103</sup> The Deaconess also believes in the unity of the body of Christ. She said “I’m not bound to a denomination because that isn't what Jesus called us to. Jesus Christ has called us to himself, not to a denomination.”<sup>104</sup> A member identified the structure of the children’s ministry as a reason for belonging to the Baptist denomination. She said “It is because of my children. Most of these denominations don't have a structure for children, they concentrate more on the adults who are formed already.”<sup>105</sup> Another member mentioned standardization of practice and ease of fellowship as reasons for belonging. A member said belonging to the denomination is a legacy asset for him as he has gained a lot from the in-depth teaching of God’s word. The Pastor mentioned that belonging to the denomination is important to him because of the Baptist distinctives which include biblical authority, the priesthood of all believers, the autonomy of the local church, etc. While a member affirmed he will remain in the denomination forever, another stated he is flexible and can join another denomination if necessary.

##### **2.4.4.2 Belonging to a Denomination and Relationship with God and members of other denominations**

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<sup>102</sup> Colijn, *Testing the Waters: Infant Baptism as a Case Study for Doing Reformed Theology Interculturally.*, 20.

<sup>103</sup> Respondent 1 (Nigerian Baptist Convention leader)

<sup>104</sup> Respondent 2 (Deaconess)

<sup>105</sup> Respondent 3 (member)

The convention leader said, that belonging to his denomination gives room for him to grow in the Lord. He said, “There is egalitarianism in the Baptist faith.”<sup>106</sup> The Deaconess affirmed that the denomination’s reliance on the Bible as the sole authority has increased her knowledge. However, a member differs by saying that the relationship with God is personal and not denomination-based. Another member submits that his denomination does not account for his personal relationship with God because God does not want us to come to him as a member of any denomination but as individuals. He however acknowledged that “belonging to a fellowship has a way of motivating you.”<sup>107</sup> He mentioned various kinds of literature in the denomination such as devotionals, Sunday school, and discipleship materials as resources that has helped him develop a good relationship with God. The Pastor referred to the Baptist denomination as the major source of what he knows about God, while another member pointed out that the denomination has had a positive impact on his study of the word, his ability to discern, and his family.

Regarding relationships with other denominations, all the respondents alluded to a good relationship with Christians from other denominations. A member particularly said knowing that he is first of all a Christian before being a member of a denomination, it has helped him to relate well with other Christians regardless of their denominations. The Baptist Convention leader stated that the Nigerian Baptist Convention works in partnership with other denominations once they believe in the Bible. A member mentioned that the Baptist denomination is accommodating, helping him to see people through God’s eyes and so he can relate well with others regardless of doctrinal differences. He stated that “we have grey areas, but we don’t let that affect us negatively, we just move on believing that God will show us the light.”<sup>108</sup> The Pastor said the relationship with other denominations is very vital because “a tree cannot make a forest”<sup>109</sup>

#### **2.4.4.3 Reflections on Belonging**

The importance of belonging to a denomination varied. Some, like the Convention leader, found strong identity and growth within their denomination. Others, like the Baptist deaconess, prioritized unity in Christ over denominational ties. For some, programs like children's ministry,

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<sup>106</sup> Respondent 1 (Nigerian Baptist Convention leader)

<sup>107</sup> Respondent 4, (member)

<sup>108</sup> Respondent 5, (member)

<sup>109</sup> Respondent 6, (Pastor)

discipleship programs, and Sunday school influenced their choice. All respondents, however, maintained good relationships with Christians from other denominations. Nigerian Christians might view denominations as smaller communities within the larger Christian body, and the decision to belong to one may thus be based on individual priorities and personal needs. These responses may also reflect an evolving society in which church members belong.

#### **2.4.5. Behaving**

In this section, I will be discussing “behaving” concerning new denominations, unity, and the calling of the Church. How are new denominations formed? What activities do churches employ to attract new members? What are the strategies for retaining existing church members? Is there unity among different denominations and what activities are utilized to stimulate unity among them? In this context, Behaving refers to “rites, practices, traditions, and morality in personal or communal life.”<sup>110</sup>

##### **2.4.5.1 Behaving to Form a new denomination**

The theologian highlighted that a breakaway from an existing denomination due to doctrinal differences results in a new denomination. The Baptist deaconess also mentioned that churches often start as a fellowship where people pray together, have Bible studies, crusades, film shows, medical outreach, and food outreaches. Over time the number increases and a new denomination is formed. One member stated that while new denominations may be formed based on the conviction to start something different, at other times it “looks like a business venture.”<sup>111</sup> The Pastor said that new denominations may be established with the blessing of the mother church after the pastor has gone through some training, while sometimes new denominations are small cell fellowships/ home fellowships of prayer meetings that grow into a Church.

##### **2.4.5.2 Behaving to attract new members and retain existing members**

The Convention leader said that caring for the welfare of church members attracts new members. He stated that “Jesus Christ wants us to show love to others practically and not love with mouth.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Colijn, *Testing the Waters: Infant Baptism as a Case Study for Doing Reformed Theology Interculturally.*, 20.

<sup>111</sup> Respondent 5, (member)

<sup>112</sup> Respondent 1 (Nigerian Baptist Convention leader)

On the negative side, he said some church leaders use satanic power or psychology to deceive people. Psychology he said, works in a third-world country like Nigeria, where the poverty level is high. Two members mentioned special programs like conferences, revivals, leadership training, musical concerts (particularly for young people), and entrepreneurship seminars as programs that attract new members. The Deaconess said new members are attracted through the provision of meals while love, attention, visitation, and acceptance are ways old members are retained. This was supported by another member who mentioned welfare support as a strategy to attract and retain membership. Members also stay when they enjoy good fellowship and their spiritual, social, emotional, and physical needs are met. A member said, “People only leave a pasture that is dry for a greener pasture.”<sup>113</sup> Some other churches (especially those targeting the youth) adopt secular strategies such as entertainment by inviting comedians and celebrities to their church programs. The Pastor mentioned “packaging” as a strategy for attracting new members and stated that the touch of excellence in the ambiance of the church, music, and message attracts new members. Revival programs, prayer services, sports activities, skill acquisition programs, leadership training, and free medical services are employed to retain old members. The Convention leader mentioned discipleship as a strategy to retain old members. A member also revealed that old members stay when the church is focused on preaching God’s word, has a good atmosphere of worship, and engages in spiritual warfare through prayers. He underscored the need for Churches to do less of ‘inreach’ (within the church) but more outreach as the lost souls are mostly outside of the church.

#### **2.4.5.3 Behaving in Unity with other denominations**

“We cannot have 100% unity in this world.”<sup>114</sup> The Convention leader mentioned the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) as an umbrella body that unifies all denominations in Nigeria. A member stated spreading executive positions of CAN across different denominations can improve fellowship among denominations. The CAN also organizes Joint interdenominational revival programs to bring denominations together. A member and the Pastor mentioned pulpit exchange as an activity utilized to promote unity. Music fosters unity in Nigerian denominations, as music ministers are invited to minister in different denominations. Interdenominational sports competitions such as football matches also promote unity.

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<sup>113</sup> Respondent 4, (Member)

<sup>114</sup> Respondent 1, (Nigerian Baptist Convention leader)



All the respondents attested to a good relationship with members of other denominations. The leader in the Convention said, “I believe we're one, I relate well with everyone and I believe that God wants us as well to relate with Muslims who are not Christians because those are the ones we are trying to reach out to.”<sup>115</sup> A member said he does not deliberately relate differently with people from other denominations but alluded that “there is bound to be a deeper relationship between people in my local church, that’s what local church should be all about anyways.”<sup>116</sup> The pastor said he relates with people from other denominations in the same way as long as the bible is the foundation of the relationship.

#### **2.4.5.4. Reflections on Behaving**

New denominations arise from needs like discipleship, genuine response to God, desire to express spiritual gifts, and doctrinal disagreement. New denominations may also be an unplanned outcome of a growing fellowship. At other times, it may arise based on the intention to make money. Churches use social services, special events, secular entertainment, and personal development programs to attract and retain members. These seem to be effective due to the socio-economic situation of the country. While acknowledging challenges to complete unity, all maintain good relationships with Christians from other denominations and support the unity efforts of organizations such as the Christian Association of Nigeria.

#### **2.4.6. Experiencing**

In this section, I will discuss the “experiencing” aspect of various denominations in Nigerian Churches. I asked questions like what experiences have made you remain in this denomination? Why do you think people leave a church or a denomination for another one in Nigeria? How do you see other denominations? How do you feel when a brother or sister leaves a denomination? In this context, Experiencing refers to “people’s perceptions of themselves and their relationship with God and others around them.”<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Respondent 1, Nigerian Baptist Convention leader)

<sup>116</sup> Respondent 4, (Member)

<sup>117</sup> Colijn, *Testing the Waters: Infant Baptism as a Case Study for Doing Reformed Theology Interculturally.*, 20.

#### **2.4.6.1. Experiencing to Remain in a Denomination**

The Deaconess said access to God without an intermediary, is a reason for remaining in the Baptist denomination. “I also enjoy a one-on-one relationship with my pastor, and I enjoy the ministry opportunities.”<sup>118</sup> A member said, being born into the denomination makes leaving it difficult. Another member mentioned ease of access, long-lasting relationships, and familiarity with the practices as a reason for remaining. The practice makes it possible to feel comfortable worshipping in any branch of the Baptist denomination without knowing the members. Another member said he enjoys the biblical teachings, the existing bond among members, church music (including hymns), the democratic system of leadership, and the age-specific programs. He said, “The Baptist has this strategy of catching us while we are very young.”<sup>119</sup> The pastor and another member stated that the Baptist structure has made them remain. The pastor said the Baptists’ belief in the Priesthood of all believers (where each member has direct access to God) is a strong factor for remaining.

#### **2.4.6.2 Experiencing Change of Denominations**

Changing denominations is not a difficult experience among Nigerian Christians. The Convention leader said that anyone who is not fully disciplined can move from one church to another. He also added that sometimes, serious disagreements can make people leave.<sup>120</sup> The Deaconess said many leave their denomination because of non-contemporary worship experience, fashion, and music. She said for Gen Z, “If a church is not adapting to this new age, to what the youth can connect with, you will lose them.”<sup>121</sup> A member compared leaving a denomination with leaving a school and alluded that “The same way people leave schools if they are not well taught, is the same way they leave a denomination if they are not well fed.”<sup>122</sup> Other reasons people leave a denomination is the desire for a deeper teaching of God’s word, a more lively environment, and a display of the gift of the Holy Spirit. People also leave a church because of conflict, need for special prayers, or relocation, and some leave without any particular reason, “we are human beings, we migrate.”<sup>123</sup> However, a member said the same reasons why some people leave a denomination are the same

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<sup>118</sup> Respondent 2, (Deaconess)

<sup>119</sup> Respondent 5, (member)

<sup>120</sup> Respondent 1, (Nigerian Baptist Convention leader)

<sup>121</sup> Respondent 2, (Deaconess)

<sup>122</sup> Respondent 3 (member)

<sup>123</sup> Respondent 5, (member)

reasons why others join a denomination. The Pastor mentioned ~~the following~~ as reasons for people leaving the church: feeling that the church is not caring enough, not assigned leadership positions, excessive financial demand of the church on members, unmet spiritual needs, lack of belief in the church practices, and lack of personal gains from the church.

#### **2.4.6.3. Experiencing with other denominations**

Concerning their perspective of other denominations, the Convention leader said most other denominations (the new generation churches) are not concerned about unreached people groups in the rural areas, pointing out that the money spent in the cities and on luxury (such as private jets) is sufficient to work among the unreached and unengaged people group. This statement may be an over-generalization of new-generation churches, suggesting inter-denominational tension (especially at the leadership level) on issues such as resource allocation, prioritization of unreached groups, and conservative perspectives by older and established denominations. This viewpoint can fuel competition and limit joint mission activities between denominations. The Deaconess said her closest friend is from another denomination, suggesting that her relationship with others is not denomination-based. Another member said relating with someone from another denomination may be difficult when there is an attempt to force their doctrine on him. The Pastor said that although he moves away from anyone teaching a dogma not rooted in the bible, he has learned from pastors from other denominations who are filled with the Holy Spirit because “The Holy Spirit is non-denominational”<sup>124</sup>

#### **2.4.6.4. Reflections on experiencing**

Having a personal experience and access to God and the Baptist structure is important to many respondents. Nigerian Baptist members experience denominations in various ways. Some, like the Convention leader value their denomination's doctrines and teachings, while others feel committed due to upbringing. Reasons for leaving a denomination are diverse. Dissatisfaction with worship styles, lack of spiritual growth need for targeted prayers, and disagreement can also lead to a change of denomination. All the respondents maintain positive relationships across different denominations, although some express caution with people propagating unbiblical doctrines.

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<sup>124</sup> Respondent 6, (Pastor)

## **2.5. Reflections on aspects of the BBBE Model**

The various denominations in Nigeria are built around diverse beliefs, experiences of belonging, behaviors, and personal encounters. Some, like the Baptist leader, find doctrinal alignment important while others are drawn by spiritual experiences or a call to reach specific communities. Despite this variety, emphasis is placed on the church's unity as an essential attribute for fulfilling the Church's calling. Belonging to a denomination can be a source of identity and spiritual growth. However, some prioritize unity in Christ over denominational ties. New denominations may be formed due to doctrinal disagreements, response to specific needs, or for personal gains. In a challenging socio-economic environment, many churches use social programs to attract members. Others engage worship styles, special events, and even secular entertainment to attract and retain members. Efforts are made to foster unity through organizations like the Christian Association of Nigeria.

The experience within denominations is as diverse as the reasons for joining. Some find fulfillment in sound biblical teachings, and personal experience with God, while others prioritize a structure that caters to all age groups, particularly children. Denominational allegiance varies, but all respondents maintain positive relationships with Christians from other denominations. Reasons for leaving a denomination range from dissatisfaction with leadership to the desire for a more fulfilling worship experience and spiritual growth. In summary, many factors are responsible for the many denominations in Nigeria. Some are in response to perceived needs, while some are based on personal interests. The socio-economic state of the country may contribute to the growth of some of these denominations. Respondents believe the preaching of the gospel is the primary call of the church and fostering unity in the church is important to fulfill this calling. The responses suggest that although unity is emphasized, it may not translate perfectly into what is practiced. This apparent disconnection may be due to different understandings of unity, reflecting one of the Baptist distinctives - 'individual soul liberty'. This belief gives every member the liberty to choose what they believe about God. Thus, it is possible to have different understandings of topics (such as unity) from members of the same Church and denomination.

## **2.6. Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter reveals evolving and diverse motivations for new denominations. While doctrinal differences and the desire for African leadership played a crucial role in the past, contemporary reasons vary widely. Positive factors like the need for discipleship, desire to express spiritual gifts, and response to specific needs within the community were identified from empirical research. Although less emphasized, negative motivations like personal ambition or financial gain were also identified. While denominations use social services, special events, and secular entertainment to attract and retain members, the research does not show they are employed to compete with other denominations, as meeting practical needs may be necessary first steps especially because of the socio-economic challenges in the country.

The empirical research conducted within the Nigerian Baptist denomination revealed a remarkable emphasis on maintaining good relationships with Christians of other denominations. This suggests that despite denominational differences, there is a desire for Christian unity, especially from members of the Baptist denomination inferring a strong sense of community among Christians in Nigeria, which transcends denominational boundaries. While this research offers valuable insights it is limited in highlighting the experiences and perspectives of other denominations, especially the newer ones because it was conducted within an established and old denomination. Further research investigating motivations for many denominations and perspectives concerning unity across different denominations (comparing Orthodox and Pentecostal) may provide a more comprehensive understanding.

Based on my findings, I will ensure I have a more holistic approach to answering the question of what the Nigerian Baptist Denomination can learn from Herman Bavinck's Ecclesiology for dealing with the question of denominationalism and unity of the church. When conversing with Bavinck's ecclesiology, I will explore how Bavinck's ecclesiology on church unity supports or challenges the positive responses to establishing new denominations, denominationalism, and the unity efforts in Nigeria through groups such as the Christian Association of Nigeria. Lastly, I will identify lessons the Nigerian Baptist denomination can learn from Herman Bavinck's ecclesiology on practical approaches to strengthen the unity of Churches in Nigeria.

In the book *Christian Theology and African Traditions*, Micheal alluded that theology will only be relevant if it dialogues with the tradition of a given set of people. He quickly clarified that this

dialogue is not an attempt to undermine the Scriptures, but to ensure that God is not isolated from the human context of any theological discourse.<sup>125</sup> Thus, in the next chapter, the research will focus on African Ecclesiology to engage the perspective of African theologians on the subject of ecclesiology and the unity of the Church.

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<sup>125</sup> Matthew Michael, *Christian Theology and African Traditions*, 1st ed. (The Lutterworth Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1cg4mp2>.

## CHAPTER THREE

### 3.0. AFRICAN ECCLESIOLOGIES

#### 3.1 Introduction

While considering the possibility of constructing a realistic African ecclesiology, Avis, a Western Anglican theologian acknowledged the Bible may not have provided a detailed blueprint for church structure and practices. He however suggests that the practices of the early church and the core values of the teachings of Jesus Christ and the apostles may offer some guidance on African ecclesiology.<sup>126</sup> Michael refers to biblical metaphoric descriptions of the Church as, a family, branches on a vine, an olive tree, a field of crops, and the body of Christ.<sup>127</sup> Some of these metaphors may provide insights into what is expected from the church concerning unity. He further alludes that social, economic, and political challenges have caused the contemporary Church to lose focus of its primary purpose,<sup>128</sup> as it is being perceived as just a social institution by many. With the socio-economic realities of Africa and the current growth witnessed by the Church in Africa, African ecclesiology has become even more significant<sup>129</sup> as it focuses on ecclesiological concepts relevant to the African community. Considering the social context of Africa, focusing on African ecclesiology as it relates to the unity of the Church will thus be crucial for my research work and it is also important for the church's future in Africa.

#### 3.2 Choosing an African Ecclesiology Model

African ecclesiological models can offer insights into how churches in Africa view their identity, purpose, and relationship with each other. Examining these models can help us understand how African perspectives can contribute to fostering greater unity within the different denominations in the African context. African theologians are at a consensus that the ecclesiology of the Church

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<sup>126</sup> Avis, Paul D.L. ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 21.

<sup>127</sup> Michael, Matthew. *Christian Theology and African Traditions*, 1st ed. (The Lutterworth Press, 2013), 202, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1cg4mp2>.

<sup>128</sup> Michael, 203.

<sup>129</sup> Oduor, Peter Lee Ochieng. "Ubuntu Philosophy as a Technology for the Foundational Architecture of African Ecclesiology in Reference to Harvest Revival Ministry Churches in Kenya." *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion* 4, no. 2 (November 29, 2021): 4, <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtr.4.2.487>.

in Africa is an emerging theology<sup>130</sup> and it may not be “comparable in depth and amplitude to the ecclesiology of the Western church.”<sup>131</sup> This emerging nature also presents an opportunity to develop a unique ecclesiology that is relevant and culturally appropriate for African Christians. While not identical to Western models, African ecclesiology can still draw inspiration from them by exploring if and how established theological concepts can be reinterpreted within the African context.

Cho, a contemporary American-based African theologian contended that African ecclesiology should be approached based on the history of faith in Africa.<sup>132</sup> This approach “goes beyond a clerical and hierarchical Western account of church history to the stories of living faiths in the encounter of peoples and cultures with Christ in their daily lives.”<sup>133</sup> By focusing on lived experiences, Cho's approach offers a relevant perspective on African Christianity. It allows an understanding of how faith is practiced and understood by the congregation and not just theologians and Church leaders. He suggests a historical approach may guide the theologians to consider the differences in the “appropriation of the faith across the diverse cultural, spiritual, and historical moments.”<sup>134</sup> This theology will not be an abstract concept but one that reflects the experiences of African Christians. Cho's emphasis on a historical approach, lived experiences and contextualization can provide valuable insights in developing an ecclesiology that resonates with diverse African Christian experiences.

### **3.3.0 Models of African Ecclesiology**

African scholars have different ecclesiological models based on elements of the African culture. In this chapter, I will be conversing with Orobator's ecclesiology based on the three elements (community, family, and ancestors) as models for African Ecclesiology.<sup>135</sup> The research is focused on these models as they contain elements that interact with the subject of the church's unity. Orobator, a Catholic Nigerian theologian, is an ideal conversation partner in African ecclesiology

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<sup>130</sup> Ilo, Stan Chu. “African Ecclesiologies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology* ed. Paul Avis (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 635.

<sup>131</sup> Orobator, Emmanuel. “*Perspectives and Trends in Contemporary African Ecclesiology*,” n.d., 268.

<sup>132</sup> Ilo, Stan Chu. “African Ecclesiology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, ed. Paul Avis (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 625.

<sup>133</sup> Ilo, 625.

<sup>134</sup> Ilo, 628.

<sup>135</sup> Orobator, “*Perspectives and Trends in Contemporary African Ecclesiology*,” 269.



because his diverse background in African Traditional Religion and Catholicism allows him to bridge the gap between African cultural contexts and Christian theology. Orobator argues for a move away from simply applying Western theological models to the African context.<sup>136</sup> He emphasizes the need for African theologians to develop theological frameworks that draw on African cultural values and experiences. Later, I will consider the Ubuntu philosophy as a potential framework in African ecclesiology.

### **3.3.1 Community Model**

Communities influence individual and societal values, traditions, and beliefs. Orobator opines that the “African notion and experience of community aptly embodies the meaning of church”.<sup>137</sup> This is because the African community generally operates collectively rather than as individuals and the group’s needs take priority over personal needs. Individuals are sometimes measured based on the support they garner from the community members. For example, good character can be measured by a strong numerical representation of community members and neighbors at a birthday ceremony. In Africa, the community structure, just like the Church, “facilitates participation, fellowship, and personal and interpersonal relationship without exclusion.”<sup>138</sup> Thus, the Church is seen as an inclusive body that encourages equal involvement of all its members and fosters relationships that extend even outside the Church.

Another feature of the African community is its purposeful existence. This purpose is widely understood by the members who work together by contributing diverse skills.<sup>139</sup> A typical community will identify individuals with talents and abilities that may have been acquired through education, genetics, or vocational training. These are harnessed to achieve the purpose of the community. The Church, functioning as a united community is thus able to harness different gifts to build the body of Christ. Orobator believes that understanding the African community can “proffer an enriching notion of church as a community of faith where the presence of God is experienced.”<sup>140</sup> The Church as a community of God’s people can become a place where

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<sup>136</sup> Orobator, A.E. ed., *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2016), 119.

<sup>137</sup> Orobator, “Perspectives and Trends in Contemporary African Ecclesiology,” 269.

<sup>138</sup> Orobator, 269.

<sup>139</sup> Orobator, 269.

<sup>140</sup> Orobator, 269.

individuals experience the love of God as they share their faith, help each other to grow, and support each other in difficult times.

Waliggo, an African Catholic theologian, proposes the Church as a community of “believers that is self-supporting, self-evangelizing and self-administering.”<sup>141</sup> This is based on the outcome of research he conducted among local catholic priests, theological students, and professional laymen and women in Uganda. Their responses revealed that the community model resonates effectively with the African mindset and suggested that local Churches should be an independent group that can care for and respond to the needs of its members and local community with consideration to their context. Empowering local Churches can make them effective in carrying out their mission.

### **3.3.2 Extended Family Model**

Many African ecclesiologists agree that the family model is integral to African spirituality.<sup>142</sup> The extended family in Africa is a closely knit unit where members live together, support each other, and are accountable to each other. Respect for the elderly and tradition ensures family values are passed on to the next generation. Africans are also known to be hospitable, and their communal sense encourages sharing even with limited resources. Members have a sense of togetherness and “differences are celebrated and reconciled.”<sup>143</sup> In many African societies, families extend beyond the immediate nuclear family to include grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and distant relatives. Faith is usually a family affair in Africa, and it is rare for children to pursue a faith different from their parents. The Church as a family promotes acceptance and ensures the Christian faith is passed from one generation to another.

Orobator clarifies that the strong family influence on its members does not suggest an involuntary conformation without conviction, but rather fosters diversity as a gift that supports the growth and well-being of the Church.<sup>144</sup> This remark suggests accepting diversity in the Church as in the family can be a positive force that promotes collective church growth. Uzuchukwu, an African Catholic theologian, is another proponent of this model. He proposes that the church family can

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<sup>141</sup> Waliggo, John M. “The African Clan as the True Model of the African Church,” in *The Church in African Christianity: Innovative Essays in Ecclesiology*, African Challenge Series, ed. J.N.K Mugambi and Laurenti magesa (Nairobi Kenya: Initiatives, 1990), 114.

<sup>142</sup> Orobator, “*Perspectives and Trends in Contemporary African Ecclesiology*,” 270.

<sup>143</sup> Orobator, 270.

<sup>144</sup> Orobator, 271.

provide care and love while promoting communication and tolerance just like the African family.<sup>145</sup> He further posits that as the family of God, “those born into this church-family through water and the Spirit, coming from whatever race or nation, are bonded together through the victory or blood of the Lamb.”<sup>146</sup> This infers that the bond that joins the Church together is strong and traverses all possible diversity.

The African extended family model has flaws that have made scholars express their reservations. The general knowledge that “the family in Africa is heavily patriarchal and androcentric, with the husband as head and boss and the wife and the children as submissive dependents”<sup>147</sup> is another weakness of the model. They opine that adopting a model that mirrors this traditional structure may reinforce existing gender biases in African societies. This could lead to a church that doesn't fully embrace the equality of all its members. Uzuchukwu cautions that “the idea of the church as a family should, not be construed as an experience that will set the terms for the construction of this new family of God,”<sup>148</sup> expressing concern about the patriarchal dominance in the African culture. Another potential flaw of the family model is a tendency towards exclusivism. Belonging to a family is very important in the African culture, so much so that parents are reluctant to support marriages where one partner cannot present his family members. Scholars however object to this position, stating that the family model discourages exclusivism as seen in many denominations today.<sup>149</sup> Orobator argues that “the church as the family of God in Africa serves as a corrective to one of the defects of the family model, that is, the particularism of relationship. As the family of God, the bond of relationship in the church is universal, neither particular nor exclusive,”<sup>150</sup> suggesting that the matters of the immediate church family may be prioritized over the broader Christian community. Okure, a Catholic Nigerian theologian, on the other hand, posits that the African family lacks exclusivism by affirming that “family in Africa embraces all members on equal terms regardless of personal, social, religious, and other affiliations since one ancestral blood

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<sup>145</sup> Uzukwu, Elochukwu E. *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 68.

<sup>146</sup> Uzukwu, 67.

<sup>147</sup> Orobator, *The Church We Want*, 95.

<sup>148</sup> Uzukwu, *A Listening Church*, 66.

<sup>149</sup> Orobator, “*Perspectives and Trends in Contemporary African Ecclesiology*,” 271.

<sup>150</sup> Orobator, 271.

flows in all members and bonds them inseparably.”<sup>151</sup> She contends that despite some negative characteristics, the African family model is still relevant in African ecclesiology.

Orobator concludes that despite the flaws of the African family, “the family support systems continue to be alive in Africa and is still the locus for the transmission of values, the acquisition of identity, and it provides a framework of inclusion regardless of one’s character, age, status.”<sup>152</sup> If the family model is appropriately contextualized, it has potential because it supports its members, transmits values, shapes identity, and offers a sense of belonging to all members.

### 3.3.3 Ancestor Model

“An African ecclesiology is inconceivable without the concept of ancestorship.”<sup>153</sup> Africans hold their ancestors in high esteem because they are perceived to provide spiritual direction and insight to the community. Ancestors are also viewed as intermediaries between man and God. Nyamiti, an African Catholic Theologian based his ancestral ecclesiology on Christology, where Jesus is seen as the Proto-Ancestor because He “manifested precisely all those qualities and virtues which Africans like to attribute to their ancestors and which lead them to invoke the ancestors in daily life.”<sup>154</sup> He indicates that “God communicates his ancestral life to us by sending his Son and descendant to become our ancestor”<sup>155</sup> suggesting that the core purpose and identity of the church are directly linked to the life and work of Jesus Christ. This explains why Christology is relatable to the Africans in ecclesiology. Bujo, an African Catholic theologian, is another proponent of this model. He clarifies that the ancestors referred to here are only those who lived a life of reverence to God and had a positive influence on their generation.<sup>156</sup> While some scholars have criticized the model as “not taking full cognizance of the divinity of God and Christ,”<sup>157</sup> Bujo expatiates that the reason Jesus is called the ‘Proto-Ancestor’ is because “Jesus did not only realize the authentic ideal

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<sup>151</sup> Okure, Teresa. “Becoming the Church of the New Testament,” in *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III* ed Orobator A.E (New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 95.

<sup>152</sup> Orobator, *The Church We Want*, 154.

<sup>153</sup> Orobator, “*Perspectives and Trends in Contemporary African Ecclesiology*,” 272.

<sup>154</sup> Bujo, Bénézet. *African Theology in Its Social Context*, Faith and Cultures Series (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1992), 80.

<sup>155</sup> Nyamiti, Charles. “The Church as Christ’s Ancestral Mediation: An Essay on African Ecclesiology,” in *The Church in African Christianity: Innovative Essays in Ecclesiology*, African Challenge Series ed. J.N.K Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa (Nairobi Kenya: Initiatives, 1990), 131.

<sup>156</sup> Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 79.

<sup>157</sup> Sakupapa, Teddy. “*Ecumenical Ecclesiology in the African context: towards a view of the church as Ubuntu*,” *Scriptura [Online]*. 2018, Vol.117, 2018, 6, <https://doi.org/10.7833/117-1-1384>.

of the God-fearing African ancestors but also infinitely transcended that ideal and brought it to new completion and no other ancestor can be thought of who was capable of such a complete and effective realization of the ideal.”<sup>158</sup> In an attempt to bridge the gap between theology and traditional African beliefs, Bujo’s statement suggests the model acknowledges the divinity of Christ as incomparable to the other earthly ancestors. This stance also raises the question of whether Jesus is an example or helper to the believers just as the other ancestors, or a unique Saviour, who reaches to the soul of man.

Africans believe that their ancestors never leave their people and that the presence of their ancestors “is authentically experienced as the participation of the invisible world in the world of the living.”<sup>159</sup> Dead ancestors are thus believed to be present in the lives of their family members just as “Christ has an abiding presence in the church, and He is present whenever the community or family gathers together in word, prayer, sacrament, and ministry.”<sup>160</sup> Ela, an African Catholic theologian further explains that in the African mind, “drink and food offered to the ancestors are symbols, of the continuity of the family and a permanent contact with them.”<sup>161</sup> Nyamiti supports this stance by stating that “Christ the proto-ancestor also communicates life to all the descendants of the community of faith in the form of the Eucharist (proto-ancestral meal), which constitutes the authentic foundation of a truly African church.”<sup>162</sup> Therefore, the Eucharist becomes a symbolic “ancestral meal” that strengthens this connection by uniting man with Christ and commemorating their ancestors. Bujo further stresses the importance of the proto-ancestral meal, asserting that it “must be the foundation-stone of a Church which is truly African.”<sup>163</sup> The Passover meal serves as a reminder of how the ancestors of the believers were delivered from slavery while the Eucharist commemorates the deliverance of the world from sin through Jesus’ death. This experience remains the cornerstone of a true African Church. Although a proponent of the ancestral model, Ela cautions that veneration of the saints should not be seen as “a substitute for communion with the ancestors”<sup>164</sup> In his book “My African Faith”, he warns that promoting this misconception

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<sup>158</sup> Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 80.

<sup>159</sup> Ela, Jean-Marc. *My Faith as an African* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 19.

<sup>160</sup> Orobator, “*Perspectives and Trends in Contemporary African Ecclesiology*,” 273.

<sup>161</sup> Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 19.

<sup>162</sup> Nyamiti, “*The Church as Christ’s Ancestral Mediation: An Essay on African Ecclesiology*,” 131.

<sup>163</sup> Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 94.

<sup>164</sup> Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 28.

that the saints are the ancestors tends to confuse new converts who may later discover the truth themselves.

Attempting to make ecclesiology more relevant and accessible by incorporating familiar ancestral recognition and reverence concepts is complex. Bujo however insists that “an African theology, rooted in the concept of the ancestors, can readily help develop a truly incarnated Christology and ecclesiology,”<sup>165</sup> and this should thus be explored as much as possible.

### **3.3.4 The Ubuntu Philosophy**

The African way of life is centred around the community. One of the words that commonly captures the importance of community in Africa is the word ‘ubuntu’. Ubuntu or Bantu “describes the essence of humans as individuals-in-community.”<sup>166</sup> Emphasizing the collective nature of the human society, Oduor alludes that “as opposed to Western liberal democracy that assumes people to be atomized individuals, the African philosophy of Ubuntu places the self at its centre whereby the self not only consists of the physical individual but also includes the social environment with which we identify.”<sup>167</sup> The African society highlights how human beings are interconnected and promotes unity and a sense of responsibility towards others. Oduor, an African theologian thus advocates that the Ubuntu philosophy can become a “key ingredient for a stable ecclesiological conversation resulting in the establishment of churches in Africa that appreciate the African ethos and answer the questions raised by Africans.”<sup>168</sup> Countering the opinion that ubuntu is a construct of African elites, Sakupapa, an African Presbyterian theologian, considers ubuntu “a living tradition that is constantly reinvented owing to cultural dynamism, and further affirms its (sub-Saharan) African roots.”<sup>169</sup> He argues that the ubuntu concept is practical, and constantly evolving and adapting to changing cultural contexts, making it relevant in African ecclesiological discourse.

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<sup>165</sup> Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 129.

<sup>166</sup> Tarus Kirwa David and Lowery Stephanie, “*African Theologies of Identity and Community: The Contributions of John Mbiti, Jesse Mugambi, Vincent Mulago, and Kwame Bediako*,” *Open Theology* 3, no. 1 (January 26, 2017): 306, <https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2017-0024>.

<sup>167</sup> Oduor, “*Ubuntu Philosophy as a Technology for the Foundational Architecture of African Ecclesiology in Reference to Harvest Revival Ministry Churches in Kenya*,” 6.

<sup>168</sup> Oduor, 2.

<sup>169</sup> Sakupapa, “*Ecumenical Ecclesiology in the African Context: Towards a view of the Church as Ubuntu*,” 9.

### 3.3.5 Implications of Ubuntu in African Ecclesiology

The Ubuntu philosophy offers a practical framework for churches in Africa by emphasizing the importance of community and social context in shaping their theology and practices. The Ubuntu philosophy demands that ecclesiology be constructed with the people in mind. The Church should be aware of the social context of the people, and this should be reflected in its Theology.<sup>170</sup> Church leaders and theologians must be aware of their members' social realities, which should be reflected in their theological approach. Central to Ubuntu is the concept of communion. The Church in Africa should function as a strong community that provides a sense of belonging to its members and shows love to all of them. This resonates with the emphasis of the early Church on fellowship and sharing.<sup>171</sup> Sakupapa further argues that Ubuntu mirrors God's idea of community by prioritizing relationships, mutual support, and shared life.<sup>172</sup> Oduor supports this notion and further remarks that Churches that fail to foster this sense of belonging fall short of their purpose.<sup>173</sup> Members of the Christian community should not only have a sense of belonging, but they should experience love, care, and concern from the members of their Church community. The Ubuntu philosophy also fosters unity within and between churches. The emphasis on relationships can bridge denominational divides and promote ecumenism.<sup>174</sup> Sharing resources among community members, as endorsed by the Ubuntu philosophy, supports the principle of *koinonia* found in the New Testament.<sup>175</sup> Ubuntu also promotes inclusivity. Exclusion is a "horrific idea"<sup>176</sup> within this philosophy. Churches should not promote doctrines that support exclusivism, but rather remain open to everyone regardless of race, age, gender, or socioeconomic status.

On the flip side, Sakupapa recognizes that some inherent weaknesses in the ubuntu concept may make it unsuitable as an ecclesiological model.<sup>177</sup> He reveals its potential to diminish diverse perspectives and be exclusive by overemphasizing cultural identity. He offered the potential to be

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<sup>170</sup> Oduor, "Ubuntu Philosophy as a Technology for the Foundational Architecture of African Ecclesiology in Reference to Harvest Revival Ministry Churches in Kenya.," 7.

<sup>171</sup> Sakupapa, "Ecumenical Ecclesiology in the African context: towards a view of the Church as Ubuntu," 9.

<sup>172</sup> Sakupapa, 10.

<sup>173</sup> Oduor, "Ubuntu Philosophy as a Technology for the Foundational Architecture of African Ecclesiology in Reference to Harvest Revival Ministry Churches in Kenya.," 8.

<sup>174</sup> Oduor, 8.

<sup>175</sup> Sakupapa, "Ecumenical ecclesiology in the African context: towards a view of the Church as Ubuntu," 10.

<sup>176</sup> Oduor, "Ubuntu Philosophy as a Technology for the Foundational Architecture of African Ecclesiology in Reference to Harvest Revival Ministry Churches in Kenya.," 8.

<sup>177</sup> Sakupapa, "Ecumenical Ecclesiology in the African Context: Towards a view of the Church as Ubuntu," 9.

impacted by prevalent patriarchal systems in certain African societies as another demerit of the concept. Despite these drawbacks, ubuntu remains a powerful tool for developing African ecclesiology. This potential will be discussed further in the next section.

### **3.3.6 Ubuntu: A Unifying Philosophy for African Ecclesiology**

Understanding the Church in Africa requires exploring its unique cultural context. Two prominent models, community and family, have been proposed to reflect the African emphasis on collectivity and shared life. The concept of Ubuntu offers a broader philosophical framework that strengthens and complements these existing models.

Bongmba an African theologian argues that reconstructing African ecclesiology “calls for strong intersubjective bonds”<sup>178</sup> and proposes that the proper “articulation and appropriation of ubuntu as a philosophical ideal”<sup>179</sup> will help to achieve this need for strong institutional connections within the Christian community. The Ubuntu philosophy resonates with the African communal spirit, where individuals are shaped by their social environment. Bongmba further contends that by adopting the ubuntu framework, the “Church becomes a family where members cultivate and facilitate new relationships in an interdependent world. The Church then ought to cultivate a relational ecclesiology, rethink the notion of the Church from the perspective of small Christian communities, and work against the abuse of ecclesiastical power.”<sup>180</sup> Ubuntu aligns perfectly with the community model of the Church, which emphasizes the importance of working together for the common good. The Church community becomes a space for shared purpose, where diverse gifts from different denominations contribute to the overall growth of the Church of God at large. Similarly, Ubuntu's focus on relationships and shared life connects with the family model as both emphasize inclusivity, love, and a sense of belonging. Ubuntu's emphasis on relationships can bridge denominational divides, fostering fellowship, unity, and collaboration between different Christian communities rooted in African culture. The emphasis on shared identity within a group might also be misinterpreted to prioritize tribal affiliation over Christian identity, particularly in Africa where there are many tribal groups with strong intratribal connections and allegiance. This

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<sup>178</sup> Bongmba, Elias Kifon. ed., *Religion and Social Reconstruction in Africa*, Studies in World Christianity and Interreligious Relations (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2018), 74.

<sup>179</sup> Bongmba, 75.

<sup>180</sup> Bongmba, 76.



could exacerbate tribalism within the church, leading to exclusion and competition between groups. Sakupapa maintains that Ubuntu holds promise for developing a set of ethical principles that can guide the church's pursuit of unity and social responsibility as its emphasis on relationships and interconnection between people can be a strong foundation for building unity within the church despite differences.<sup>181</sup> If the weaknesses of the Ubuntu philosophy can be addressed, it can be adopted as a larger framework under which other models mentioned above can function, Nigerian churches can become more unified, relevant, and supportive of members of their Church and Churches from other denominations.

### **3.4 African Ecclesiology and the Unity of the Church**

In this section, I will explore how the different ecclesiological models discussed above can be relevant to the unity of the different church denominations in Nigeria.

Waliggo proposes constructing ecclesiology around the family model may promote unity in the African Church. “When there is a problem in a clan or a family, members normally feel concerned and always sit together to iron out the problem.”<sup>182</sup> In the African family, disagreements are approached to maintain the family bond. If the different church denominations function as a family of God, members of various church denominations will understand the importance of accepting and loving every Christian without denominational consideration. Adopting the family model for conflict resolution will promote unity and love in the Church. Extending this “sense of unity as a mark of the Church will be a witness to the unbelievers, drawing them to salvation.”<sup>183</sup> This statement further underscores the importance of unity in the Church as a strategy to convert unbelievers. This model, also known as the clan model advocates for unity in the Church through “active individual participation, sharing, empathy and mutual respect.”<sup>184</sup> The family/clan model promotes a Christian community where different denominations participate, feel respected, and make useful contributions. This sense of belonging and shared purpose can attract those seeking a spiritual home, including unbelievers.

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<sup>181</sup> Sakupapa, “Ecumenical Ecclesiology in the African Context: *Towards a view of the Church as Ubuntu*,” 9.

<sup>182</sup> Waliggo, “*The African Clan as the True Model of the African Church*,” 118.

<sup>183</sup> Waliggo, 122.

<sup>184</sup> Waliggo, 122.

In the traditional African setting, individuals do not exist alone, but as members of a community, and individuals are expected to share their experiences, possessions, and even children with other members of the community,<sup>185</sup> This is particularly important to ensure the disadvantaged members of the community are looked after. If the different church denominations in Nigeria function as a community, they will willingly share their resources with those who have less or are in need, promoting interdenominational unity. This gesture can also discourage unhealthy competition and strengthen the collective effort of the Nigerian church. Just like in the African community where “every member down to the least significant, shares the responsibility for strengthening the force of the tribe or clan and of each of its members,” each denomination can take responsibility for the unity of the larger Nigerian church, strengthening the unity effort of groups such as the Christian Association of Nigeria. Bujo expands that in the African community, actions that divide the society, are considered unacceptable even if the actions are negligible.<sup>186</sup> This stance if adopted, can discourage individual denominations from engaging in activities that may threaten the unity of the broader church community. The community model promotes sharing and interdependence and values the contribution of every member no matter how small. Smaller denominations can seek and receive support from more established denominations. They can also feel free to contribute (no matter how small) to the larger church community.

In the African context, the living must ensure they are committed to the values their ancestors cherished while they were alive. This knowledge becomes a collective purpose for the living promoting the unity of the tribe and the welfare of every member.<sup>187</sup> Adopting the ancestral model, different church denominations in Nigeria can consider themselves living out the desire of Jesus the proto-ancestor (as established in the prayer of John 17) when they are united based on their relationship with Christ, this unity in Christ supersedes any tribal or ethnic bond. In addition, continuing the legacy established by the ancestors is the only way to ensure “their society does not come to ruin.”<sup>188</sup> Approaching unity as a legacy that Jesus passed on rather than the agenda of some religious groups can improve the commitment of different denominations to unity. This

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<sup>185</sup> Mbiti, S. John. *African Religions & Philosophy*, (London: Heinemann, 1977), 141.

<sup>186</sup> Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 22.

<sup>187</sup> Bujo, 21.

<sup>188</sup> Bujo, 21.

position can also ensure that unity efforts are guided by the values that Jesus, the Proto-Ancestor lived by while He was on earth.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

Exploring African ecclesiology reveals a dynamic and evolving conversation as African theologians explore the Church's role using concepts familiar to their cultures. The Community Model presents a close-knit system, that promotes sharing of resources, responsibility, participation, and relationships. It encourages inclusivity and utilizes diverse skills for a common purpose, reflecting the ideal African community. The extended family model emphasizes support, shared values, and a sense of belonging. However, concerns exist about its patriarchal structures and tendency for exclusivity. While the Christ-as-ancestor model positions Jesus as a unifier, offering spiritual direction and bridging the gap between God and humanity, some find this approach downplaying Christ's divinity.

These models, despite limitations, provide valuable insights into Church unity. The community model promotes unity through collaboration and shared goals, the family model emphasizes acceptance and support, while the ancestor model highlights the importance of spiritual guidance and connection. Although engaging the Ubuntu philosophy offers the potential for a relational and people-centred church community, it is vital to note its emphasis on social cohesion and respect for diverse perspectives can downplay the importance of clear doctrinal boundaries in maintaining a unified Christian message. Disagreements over core Christian beliefs might be seen as disruptive to communal harmony, potentially hindering open and honest dialogue. The promotion of tribalism and the potential for Ubuntu to be influenced by patriarchal systems in some African societies also raises concerns about inclusivity. These tendencies can produce an ecclesiology that is not theologically and biblically sound and thus calls for the integration of a balanced framework that addresses doctrinal differences within the context of their shared identity in Christ. By drawing on the strengths and addressing the weaknesses of Ubuntu, African theologians can present a more unified and relevant ecclesiology.

Despite the broad theological discourse, a gap remains between the ideal and the reality of the African Church. Orobator observes that many churches still operate within “hierarchical,

legalistic, and clericalized structures”<sup>189</sup> and the communal spirit and values of hospitality central to African cultures, often seem absent. This gap presents a significant challenge and an opportunity for growth. Unity is, however, not an end, but a tool for the Church to fulfil its calling. The unity that Christ prayed for in John 17 was so that men may know Him and thus come to the Father. Therefore, the Church's ecumenical endeavours in Africa should be channelled toward the Church's primary calling.

Bavinck's ecclesiology based on sound theology can provide a strong foundation for the African model, ensuring its expressions of faith remain grounded in core Christian beliefs and the authority of the word of God. Thus, in the next chapter, I shall consider Bavinck's ecclesiology, as a potential foundation for African ecclesiology. I will focus on the aspects of his theology that address denominationalism in the church and its unity. I will also consider the possible usefulness of Bavinck's ecclesiology for the Nigerian church, especially the Nigerian Baptist Convention.

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<sup>189</sup> Orobator, “*Perspectives and Trends in Contemporary African Ecclesiology*,” 280.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### 4.0. HERMAN BAVINCK'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

This chapter will answer the research question: What does Herman Bavinck's ecclesiology offer with regard to the question of the unity of the church? I will examine the concept of the church and its unity through the lens of Western Reformed Ecclesiology, with a focus on the perspectives of Herman Bavinck.

#### 4.1. Introduction

Ecclesiology is important in Christian theology because it addresses fundamental questions about the church's identity. Although there had been earlier discussions about the church in Christian theology, the topic gained prominence during the Reformation. Kärkkäinen, a Western Lutheran theologian alludes that the ecumenical movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, - sparked by the need for the unity of the church - is a major reason for renewed interest in ecclesiology, because “any discussion about the unity of the church presupposes some tentative understanding of what the church is. You cannot unite entities without knowing what kind of organisms you are trying to unite.”<sup>190</sup> Kärkkäinen prescribes that contemporary ecclesiology should strike a balance between traditional and modern reflection to ensure a balanced theology that neither unnecessarily holds on to the past nor mindlessly conforms to the current circumstances.<sup>191</sup>

#### 4.2. Relevance of Herman Bavinck's Ecclesiology

Herman Bavinck (1854-1921)<sup>192</sup> lived during a time of significant ecclesiastical conflict in the Netherlands. The 19th and early 20th centuries saw numerous schisms within the Dutch Reformed Church, primarily driven by responses to modern liberal theology and the desire to maintain doctrinal purity.<sup>193</sup> These divisions prompted theologians like Bavinck to address the doctrine of

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<sup>190</sup> Kärkkäinen, 2.

<sup>191</sup> Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti. *Hope and Community, A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*, Volume 5 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), 233.

<sup>192</sup> Eglinton, James P. “Some Benefits of Going Organic:” *Theology in Scotland* 17, no. 1 (2010): 23, <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/TIS/article/view/5>

<sup>193</sup> Hans Burger, “Thinking the Church in a Dutch Reformed Context,” no. SST conference (2015): 6–7, [https://www.academia.edu/15330585/Thinking\\_the\\_Church\\_in\\_a\\_Dutch\\_Reformed\\_Context](https://www.academia.edu/15330585/Thinking_the_Church_in_a_Dutch_Reformed_Context).

the church (ecclesiology) with a focus on unity and Catholicity.<sup>194</sup> Despite his background as a Reformed secessionist, he “perceived a tension in his life between his commitment to orthodox theology and spirituality and his desire to understand and appreciate what he could about the modern world, including its worldview and culture.”<sup>195</sup> This position presents an ecclesiology grounded in sound theology, yet with a global perspective.

Bavinck's background, influenced by both his critical Old Testament scholar Abraham Kuenen and his pastor J.H. Donner makes his ecclesiology relevant in this research.<sup>196</sup> By adopting Kuenen's emphasis on careful historical analysis and fair consideration of opposing views, Bavinck's ecclesiology can engage in a conversation with diverse theological perspectives like the Nigerian Baptist denomination. Furthermore, Donner's counsel as a seceder pastor, guided Bavinck from the path of separation to integration, shaping his vision of a united church encompassing different denominations.

Bavinck is especially renowned for his comprehensive and systematic approach to Reformed dogmatics. This four-volume work, *Reformed Dogmatics*, remains an inspiring text in the field, offering deep insights into the doctrines of God, salvation, and the church. His “heart and mind sought a trinitarian synthesis of Christianity and culture, a Christian worldview that incorporated what was best and true in both pietism and modernism, while above all honouring the theological and confessional richness of the Reformed tradition dating from Calvin”<sup>197</sup> His ecclesiology presents Christ as the founder of the church and proposes a vision for a united church that cuts across denominational lines, emphasizing that the real conflict in the church was between sin and grace. This perspective called for an understanding of the church that was not restricted to institutional structures but centred on the foundational work of Christ. Unlike some other theologians who either overemphasized the structural unity of the church or minimized its significance, Bavinck in his ecclesiology maintained that the church's unity is fundamentally grounded in Christ as the Head of the church and at the same time underscored the need for its physical manifestation. He also recognized diversity as a blessing to the body of Christ and argued

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<sup>194</sup> Burger, 6.

<sup>195</sup> Bolt, John. *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4 (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2003), 18.

<sup>196</sup> James Eglinton, “Herman Bavinck,” in *T & T Clark Handbook of Neo-Calvinism ed Nathaniel Grey Sutanto and Cory Brock* (New York London: T&T Clark, 2024), 203–4.

<sup>197</sup> Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2003), 20.

for a distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental articles of faith, insisting that the truth of the word must not be sacrificed for the structural unity of the church.<sup>198</sup>

In an intercultural dialogue between Western and African ecclesiology on the problem of denominationalism and the unity of the church, Bavinck's perspectives - shaped by his background and education - can bridge cultural and theological gaps. Bavinck's movement from separatism towards integration and his vision of a united church remain relevant to the Nigerian church.

His approach offers a theological balance that acknowledges the limitations of human knowledge,<sup>199</sup> emphasizes the authority of the Bible and acknowledges diversity. His recognition of the structural unity of the church provides governance direction and an understanding of the African communal spirit. Bavinck's ecclesiology, with its focus on unity founded on Christ, and willingness to dialogue with different denominations<sup>200</sup> is appropriate for contemporary discussions on church unity as it addresses the challenges posed by denominationalism. This is especially relevant to the Nigerian church, where the proliferation of denominations may promote unhealthy competition.

#### **4.3. The Foundation of the Church**

For Bavinck, "The foundations of the Christian church were laid in the Old Testament where the covenant community of Israel was both a national and religious community, governed by a single divine law."<sup>201</sup> Bavinck argues that the Old Testament community of Israel laid the groundwork for the Christian church. Israel as a community was united by faith in God and bound by His laws becoming a prototype of the relationship of the Christian church under a new covenant. Judaism became a predominantly religious community that regularly gathered for worship in the temple and synagogue after the exile. Bavinck explains that The Greek words συναγωγή (synagōgē) and ἐκκλησία (ekklēsia) were originally used interchangeably for these religious gatherings but were later differentiated and συναγωγή tended to mean the congregation, meeting, and ἐκκλησία was defined as the ideal community called to God's salvation.<sup>202</sup> Christ himself first used the word

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<sup>198</sup> Burger, "Thinking the Church in a Dutch Reformed Context," 8.

<sup>199</sup> Burger, 7.

<sup>200</sup> Burger, 7.

<sup>201</sup> Herman Bavinck and John Bolt, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 590.

<sup>202</sup> Bavinck, Bolt, and Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:278.

church in the New Testament in Matt. 16:18 and 18:17. Bavinck posits that the debates about the word church in the original text of this scripture ( as the words of Jesus) are unnecessary considering the term's general use. Jesus himself founded the Christian church and the scriptures support this. However, this church unlike the church of the Jews, would be built on Peter's declaration of Jesus as Messiah.<sup>203</sup> This was not just an extension of existing Jewish traditions, but one with a foundation built on the confession of Peter. The church became the gathering of Christ-believers after the ascension of Jesus (Acts 5:11; 11:26; 1 Cor. 16:1; Gal. 1:2; 1 Thess. 2:14) spreading from Jerusalem to the entire world.<sup>204</sup> Over time, the church acquired different definitions to include the people of God in a particular place, whether gathered or not.

For Bavinck, “The ἐκκλησία is the elect people of God.”<sup>205</sup> The called-out ones, the elect people of God are a chosen community that finds its foundation in Jesus Christ. Bavinck's reformed perspective underscores the concept of election, proposing that God plays an active role in calling and assembling believers within His church. This does not negate the individual's free will, rather, it underscores the special role God gives and assigns to the church. Being part of Ekklesia symbolizes a chosen instrument, belonging to God, to spread His message and carry out His purposes in the world. Based on the aforementioned, Bavinck notes that “there is no doubt that according to Scripture the characteristic essence of the church lies in the fact that it is the people of God. For the church is a realization of election, and the latter is election in Christ to calling, justification, and glorification (Rom. 8:28), to being conformed to the image of God's Son to holiness and blessedness (Eph. 1:4).”<sup>206</sup> The church is essentially made up of God's chosen people – those elected for salvation.

A lot of emphasis has been placed on the creed and the church order as the foundation of the church. Bavinck however challenges this belief, stating that the one (universal, catholic) church (body) that Christ founded was not “the outcome of a creed, a church order, and a synodical system, or organization of believers but one whose entire existence is centred on Christ Jesus.”<sup>207</sup> He argues that the true, Christian church was not built on structures or confessions but on Jesus Christ

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<sup>203</sup> Bavinck, 4:278–79.

<sup>204</sup> Bavinck, 4:280.

<sup>205</sup> Bavinck, 4:279.

<sup>206</sup> Bavinck, 4:298.

<sup>207</sup> Bavinck, 4:280.



Himself. Not dismissing the creeds and structures, he emphasizes the relationship between believers and Christ as central to the existence of the church.

#### 4.4. The Visible and Invisible Church

According to Bavinck, the initial reformed position<sup>208</sup> on the distinction between the visible and the invisible church aimed to emphasize that the true essence of the church lies in its invisible aspects - faith, communion with Christ, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, not downplay the importance of the visible church as a community.<sup>209</sup> Arguing further, Bavinck notes that the “visible and invisible aspects of the church are inseparably bound up together.”<sup>210</sup> Although this suggests that the visible and the invisible church should be considered the same, Bavinck further provides a distinction between the two. He describes the invisible church as characterized as the elect, known only to God,<sup>211</sup> while the church is visible because “it manifests itself in its confession and conduct, or acts institutionally with its officer and ministries, or because it not only contains true believers but also hypocrites.”<sup>212</sup> Taking a Reformed position, he further argues that the distinction between the visible and invisible church applies only to the spiritual state of the true members of the church militant. This he best encapsulates by stating: “The church is an object of faith. The internal faith of the heart, regeneration, true conversion, hidden communion with Christ (and so forth) are spiritual goods that cannot be observed by the natural eye and nevertheless give to the church its true character (forma).”<sup>213</sup> Faith is the foundation of the church and its people, but humans cannot definitively identify true believers because it is invisible. Thus, the invisible church is known by God only, because it is based on that which is not observable with the physical eyes.

Concerning the visible church, Bavinck further contends that it “is manifested as both an institution (in the offices and means of grace) and an organism (in a community of faith and life),”<sup>214</sup> stating

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<sup>208</sup> The first to make a distinction was Calvin in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles in *The Library of Christian Classics*, Volumes 20 & 21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), IV, 1, 2-3, 7. Where Calvin identifies a distinction between the visible and invisible church. He said the invisible church includes all of God's elect who are only known to God, while the visible church is the "mother of believers," where they are born, nurtured, and matured.

<sup>209</sup> Bavinck, 4:288.

<sup>210</sup> Bavinck, 4:288.

<sup>211</sup> Bavinck, 4:274.

<sup>212</sup> Bavinck, 4:290.

<sup>213</sup> Bavinck, 4:303.

<sup>214</sup> Bavinck, 4:330.

that both existed simultaneously from inception.<sup>215</sup> For Bavinck, the visible church is not just a gathering of people, but an organized body with structures. He contends though they are the visible aspects of the church, “the institution and the organism of the church, when they assert themselves in the visible realm, have an invisible spiritual background.”<sup>216</sup> While validating the importance of the visible church in providing structure and ensuring the spiritual growth of its members, Bavinck equally affirms that the visible church does not exist by itself, but is controlled by the Spirit, which is invisible. He further argues that as an organism, “the whole is prior to the parts. It has its origin in paradise (Gen. 3:15), or, as it concerns the time of the New Testament, in Jerusalem (Acts 1:8).”<sup>217</sup> Thus, the church as the body of Christ is not composed of many denominations, because it has always existed, and they are all part of it. This also speaks to the unity of the church as preceding any gathering of believers. Therefore, as the living body with Christ as the head, the church continues to grow by the power of the Holy Spirit, and as an institution, its leadership and government are under God with Christ as the appointed king.<sup>218</sup> For Bavinck, the church as an institution is not an “accidental addition,”<sup>219</sup> initiated by man, but part of God’s initial design for the church.

#### **4.5. The Attributes of the Church**

Bavinck takes the classical reformed position concerning the attributes of the church as already expressed in the Nicene Creed. He disagrees with the Catholic stance that views the attributes of the church as elements to be exhibited in hierarchically ordered institutions, by drawing a parallel between each of the attributes of the church. He argues<sup>220</sup> that Protestants emphasize spiritual unity among believers in Christ (Ephesians 1:10, 5:23) rather than a hierarchical structure like the papacy. Also, for Protestants, holiness is not primarily about rituals or ceremonies, but a spiritual communion of believers striving to live according to God's will (John 17:19, Ephesians 5:25-27). While Catholics see Catholicity as a geographical appearance of the church, Protestants view it as the inclusivity of God's message for all people (Romans 1:8, 10:18). He further argues that while Catholics emphasize apostolic succession, Protestants emphasize apostolic teachings.

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<sup>215</sup> Bavinck, 4:331.

<sup>216</sup> Bavinck, Bolt, and Vriend, 4:305.

<sup>217</sup> Bavinck, Bolt, and Vriend, 4:301.

<sup>218</sup> Bavinck, 4:329.

<sup>219</sup> Bavinck, Bolt, and Vriend, 4:305.

<sup>220</sup> Bavinck, Bolt, and Vriend, 4:320–22.

In the following section, I will examine Bavinck's work to understand how his theology on unity as an attribute of the church can give a better insight into denominationalism as it exists in the church today.

#### **4.6. The Divine Origin of the Unity of the Church**

Bavinck identified unity as the first attribute of the church. Referencing several bible passages, Bavinck defended the Protestant position that unity of the church is “first of all with the oneness of Christ head of the church, then with the communion of all believers through the same Spirit. This unity extends to the oneness of the believers with Christ and with each other, and further, with the unity of faith, hope, and love, and of Baptism”<sup>221</sup> For Bavinck, the church must take direction for its unity from Christ as the head. Christ is the foundation of the unity of the church. As the head of the church, He gathers His people by His Spirit. Evidently, “This gathering activity proceeds from Christ and is accomplished by him.”<sup>222</sup> In Christ’s capacity as the head of the church, Christ did not abdicate the responsibility of unity to any earthly individual or institution. He does not only initiate unity, but He also ensures that His church is united. By referring to the different churches of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, in the singular, the New Testament emphasized the “basic organic unity of individual congregations and local gatherings of believers in the one universal body of Christ”<sup>223</sup> Despite the different local congregations, spread across various geographical locations, this highlights the church as a single, interconnected body of Christ. The “oneness of all the churches does not just come into being a posteriori by the establishment of a creed, a church order, and a synodical system. Neither is the church an association of individual persons who first became believers apart from the church and subsequently united themselves, but it is an organism in which the whole exists before the parts; its unity precedes the plurality of local churches and rests in Christ.”<sup>224</sup> Bavinck rejects the idea that a creed, church order, or institution creates unity.<sup>225</sup> He also refutes the opinion that the church is brought into existence when individual believers unite, locating the source of unity in Christ Himself, not external structures.

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<sup>221</sup> Bavinck, 4:321.

<sup>222</sup> Bavinck, 4:372.

<sup>223</sup> Bavinck, 4:273.

<sup>224</sup> Bavinck, 4:280.

<sup>225</sup> Bavinck, Bolt, and Vriend, 4:320–22.

#### 4.7. Divisions in the Church

Regarding divisions in the church, Bavinck suggests that the breakout of churches into different groups can be traced back to the apostolic age.<sup>226</sup> He submits that even though the early churches may have been more spiritually united than today, they had unresolvable disagreements and differences based on individual principles (Gal 2:11), and sometimes heresies (1 Cor. 1:10; 11:18-19).<sup>227</sup> Bavinck recognizes that even the early church, often seen as a model of unity, had disagreements and differences, suggesting that disagreements may exist in a unified church. Bavinck claims that the Protestant Reformation brought a multiformity into the church<sup>228</sup>. This division happened because of the Reformation's position that "the church of Rome was not the true church and that the churches of the Reformation fit the scriptural description of the nature of the church."<sup>229</sup> The breakaway was not a direct attempt to divide the church, but to return to the Bible as the only authority on which the church should operate instead of the institutions established by human beings. Tracing the history of many divisions in the church, Bavinck contends that "it is precisely the hierarchical idea of the church, an idea first of all intent upon the unity of Christianity, that throughout the centuries fostered discord and caused schism."<sup>230</sup> This assertion that hierarchical structures have contributed to divisions within the church suggests that unity efforts should not be focused on the hierarchical systems of the church.

Although a secessionist, Bavinck asserts that "breaking fellowship with the church is a serious matter; schism is sin."<sup>231</sup> His position is complex because although he seems to value unity, he recognizes there may be extreme circumstances where separation might be necessary. He confirms this inference stating that "it is hard in practice to distinguish the boundary line that separates the legitimate and obligatory breaking of fellowship with a church or doctrine from an illegitimate one."<sup>232</sup> Here, Bavinck acknowledges that questions around division and unity in the church may not always have clear-cut answers.

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<sup>226</sup> Bavinck, 4:275.

<sup>227</sup> Bavinck, 4:317.

<sup>228</sup> Bavinck, 4:274.

<sup>229</sup> Bavinck, 4:311.

<sup>230</sup> Bavinck, 4:317.

<sup>231</sup> Bavinck, 4:275.

<sup>232</sup> Bavinck, 4:319.

Bavinck posits that Christians should not leave their churches based on imperfect doctrines “as long as it does not prevent us from being faithful to our confession and does not force us, even indirectly, to obey humans more than God.”<sup>233</sup> For Bavinck, there is some gradation in the severity of wrong doctrine, and this should be considered when separation from a church is to happen, and the church that denies the authority of God’s word “would, at that very moment and to the extent it did that, reveal itself to the conscience of its members as a false church,<sup>234</sup> providing a basis for separation from the church.

#### **4.8. Diversity in Unity**

According to Bavinck, God intended diversity to co-exist with unity. He alleges that diversity became a tool of division in the church due to the manipulation of sin.<sup>235</sup> Although sin has corrupted the diversity that God embraced at the beginning, He can harness “all these differences into his service and adorns his church with them.”<sup>236</sup> Citing the case of the tower of Babel, Bavinck opines that God can bring something good from the splits in the church occasioned by sin just as he brought people from different languages to himself after the language confusion at the tower of Babel. He insists that in oneness, “the Spirit does not undo the diversity that exists among believers but rather maintains and confirms it.”<sup>237</sup> His position is that having one Lord, one baptism, one God and Father of all, (Eph. 4:4-6) does not preclude different natural and spiritual gifts in the church.

#### **4.9. Organic and Structural Unity**

As mentioned earlier, Bavinck’s ecclesiology seems to emphasize the organic unity of the church (founded by Christ), more than the structural unity instituted by humans. He acknowledges that although the unity of the church is primarily spiritual, it “nevertheless exists objectively and really, and it does not remain completely invisible. It manifests itself outwardly—albeit in a very imperfect way.”<sup>238</sup> This tendency of the church to focus on its imperfection may cause it to neglect

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<sup>233</sup> Bavinck, Bolt, and Vriend, 4:319.

<sup>234</sup> Bavinck, 4:319.

<sup>235</sup> Bavinck, Bolt, and Vriend, 4:318.

<sup>236</sup> Bavinck, 4:318.

<sup>237</sup> Bavinck, 4:299.

<sup>238</sup> Bavinck, 4:321.

the unity existing. Bavinck cautions against this stance because “that which unites all true Christians is always more than that which separates them.”<sup>239</sup> This perspective offers a multifaceted concept of unity, encouraging the church to explore practical ways to express and strengthen this unity, even though it will be imperfect. This means that though imperfect, structural unity should not be discouraged in the church, but rather perceived as the visible manifestation of organic unity. Nevertheless, the church must remember that “we are obligated to first of all bind ourselves in spiritual bonds of unity.”<sup>240</sup> For Bavinck, the spiritual (organic) unity, achieved through union with Christ is an essential foundation for other forms of unity, such as those achieved through doctrinal agreements and organizational structures. Hence, without a shared spiritual experience in Christ, other forms of unity might be superficial or fragile.

Bavinck attributed unity as a major factor for the rapid growth of the Early Church. Complimenting them, Bavinck maintains they had a strong internal cohesion, despite the absence of an obvious structure, describing their cohesion as a “manifestation that is purer and more glorious than the most wonderful church order.”<sup>241</sup> The unity based on the spiritual relationship between individual churches with Christ may likely produce better results than the one centered around structures. Refuting the argument that unity was easy for the Early Church because they were ‘the same’ and had similar cultures, Bavinck points out their differences, which he suggests are similar to the present-day denominations.<sup>242</sup> Bavinck’s point that unity is achievable even amidst doctrinal and cultural differences is particularly relevant for the body of Christ today, where diversity is a prominent feature in the different denominations. This unity, he claims, “follows directly from the unity of God himself, from the unity of the divine mediator between God and humanity, from the unity of the Spirit, from the unity of truth, from the unity of the covenant and the unity of salvation.”<sup>243</sup> For Bavinck, unity in the body of Christ is spiritual and based on a relationship with the Trinity.

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<sup>239</sup> Bavinck, 4:321.

<sup>240</sup> Bavinck, 4:275.

<sup>241</sup> Herman Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and The Church,” n.d., 226.

<sup>242</sup> Bavinck, 227.

<sup>243</sup> Bavinck, 226.

Bavinck warns that “external unity does have an immediate appeal and seems more attractive,”<sup>244</sup> supporting the Reformation’s refusal of “all false, inauthentic forms of unity.”<sup>245</sup> This further emphasizes the importance of the spiritual unity of the church. Although external unity can give an immediate impression of oneness and tends to show the church of God in a good light, this may not last. On the other hand, organic unity leads to genuine and lasting spiritual bonds, though it may be challenging initially. We can also infer that Bavinck views the Reformation as a positive development for the church - despite creating divisions, it ultimately fostered a more genuine unity based on spiritual conviction.

The failure of the church to achieve unity through force or coercion in the past is evidence that true unity can only be achieved by the power of Christ.<sup>246</sup> Bavinck notes that although Jesus prayed for the unity of the church, his prayer “excludes all violent and artificial attempts to introduce and his prayer is the guarantee that it already exists in him and that in due time, accomplished by him, it will also be manifest in all believers.”<sup>247</sup> The core of Bavinck's argument is that true unity already exists in Christ himself. This further underscores his claim that organic unity stems from a shared relationship with Christ, not external efforts. It also confirms that unity as an attribute is not a state already achieved, but one to be pursued through union with Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

#### **4.10. Catholicity and Unity**

Bavinck lists catholicity as the third attribute of the church,<sup>248</sup> linking it closely to the unity of the church. While giving his famous address on ‘The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church’ at the Kampen Theological School in 1888, Bavinck alludes that “the catholicity of the church and the universalism of Christianity is of the greatest significance in our time, which is so rife with errors and schisms.”<sup>249</sup> Bavinck suggests that pursuing catholicity as an attribute of the church will help to promote unity, the first attribute of the church. During his address, he stated that catholicity had three meanings to the Church fathers: “First, about the church as a unified whole, secondly, in expressing the unity of the church as inclusive of all believers from every nation, in all times and

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<sup>244</sup> Bavinck, 250.

<sup>245</sup> Bavinck, 250.

<sup>246</sup> Bavinck, Bolt, and Vriend, 4:316.

<sup>247</sup> Bavinck, 4:317.

<sup>248</sup> Bavinck, Bolt, And Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:322.

<sup>249</sup> Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 222.

places, and lastly because it embraces the whole of human experience.”<sup>250</sup> A catholic church advances unity as it acknowledges believers no matter their origin, sect, or denomination, thus discouraging exclusivism. Opposing the earlier position of Rome, Bavinck alludes that the catholicity of the church “means the universal church, which embraces all true believers and is manifest in varying degrees of purity in various churches”.<sup>251</sup> By recognizing that this universal church is manifested ‘in varying degrees of purity in various churches,’ Bavinck suggests that no single denomination perfectly expresses the church. Thus, the catholicity of the church includes every believer, irrespective of geographical location, denomination, or confession

#### 4.11 Discussion on Bavinck’s Ideas

Eglinton, a Western reformed theologian comments that Bavinck’s ecclesiology on the visible church is important as it locates a living element (organicism) within the visible church.”<sup>252</sup> He points out that “identifying that the church’s spiritual vibrancy is not exclusive to its invisible aspect is for Bavinck, a point of considerable significance. Through the creative power of the Holy Spirit, there exists a church on earth that is teeming with spiritual life.”<sup>253</sup> Here, Eglinton draws attention to Bavinck's belief that the influence of the Holy Spirit is not confined to the invisible church alone, but also the visible church. He moves on to commend Bavinck’s healthy perspective in identifying the institution of the church as one that lacks institutional bureaucracy and nurtures Christians who are passionate about their positions and belonging in the visible and invisible church.<sup>254</sup>

Concerning division in the church, Van Wyk, a Reformed theologian criticizes Bavinck’s position as weak, stating that “the providence of God does not function as an escape to sanction sin, but as a comfort in times of trouble, and as an inspiration for responsible action.”<sup>255</sup> For Van Wyk, it is unacceptable to excuse division as the will of God, because we know God “wants his church(es) to live in unity and harmony.”<sup>256</sup> If division is a sin, does it mean that every denomination that

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<sup>250</sup> Bavinck, 220–21.

<sup>251</sup> Bavinck, Bolt, and Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:323.

<sup>252</sup> James P Eglinton, “Some Benefits of Going Organic,” *Theology in Scotland* 17, no. 1 (2010): 30, <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/TIS/article/view/5>.

<sup>253</sup> Eglinton, 31.

<sup>254</sup> Eglinton, 32–33.

<sup>255</sup> Van Wyk (Amie) J.H, “May Christ Be Divided?” in *The Unity of the Church: A Theological State of the Art and Beyond*, vol. 18 ed. Borcht Van (Boston, 2010), 63.

<sup>256</sup> Van Wyk, 63.



resulted from a breakaway was formed in sin or are there legitimate reasons for division or separation in the church today? Van Wyk further contends against Bavinck's claim that division may have positive effects arguing that it is a "rationalistic escape to justify the disunity of the church, in contrast with New Testament teaching."<sup>257</sup> He alludes that Bavinck's stance could encourage continuous division in the church. In his conclusion on this argument, Van Wyk also attempts to maintain a balance by acknowledging that although the church can't ignore heresy, it must also remember Christ's victory over evil through the Holy Spirit,<sup>258</sup> suggesting that church division can be prevented through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Kamphuis, another Western reformed theologian also insists that Bavinck's stance against division in the church would be more effective if he presented a better understanding of the visible unity of the church.<sup>259</sup> He judges Bavinck's tendency to evade how the spiritual unity of the church can be practicalized.<sup>260</sup> Kamphuis has a point, as Bavinck's ecclesiology seems to express a tension between unity and division, and organic versus visible unity, making the practicality challenging in the real world. Despite his criticism, Kamphuis submits that Bavinck's famous address on the catholicity of the church has the potential to contribute to church ecclesiology<sup>261</sup> especially because of Bavinck's conviction that "God in Christ is in the midst of our reality."<sup>262</sup> He argues that Bavinck's emphasis on God's desire to save everyone through the cross of Christ is crucial in a globalized and multicultural society.

#### **4.12 Conclusion**

This chapter explores how the ecclesiology of Bavinck, a Western theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century may be relevant to the Nigerian church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, focusing on aspects that have the potential to answer the question of denominationalism and the church's unity. Bavinck's ecclesiology emphasizes Christ as the head and founder of the church and argues that the church is not an outcome of human structures or creeds, but a gathering of believers united by their faith in Christ. This stance necessitates that the church takes its direction for unity from Christ who is

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<sup>257</sup> Van Wyk, "May Christ Be Divided" 61.

<sup>258</sup> Van Wyk, 62.

<sup>259</sup> Kamphuis, "Herman Bavinck on Catholicity," 103.

<sup>260</sup> Kamphuis, 103.

<sup>261</sup> Kamphuis, "Herman Bavinck on Catholicity," 103.

<sup>262</sup> Kamphuis, 104.

the foundation of the church unity. He provides a balanced view of the church by emphasizing the need for organic unity of the church to have a visible manifestation. This becomes particularly relevant in the Nigerian context, where a lot of emphasis might have been placed on the visible expressions of unity among different denominations.

Furthermore, Bavinck acknowledges the challenge of answering the questions around division and unity in the church and suggests more focus on unity based on core scriptural beliefs. This position accommodates diversity on less central matters. By highlighting the need for an inclusive community of believers, he challenges exclusivist tendencies that can fuel denominational divisions. This approach can foster mutual respect between denominations and strengthen unity efforts among them.

Bavinck's ideas about ecclesiology are complex and sometimes contradictory. While he identifies sin as the cause of division in the church, he recognizes that division is possible in extreme circumstances. As a secessionist, he promotes a universal and inclusive church, although he does not provide a clear path toward visible unity. Despite the weakness of Bavinck's ecclesiology, he constantly focuses on Jesus as the foundation and center of the church. He also acknowledges the limitation and imperfection of human knowledge and is open to opposing theological perspectives making his theology relevant to the contemporary church.

Thus, in the following chapter, I will engage African ecclesiologies, the concept of Ubuntu, and Bavinck's ecclesiology concerning the unity of the church in a conversation. I will also consider the possible usefulness of Bavinck's ecclesiology for the Nigerian Baptist Convention, looking at the possible fresh perspective conversation between Bavinck's perspective on denominationalism and what the Nigerian Baptist Denomination can learn from Herman Bavinck's Ecclesiology.

## CHAPTER 5

### 5.0. LESSONS FROM HERMAN BAVINCK'S ECCLESIOLOGY FOR NIGERIAN CHURCHES

#### 5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will answer the main question of the research and sub-question four namely:

- What can the Nigerian Baptist Denomination learn from Herman Bavinck's Ecclesiology for dealing with the question of denominationalism and unity of the church?
- What fresh perspectives does Bavinck's ecclesiology pose to the ecclesiology and practice of the Nigerian Baptist churches?

To answer these questions, I will first describe and analyze the denominational dividedness of the Nigerian Church and how this has affected the church's unity in Nigeria. I will then engage in an intercultural conversation on the research topic using the BBBE model. I have selected some themes to streamline the conversation on topics that will answer the questions above. The conversation will identify similarities and differences between the different contexts. This discussion acknowledges that no denomination or ecclesiology is perfect, but conversations can provide insights and better understanding. The conversation will include Formal theology (African voices and Western voice of Bavinck, interviews (formal and espoused theology), and the Scripture/confessions (normative theology) as the final authority on all issues. During the conversation, I will identify lessons that can be learned and explore fresh perspectives of Bavinck's ecclesiology concerning the ecclesiology and practice of the Nigerian Baptist churches. Lastly, I will conclude the chapter based on all the sections discussed.

#### 5.2. Believing

In this section, I will be using the believing aspect of the BBBE model paying attention to the origin of the church, the unity of the church, and the catholicity of the church. I listen to the espoused voices through the responses of Nigerian Baptist Convention members in the empirical

research and the NBC policy and constitutional documents, the formal voices of Bavinck, the theologian, and the pastor, and the normative voice of the bible.

### 5.2.1. Believing in the definition and origin of the church

I will focus on the espoused voice of NBC (as in its documents and policies) and the formal voice of Bavinck in this sub-section. According to the NBC constitution and regulation, “Church: Shall be understood to mean a group of baptized believers in Christ who have covenanted to worship, to fellowship, to teach and evangelize, and organized in a place and co-operating with the Nigerian Baptist Convention with the sole aim of propagating the gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>263</sup> In its Statement of Faith, NBC also mentions that “the conditions of salvation as revealed in the New Testament is repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.”<sup>264</sup> This definition emphasizes the belief in Jesus Christ as a condition to become a believer while emphasizing baptism as important for membership of the NBC. For NBC, becoming a believer is by election and this election is “God’s eternal choice of persons”<sup>265</sup> based on his mercy and not the merit of any man. Concerning the origin and headship of the church, the NBC recognizes Jesus Christ as the “Son of God, Saviour, and the Head of His Church.”<sup>266</sup> It also believes that Jesus Christ is “the only authority for faith and practice whose life and will is revealed in Holy Scriptures,”<sup>267</sup> and states in its article of faith that its faith is rooted in Christ Jesus and not the confession of creeds and “the Scriptures are the only sufficient, certain and authoritative rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience.”<sup>268</sup> This affirms Christ as the founder and Head of the church and highlights the centrality of Christ and the sufficiency of Scripture in guiding the church’s faith and practice.

For Bavinck, the church is the gathering of Christ-believers,<sup>269</sup> emphasizing belief in Christ as central to the identity of the church. Bavinck takes a reformed position on the concept of election

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<sup>263</sup> Nigerian Baptist Convention, “*Constitution and regulations of the Nigerian Baptist Convention*” (Nigerian Baptist Convention, 2022), 1, <https://www.nigerianbaptist.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Nigerian-Baptist-Constitution-Constitution1.pdf>.

<sup>264</sup> NBC, “*NBC Statement of Faith*,” 1, accessed January 13, 2024, <https://www.nigerianbaptist.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/NBC-Statement-of-Faith.pdf>.

<sup>265</sup> NBC, “*Beliefs Policies and Practice of The Nigerian Baptist Convention*” (Nigerian Baptist Convention, 2022), 5, <https://www.nigerianbaptist.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/NBC-Policies-and-Practices.pdf>.

<sup>266</sup> “Constitution and regulations of the Nigerian Baptist Convention,” 2.

<sup>267</sup> NBC, “*NBC Statement of Faith*,” 1.

<sup>268</sup> NBC, “*Beliefs Policies and Practice of The Nigerian Baptist Convention*,” 4.

<sup>269</sup> Bavinck, 4:280.

and proposes that “The church is the elect people of God,”<sup>270</sup> chosen based on God’s mercy and not on the works or merit. Not dismissing the creeds and structures, He argues that the true Christian church was not built on structures or confessions,<sup>271</sup> but on Jesus Christ Himself, emphasizing the relationship between believers and Christ as central to the church’s existence. Concerning the church’s foundation, Bavinck proposes that Jesus Christ “is the only Mediator, the Prophet, Priest, King, the Head of the Church.”<sup>272</sup> He also contends that the Scripture is the only standard and final authority of the church,<sup>273</sup> highlighting the need for the church to be ruled by instructions written in the Scripture.

The Nigerian Baptist Convention and Bavinck share some core beliefs about the church but also have some key distinctions (that will be explained later in this chapter). Both emphasize Jesus Christ as the founder and head of the church and view faith in Christ as central to church membership. In addition, they both contend that the Scripture is the sole authority for faith and practice and believe that God plays an active role in calling and assembling believers within His church. The normative voice in Romans 8:30, Ephesians 2:8-10, Acts 2:38, and Acts 16:31 confirms that although believers are saved by God’s election, they can only belong to the body of Christ by repenting and believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. Matthew 16:18 also confirms Jesus as the foundation and owner of the church while 2 Tim. 3:16 states that “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” This acknowledges God as the source of the Scripture and confers inherent authority on the Scripture.

### **5.2.2. Believing In the Unity of The Church**

As indicated in section 2.4.3.4, in the empirical research, the theologian, pastor and members of NBC all believe unity among Churches is the will of God.<sup>274</sup> The church’s unity is also perceived as important to reach the unbelievers. Unity however means different things, like organizing crusades together, pulpit exchange, and attending programs organized by the CAN.<sup>275</sup> The formal

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<sup>270</sup> Bavinck, 4:279.

<sup>271</sup> Bavinck, Bolt, and Vriend, 4:280.

<sup>272</sup> NBC, “*Beliefs Policies and Practice of The Nigerian Baptist Convention*,” 5.

<sup>273</sup> Bavinck, Bolt, and Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:311.

<sup>274</sup> See section 2.4.3.4.

<sup>275</sup> See sections 2.4.3.4. & 2.4.5.3.

voice of NBC, through its website, expressed the desire to collaborate with other Christian bodies as part of its mission strategies. It has demonstrated this by participating in CAN's activities. The CAN was established in response to Jesus' prayer in John 17:21, that 'they may be one.' The association, however, emphasizes structural unity in its membership and activities.

The African model and Bavinck's ecclesiology share a fundamental vision of the church as one united body. The historical voice of Bavinck is that true unity already exists in Christ himself. The core of Bavinck's argument is that organic unity stems from a shared relationship with Christ, not external efforts. He references the early church as a model for how organic unity can lead to flourishing growth within the Christian community and challenges the overemphasis on structures. Nevertheless, Bavinck acknowledges the importance of structural unity, which manifests in the visible church.<sup>276</sup> Bavinck also emphasizes that Christ's prayer for unity does not advocate for forceful or artificial methods to achieve it. On the other hand, the African model and the Ubuntu philosophy approach unity from the socio-cultural context of Africa, emphasizing the relationship between families and communities as a model for church unity. The family and community model leans heavily on structural unity considering that families and communities are established structures in the African context, and the connections emerge by blood connection or communal relationships. Bavinck however argues that the members of Christ's church are also brothers and sisters, bound together by a blood tie that "is completely pure, unmixed with other things, and free from earthly attachments."<sup>277</sup> This remark infers that the blood of Christ is stronger and superior to the tribal blood ties.

Although the espoused voice from the research context, the African model, and Bavinck agree on the need for unity between different denominations in the body of Christ, they diverge in their definition of unity and their understanding of the pathways to achieving unity. The espoused voice and the formal voice of the African model lay more emphasis on structural unity while Bavinck approaches the church's unity from a spiritual perspective by emphasizing the organic unity of the church, with Christ as the head and the church as the body of Christ. He acknowledges that organic unity will become visible over time, suggesting that structural unity is possible though imperfectly

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<sup>276</sup> Bavinck, Herman. John Bolt, and John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2003), 321.

<sup>277</sup> Bavinck, Bolt, and Vriend, 4:300.

expressed. Bavinck's view aligns with the normative voice expressed in Jesus' prayer in John 17 where Jesus expressed his desire for the believers to be one "in Us," emphasizing organic unity on a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The Baptist members (espoused voice), the theologian (formal voice), and Bavinck (formal Voice) also agree that the church's unity is perceived as important in reaching unbelievers with the message of salvation. This agrees with the scripture (normative voice) expressed in John 17 where we can infer that Jesus considered unity an important key in soul winning when he said in John 17:22 "that the world may believe that You sent Me."

Church denominations in Nigeria should be conscious that they are first united because they have a relationship with Christ and have accepted him as the head of the Church. This unity existed before the denominations which are different parts of the whole (Christ) and must remain connected to Him to carry out their assignments. Structural unity thus becomes evidence of existing organic unity. Nevertheless, denominations should not be forced directly or indirectly to participate in activities that project structural unity. This research acknowledges the benefits of structural unity particularly in a country like Nigeria with a complex religious landscape, where bodies like CAN provide a unified voice for Nigerian Christians on national issues, advocating for their interests and addressing challenges like religious violence.

### **5.2.3. Believing in the catholicity of the church**

The espoused voice of members of NBC expressed they believe true believers do not only exist in the Baptist denomination but in other denominations who believe and practice the word of God. Membership into the denomination is not based on colour, race, or continent of origin. The NBC constitution also states that it is willing "to confer with and to co-operate with other Christian churches and organizations,"<sup>278</sup> acknowledging true believers exist outside the Baptist denomination. In its statement of faith, NBC states that "A living faith exercises a growing understanding of truth and must be continually interpreted and related to the needs of each generation. No Statement of Faith can be regarded as complete, without error."<sup>279</sup> The historical voice of Bavinck opposes the earlier position of Rome as he alludes that the catholicity of the

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<sup>278</sup> "Constitution and regulations of the Nigerian Baptist Convention," 4.

<sup>279</sup> NBC, "NBC Statement of Faith," 1.

church “means the universal church, which embraces all true believers and is manifest in varying degrees of purity in various churches.”<sup>280</sup> By recognizing that this universal church is manifested ‘in varying degrees of purity in various churches,’ Bavinck suggests that no single denomination perfectly expresses the church. Both NBC and Bavinck agree that a catholic church advances unity as it acknowledges believers no matter their origin, sect, or denomination, thus discouraging exclusivism. They also converge to recognize that imperfections exist within denominations, including their own. This conversation opens doors for interdenominational dialogue as the body of Christ strives toward perfection.

### **5.3. Belonging**

In this section, I will be using the belonging aspect of the BBBE model paying attention to belonging to a denomination (reasons for joining or remaining in a denomination) as well as division and diversity among denominations. I listen to the espoused voices through the responses of NBC members in the empirical research and the NBC policy and constitutional documents, the formal voices of Bavinck, the theologian, the pastor, and the normative voice of the bible.

#### **5.3.1. Belonging To a Denomination**

Although respondents joined the Baptist denomination for different reasons, the sound teaching of the word is a common reason for remaining in the denomination. Respondents four and five (members) disclosed that they joined the Baptist church because they were born into the denomination.<sup>281</sup> From the formal voice of Respondents 1 and 2 (a theologian and Pastor) they joined the denomination because the teaching practices of the Baptist denomination conform with the word of God.<sup>282</sup> Denominational ties seem to weaken as we come from the leadership to the members. There is also some flexibility in changing denominations, especially among the members. African theologians have proposed that for most Africans, all denominations serve one God, and their membership is mostly not tied to denominational convictions as many of them are not even aware of the history behind their denominations. Exposure to theological education may

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<sup>280</sup> Bavinck, Bolt, and Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:323.

<sup>281</sup> See section 2.4.3.1.

<sup>282</sup> See section 2.4.3.1.



have contributed to the denominational ties and commitment expressed by the theologian and the pastor.

Considering Bavinck's ecclesiology, it may be difficult to identify his position as on one hand he vigorously defended the reformed position on many issues, while he was a secessionist at the same time. He however argues that Christians should not change denominations except in extreme circumstances where one is being forced to disobey the word of God.<sup>283</sup> Bavinck's emphasis on denominational commitment reflects his position on the organic nature of the visible church. Nevertheless, his position suggests that belonging to Christ and faithfulness to Scripture is more important than belonging to a denomination.

One of the respondents (the theologian) also shares a similar position with Bavinck when he suggested that commitment to a denomination is a sign of maturity. As a living organism, the visible church is a place where growth and maturity occur within the members of the church community. This commitment will also contribute to the church's growth as the body of Christ.

## **5.4. Behaving**

In this section, I will be using the behaving aspect of the BBBE model paying attention to behaving towards members of other denominations, behaving towards division, and behaving towards diversity between different denominations. I listen to the espoused voices through the responses of NBC members in the empirical research and the NBC policy and constitutional documents, the formal voices of Bavinck, the theologian, the pastor, and the normative voice of the bible.

### **5.4.1. Behaving Towards Members of Other Denominations**

The espoused and formal voices of the respondents (members, the theologian, and the pastor) indicate they all have a good relationship with members of other denominations.<sup>284</sup> This is because they believe they are all Christians. For the members, all Christians are one. A member expressed a preference to worship only in a Baptist church because of the similarity in worship styles and

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<sup>283</sup> See section 4.7.

<sup>284</sup> See section 2.4.5.3.

practices. This is not surprising as the church covenant of NBC beliefs, policies and practices demands that members unite with another Baptist Church as soon as possible when they relocate.

The formal voice of the theologian pointed to partnerships with denominations with doctrines that align with the Bible. The pastor also mentioned the Bible as a yardstick for his relationship with members of other denominations, again stressing the role of the Scripture in shaping relationships with other denominations. There was however some undertone of superiority as expressed by the convention leader, as newer generations are perceived as less focused on mission and are held responsible for the failure of the church to be united.

Considering the historical voice of African theologians, they also point out that mainline denominations such as the Baptist viewed the dynamism of the newer generation churches as a deviation from authentic Christianity, further confirming the perspective of the theologian respondent. Concerns also exist about the tendency for tribalism and exclusivism in the Ubuntu philosophy. The African family model and the ubuntu philosophy can manifest in the preferential relationships between members of the same church denomination undermining the broader goal of unity between different denominations.

Bavinck in his theology warns denominations to avoid the perception that they have exclusive ownership of the true gospel. He cautions that “this kind of Church will wither and die like a branch severed from its vine.”<sup>285</sup> Furthermore, according to Bavinck, anyone who has had a genuine experience of Christ’s love of Christ will be able to “accept other like-minded believers, not just because Christ desires it, but because they are part of one body, and can only function when they are connected to the head and each other.”<sup>286</sup> This stance challenges the problem of exclusivism and the perspective that a church denomination sees itself as the only perfect Church. This falsehood of exclusivism is not new as it was one of the matters Paul had to contend with in the early Church. Referring to Ephesians 3:6, Bavinck points out that it is a mystery of God that “the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Herman Bavinck, “*The catholicity of Christianity and the church*,” n.d., 251.

<sup>286</sup> Bavinck, “*The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church*,” 227.

<sup>287</sup> Bavinck, “*The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church*,” 225.

### 5.4.2. Behaving towards division

As indicated in section 2.4.3.2., the members, the theologian, and the pastor all view division as harmful to the church. The members expressed that division hinders the propagation of the gospel. The Convention leader mentioned that division as a reaction to unscriptural practices is good as it ensures the authority of God’s word. He further suggested that “assets, pride, individuality”<sup>288</sup> are major causes of disunity in the body of Christ today. The church pastor also mentioned that the sensationalism of newer churches and the pursuit of personal gain are causes of disunity in the church.<sup>289</sup>

The historical voice of Bavinck warns that divisions may “harm unity, deprive believers of grace, and lead to spiritual arrogance and mockery.”<sup>290</sup> He also expressed concern about the “numerous and insignificant”<sup>291</sup> reasons for division in the church. For Bavinck, division is a sin, and obedience to Christ and His teachings should define the boundaries of unity.<sup>292</sup> Bavinck and the theologian seem to align on the necessity to uphold God’s instruction as stated in the Scripture above any unity effort. Church leaders (and members) must be conscious of the impact of division not only on Christians but also on the community of unbelievers who are observing the Church intently. The principle of the Bible as the final authority as upheld by Bavinck and NBC can also be extended to unity efforts between denominations.

### 5.4.3. Behaving towards diversity

A church member and the pastor said “Having many denominations is a blessing”<sup>293</sup> because it allows the church to reach more people and offers options for worship styles. From their perspective, the diversity existing in different denominations should not be viewed as disunity.

Recognizing that diversity can exist within the Christian community, Bavinck suggests focus on distinguishing between minor differences and fundamental issues that threaten core Christian

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<sup>288</sup> Respondent 1, (Nigerian Baptist Convention leader)

<sup>289</sup> See section 2.4.3.2.

<sup>290</sup> Herman Bavinck, “*The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church*,” n.d., 247–48.

<sup>291</sup> Bavinck, 247–48.

<sup>292</sup> Bavinck, Bolt, and Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:319.

<sup>293</sup> Respondent 6, (Baptist Pastor)

beliefs. Organic unity might be possible while maintaining diversity on non-essential matters. For Bavinck, diversity is a gift from God and the church can be united in its core beliefs and purpose while embracing diverse expressions of faith as long as it does not mean disobedience to God. Bavinck insists that “resisting those who preach heresy is a sacred calling and not just the duty of the church to emphasize the importance of spiritual unity further.”<sup>294</sup> Paul warned the early Church in Acts 20:29-31 to watch out for “grievous wolves” who would find their way into the Church. Thus, diversity in the body of Christ must exist within the boundaries of spiritual unity.

## **5.5. Experiencing**

In the section below, I will be using the experiencing aspect of the BBBE model paying attention to denominational experience and experiencing God in a denomination. I listen to the espoused voices through the responses of Nigerian Baptist Convention members in the empirical research, the formal voices of Bavinck, African theologians, and respondents (the theologian, and the pastor).

### **Denominational Experience**

The personal experience of the respondents seems to play a more important role in their relationship with God than their denominational experience. This is particularly true for the members, who mentioned personal reasons for remaining in the denomination. The strong structure of NBC is also important for its members. The historical voice of the African model prioritizes lived experience and practices within the family and the community. Bavinck’s historical voice, on the other hand, takes a more theoretical approach, emphasizing a sound theological perspective. This conversation presents an opportunity for mutual enrichment. Bavinck’s ecclesiology based on sound theology can provide a strong foundation for the African model, ensuring its expressions of faith remain grounded in core Christian beliefs. The strong structure of the NBC can provide a stable foundation for theological education and sound doctrinal teaching. This is important in shaping an African ecclesiology that addresses unity among church denominations.

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<sup>294</sup> Bavinck, Herman. “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” n.d., 227.

## 5.6. Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I have utilized the BBBE model to facilitate a theological dialogue between NBC (through the espoused voice of its members, denominational documents, and the formal voice of a theologian and a pastor), the formal voice of Herman Bavinck's ecclesiology, and the normative voice of Scriptures. The conversation identified how these voices converge and diverge on the subject of denominationalism and the unity of the church in Nigeria. It also highlighted fresh perspectives for NBC from Herman Bavinck's theology on the subject matter especially the need to focus on the spiritual unity of the church.

Bavinck's emphasis on the church and its members' relationship with Christ as the foundation for unity between denominations is pivotal to all unity pursuits. This organic unity challenges the overemphasis on organizational and structural unity as it recognizes Christ as the head of the church. Nigerian Churches including the Baptist denomination should not deter from their efforts to promote structural unity through their participation in the activities of bodies such as the Christian Association of Nigeria, because structural unity can offer practical benefits, especially in a complex religious landscape like Nigeria. It can also enhance church governance and mission activities in the country.

Bavinck's critique of exclusivism within denominations underscores the need for a more inclusive and humble approach. Denominational unity should be extended across the different church generations in Nigeria. Bavinck also highlights the importance of resisting false teachings while pursuing unity, insisting that safeguarding the truth of God's word is paramount, even when striving for unity. This perspective can bridge the gap that the ubuntu philosophy can create by its tendency to sacrifice the truth for the group's unity. The Church in Nigeria should distinguish between minor doctrinal differences and fundamental issues that threaten the core Christian beliefs, using the Bible as the final authority on all matters.

In conclusion, although from a different context, Bavinck's ecclesiology can guide the Nigerian Baptist Convention and other denominations in Nigeria on how to promote the church's unity.

## CHAPTER SIX

### RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

#### 6.0. Introduction

In this final chapter, I integrate the findings from the preceding chapters, focusing specifically on Herman Bavinck's contributions to the ecclesiology of the Nigerian Baptist Church. This chapter will outline specific ways Bavinck's ecclesiology can inform and transform the practices and perspectives of the Nigerian Baptist Church, to foster greater unity. It will also reflect on the entire study and conclude the thesis.

#### 6.1. Recommendation for the NBC from Bavinck's Ecclesiology

**6.1.1. Emphasis On Spiritual Unity:** Bavinck's ecclesiology asserts that the church's unity is rooted in its relationship with Christ as its head. This perspective is important for the Nigerian Baptist Church, at the leadership and membership level. The research revealed structural unity as the reference point for unity in NBC. The denomination should emphasize and demonstrate a Christ-centred unity and ensure it is the starting point of its unity effort. It should also clearly convey the vision of Christ-centered unity to the entire denomination, through various channels such as the statement of faith and regular teachings. This should not deter it from participating in activities that promote structural unity as Bavinck asserts that spiritual unity will over time manifest visibly.

**6.1.2. Model of Humility and Inclusiveness:** Although NBC agrees with Bavinck's recognition that no single denomination fully embodies the perfect church, this belief should translate to practice. As one of the established mainline denominations in the country, NBC can set an example for other denominations by demonstrating humility and a genuine commitment to inclusivity. For example, the denomination can model inclusiveness through more open practices surrounding baptism and the Lord's Supper. NBC could revise its policies to recognize the baptisms conducted in other Christian denominations, thereby validating diverse Christian expressions. Similarly, the Lord's Supper could be offered as an open table to all professing believers, regardless of the

denominational background. By recognizing the contributions of other denominations, NBC can inspire and empower newer denominations (and older ones) to pursue similar paths.

**6.1.3. Uphold The Truth of God’s Word:** Although the NBC has a well-documented Statement of Faith, committing to a foundational Christian creed, such as the Nicene or Apostles’ Creed can prevent heresy and ensure doctrinal integrity. Creeds were written to address heresy and reaffirm the unity of believers by strengthening traditional beliefs rooted in Scripture. NBC can mandate its church leaders to commit to a creed for all ministerial assignments. This would reaffirm the denomination's commitment to shared core Christian beliefs and guide leaders to avoid and discern theological errors that may arise within the church community.

Another practical way to uphold the truth of God’s word is to resist heresy. Bavinck’s ecclesiology demands the church to uphold the truth and resist heresy. For Bavinck, unity must exist within the boundaries of God’s word. Because CAN places more emphasis on structural unity, it risks compromising the truth of God’s word to keep its membership. As an active member of CAN, NBC must remain faithful to the Bible and lead in equipping associations like CAN, to discern between legitimate theological differences and harmful heresies. NBC should influence CAN to articulate and communicate its core biblical beliefs clearly. This will provide a solid foundation for discerning heresy, demonstrate a commitment to God’s Word, and ultimately support the propagation of the true gospel of salvation in Nigeria.

**6.1.4. Integration of Theology and Practice:** The denomination should consider periodic evaluations to assess its alignment with the goal of Christ-centered unity. This should involve the evaluation of the operant, formal, and espoused voice with the normative voice of the scriptures. This exercise will expose gaps between theology and practice, providing opportunities for growth in the denomination as the gaps are addressed. In line with Bavinck’s inclusive ecclesiology, the Nigerian Baptist Church should ensure its written policies and practices welcome believers from different backgrounds and denominations. This could involve revising membership policies to be more inclusive to ensure church activities are open to all Christians, not just Baptists. The denomination can demonstrate that salvation is faith in Jesus by formally accepting non-baptized believers (or believers not baptized by immersion) into the church membership.

**6.1.5. Promote Sound Theological Education:** NBC aligns with Bavinck that the scripture is the final authority on all issues. With established theological educational institutions, the NBC should ensure its belief translates to practice. Theological illiteracy can lead to heresy, doctrinal errors, and divisions. By providing sound theological education, NBC can equip theologians with knowledge based on sound biblical doctrines. Sound theological education will help avoid heresy among pastors trained at the Nigerian Baptist Seminary. This platform can adequately equip future church leaders and theologians by remaining true to the word of God. Its education should also underscore the importance of spiritual unity in the body of Christ and equip its audience to engage with believers from different denominations based on scriptural principles.

**6.1.6. Allow Time for the Manifestation of Structural Unity:** The newer generations are seen to be responsible for the disunity in the church because of their dynamic and more contemporary worship styles and hesitation to identify with bodies like the CAN. Bavinck argues that structural unity should not be enforced. NBC as one of the foundational members should be patient with churches that exclude themselves from activities that promote structural unity by adopting Bavinck's perspective that the manifestation of unity takes time.

**6.1.7. Contribute to Meaningful African Ecclesiological Discourse:** Bavinck's Christocentric ecclesiology with emphasis on the church's spiritual unity offers a framework for fostering greater unity and inclusiveness. Theologians in the NBC and Nigeria should contribute to African ecclesiology by providing contributions from the Nigerian context.

## **6. 2. Evaluation of Thesis and Conclusion**

This study has contributed to the theological discourse on denominationalism and the unity of the church in Nigeria. Its relevance lies in its intercultural theological dialogue, identifying factors influencing denominationalism and offering fresh perspectives from Bavinck's ecclesiology to the Nigerian Baptist denomination and beyond.

The empirical component is valuable but focusing on the NBC has narrowed the scope of the research, potentially overlooking other influential voices and denominations that could offer additional insights into the issue of denominationalism and church unity in Nigeria. This limitation opens the avenue for further research. Future research that includes other denominations



particularly newer ones in Nigeria would provide a more comprehensive picture. Additionally, investigating the impact of socio-economic factors and global theological trends on Nigerian denominations could offer deeper insights into the evolving motivations for the many denominations in the country. Further studies can also explore how African ecclesiological perspectives, particularly those emerging from Nigerian contexts, can contribute to and challenge global theological discussions.

## APPENDIX

### Appendix 1 - Interview Questions

#### INTRODUCTION

1. What is your name?
2. Which Church denomination Do You Belong To?
3. How long have you belonged to your denomination?
4. What is your position in the denomination?

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT BELIEVING

1. What were the reasons for you to join your denomination?
2. What might be the reasons that there is a growing number of Christian denominations in Nigeria? What is your opinion about this?
3. What do you think about the multiplication of different denominations in the Nigerian Churches?
4. What do you think about the importance of unity of the church?
5. How do you see the relationship between fulfilling the calling of the church and the unity of the church?
6. Are there possible advantages and disadvantages of many denominations in Nigeria?

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT BELONGING

1. How important is it for you to belong to this specific denomination?
2. Is there a relationship between the denomination you belong to and your relationship with God? In other words, how does your belonging to your denomination influence your relationship with God?
3. Is there a relationship between the denomination you belong to and your relationship with other Christians/ Church members?

## QUESTIONS ABOUT BEHAVING

1. How are new denominations formed?
2. Which activities are employed to attract new members?
3. Which activities are employed to keep members involved?
4. Which activities – according to your knowledge - are employed to stimulate unity among churches?
5. Is your relationship with Christians from other denominations different? Why?
6. Does your denomination have a relationship with other denominations? Explain

## QUESTIONS ABOUT EXPERIENCING

1. What experiences have made you remain in this denomination?
2. Why do you think people leave a Church/ denomination for another one in Nigeria?
3. What has been your experience relating to Christians from other denominations?

## FOR MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH

1. What does a change in denomination (joining or leaving a denomination) mean for your faith?
2. How do you feel about leaving a denomination/brothers and sisters in the faith
3. Can you explain what disturbs you most in a denomination and makes you leave?
4. How do you feel about entering a new denomination?
5. Can you explain, what attracts you most in a new denomination?

NB – Questions for church founders will be rephrased as:

1. Why did you establish your denomination?
2. What reasons do people give for leaving your church?
3. Why do you think new members join your church?

## Appendix 2 - Interview respondents

Respondent 1: Theologian/Nigerian Baptist Convention Leader.

Respondent 2: Deaconess/ Nigerian Baptist member

Respondents 3, 4 and 5: Nigerian Baptist members

Respondent 6: Nigerian Baptist Pastor

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