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PART III

COUNTERFEIT CHRISTIANITY AND THE CAPTIVITY OF THE CHURCH

CHAPTER 17

Ecumenism, Interfaith Religion, Universalism, and Unity Without Truth

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Abstract

This chapter examines the moral and theological ambiguity of religious unity in an age that increasingly treats doctrinal exclusivity as a threat to peace. Building upon the book's preceding analysis of reconstructed theology, another Jesus, progressive hermeneutics, occult syncretism, spiritual spectacle, and apostolic church order, it argues that biblical unity is not manufactured by institutions, diplomatic language, or the concealment of disputed doctrine. It is created by the Holy Spirit among those joined to Jesus Christ through the apostolic gospel, sanctified by God's truth, and ordered toward holiness, love, worship, and mission. Through sustained exposition of [John 14:1-7](#), [John 17:13-23](#), [Acts 4:8-12](#), [2 Corinthians 6:14-18](#), [Ephesians 4:1-16](#), and related passages, the chapter distinguishes Christian fellowship from civic coexistence, theological dialogue from religious synthesis, humanitarian cooperation from joint worship, and visible unity from institutional uniformity. It traces the modern ecumenical movement from missionary cooperation and the 1910 Edinburgh conference through the World Council of Churches, Roman Catholic ecumenical developments, evangelical cooperation, interfaith diplomacy, and contemporary policy-facing religious networks. It presents the strongest arguments for ecumenism, inclusivism, pluralism, and universalism fairly, including the scandal of Christian division, concern for the unevangelised, the universality of divine love, and the moral urgency of peacebuilding. These claims are answered biblically, historically, logically, and pastorally. Particular attention is given to African Christian-Muslim coexistence, traditional religious syncretism, religious liberty, the protection of converts, and the expanding role of interfaith organisations in public policy. The chapter concludes that Christians may serve neighbours of every religion and cooperate for limited common goods without implying shared access to God. In the last second before midnight, the church must repent of both sectarian pride and doctrinal surrender, recover unity in truth, and bear loving witness that reconciliation with the Father is found only in the crucified, risen, and returning Christ.

Keywords: biblical unity; ecumenism; interfaith religion; religious pluralism; inclusivism; universalism; Christian mission; rapture readiness

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When the Table Becomes Larger Than the Host

A table may be enlarged until there appears to be room for everyone. More chairs are brought in. Old quarrels are set aside. Representatives arrive from distant traditions carrying their sacred books, inherited wounds, moral concerns, and hopes for peace. The organisers remove anything likely to offend. The bread is described in language broad enough for every participant. The prayers are shortened until no confession is too particular. The name of Jesus may still be mentioned, but only as one honoured voice in a wider spiritual conversation. At last the gathering seems perfectly inclusive.

Then someone asks a disturbing question: whose table is this?

If the Host may not identify Himself, if His covenant may not define the fellowship, if His sacrifice may not interpret the meal, and if His authority must be suspended so that every religious claim can sit undisturbed, the table has not become more hospitable. It has become ownerless. The chairs are full, but the Lord has been asked to remain outside the room built in His name.

The modern age is deeply suspicious of boundaries. It has seen walls used to protect privilege, churches divided by pride, nations weaponise religion, and communities kill in the name of sacred certainty. These evils are real. Christians must confess the scandal of denominational rivalry, coercion, contempt, cultural arrogance, and the use of doctrine as a covering for ambition. Yet the age often moves from a justified condemnation of hatred to an unjustified condemnation of truth itself. It begins by asking believers not to harm their neighbours and ends by requiring them to deny that their neighbours need conversion. It begins by defending freedom of religion and ends by treating religions as different dialects of one saving reality. It begins by opposing violence and ends by declaring that the confession "Jesus Christ alone is Lord" is morally dangerous.

Chapter 16 examined apostolic church order and asked who may bear governing responsibility within Christ's flock. The question now widens. Church order also concerns the boundaries of fellowship. A congregation is not defined only by who occupies the pulpit. It is defined by the God it worships, the Christ it confesses, the gospel it proclaims, the Scripture it obeys, the sacraments or ordinances it practices, the discipline it exercises, and the hope toward which it lives. A church without boundaries is not necessarily loving. It may simply be unable to say what it is.

The controlling claim of this chapter is that biblical unity is not created by concealing truth, minimising the gospel, or combining incompatible religions. It is created by the Holy Spirit among those united to Jesus Christ through the apostolic gospel, sanctified by God's truth, and called to walk in holiness and love. Christians may cooperate with people of other religions for limited civic, humanitarian, educational, or peacebuilding purposes without pretending that their doctrines, prayers, objects of worship, or paths of salvation are spiritually equivalent. Ecumenism becomes counterfeit when institutional unity, social legitimacy, political influence, funding, peace, or public approval requires the church to silence Christ's exclusive lordship, suppress essential doctrine, participate in syncretistic worship, or offer salvation without repentance and faith.

Unity is not an unconditional good. A conspiracy can be united. An empire can be united. A crowd can be united against an innocent person. Babel was united. The body of Christ is also united. The moral question is therefore not whether people stand together, but what truth gathers them, whose authority governs them, which worship forms them, and toward what end they move.

The opposite of false unity is not permanent fragmentation. Sectarian pride is not fidelity. A church can defend the narrow way while making its own gate narrower than Christ's. It can mistake inherited custom for apostolic doctrine, condemn every unfamiliar congregation, treat secondary disagreements as another gospel, and rejoice more readily in separation than reconciliation. Such conduct does not protect truth. It uses truth as a fortress for the ego.

The faithful path is narrower and better. It seeks visible unity among genuine believers, honest cooperation across legitimate differences, peaceful coexistence with all neighbours, doctrinal clarity without cruelty, and missionary witness without coercion. It refuses both the ecumenical fog in which every boundary disappears and the sectarian prison in which every neighbour becomes an enemy. It loves people enough to protect them from violence and loves Christ enough not to lie about the way to the Father.

The Words Must Be Separated Before the Churches Are Joined

Confusion thrives when several different activities are called unity. Precision is therefore not academic decoration. It is a duty of love.

Biblical unity is the Spirit-created communion of those who belong to Christ, confess the apostolic gospel, receive the written Word, and share one life under one Lord. It includes doctrinal, spiritual, moral, relational, and missional dimensions. It is not exhausted by institutional membership, but neither is it merely invisible sentiment. It should become visible through shared confession, love, worship, service, mutual recognition, and cooperation consistent with truth.

Christian fellowship is the shared life of believers in Christ. The New Testament term *koinonia* includes participation, communion, partnership, generosity, and common allegiance. Spiritual communion is deeper than friendliness. It means participation in the life and benefits of Christ through the Holy Spirit. Visible church unity is the public expression of this communion through recognised fellowship, common confession, cooperation, and, where doctrine and order permit, shared worship and the Lord's Supper.

Ecumenism ordinarily refers to organised efforts toward unity among Christian churches or traditions. It can describe missionary cooperation, theological dialogue, common witness, institutional councils, sacramental reunion, or formal merger. The word itself does not settle the theological question. An ecumenical initiative may help churches confess Christ together, repent of sinful hostility, and serve their neighbours. It may also reduce doctrine to a negotiable minimum and reward silence concerning grave error.

Interdenominational or evangelical cooperation occurs when churches with meaningful differences work together around an agreed biblical purpose, such as evangelism, Bible translation, theological education, mercy ministry, or defence of religious liberty. Such cooperation does not require pretending that ecclesiological differences are unimportant. It requires sufficient agreement for the specific task and sufficient honesty about what remains unresolved.

Interfaith relations concern contact among adherents of different religions. Interfaith dialogue is structured conversation intended to increase understanding, reduce hostility, clarify beliefs, or pursue a common civic concern. Dialogue is not inherently syncretistic. Paul conversed with Jews, philosophers, rulers, and worshippers of other gods. He listened, reasoned, and used language his hearers could understand. He did not conclude that every altar led to the same God.

Interfaith prayer and joint worship are different. Prayer is not merely speech in the presence of others. It is an act of worship directed to the One addressed. When people who deny one another's accounts of God jointly invoke a deliberately undefined deity, the ambiguity is not solved by private intentions. The public act can communicate that incompatible objects of worship are interchangeable or that doctrinal difference does not matter before God. Joint worship therefore requires far more than civic goodwill.

Religious pluralism has several meanings. Descriptive pluralism simply recognises that many religions coexist. Political pluralism concerns laws and institutions that allow citizens with different beliefs to live together without coercion. Philosophical or theological pluralism makes a stronger claim: major religions are valid, perhaps culturally conditioned, responses to the same ultimate reality, and no tradition may claim final superiority. John Hick's mature proposal interpreted religions as diverse human responses to "the Real," mediated through different conceptual and cultural worlds (Hick, 2004). Such a theory is not a neutral description of religions. It is a comprehensive interpretation that places itself above them.

Inclusivism usually affirms that Christ is the ontological basis of salvation while denying that explicit knowledge of Christ is always necessary. Karl Rahner's language of the "anonymous Christian" is the best-known Roman Catholic form, while evangelical inclusivists such as Clark Pinnock have argued that people may respond savingly to the light available to them, even though salvation remains grounded in Christ (Pinnock, 1992; Rahner, 1978). Inclusivism differs from pluralism because it retains Christ's decisive saving role, but it raises serious questions about revelation, faith, repentance, mission, and the unevangelised.

Universalism teaches that all persons will finally be saved, whether through post-mortem repentance, irresistible divine love, purgative judgment, universal reconciliation, or another process. Hopeful universalism refrains from dogmatic certainty but regards universal salvation as a permissible or desirable hope. Christian universalists differ among themselves. Some affirm biblical authority, Christ's atonement, judgment, and hell, but interpret judgment as ultimately remedial. Others rest universalism in a broader theology of divine love or metaphysical unity.

Syncretism is the fusion of incompatible religious beliefs, practices, symbols, mediators, or objects of worship into a new system. Cultural adaptation is not automatically syncretism. Christians may pray in local languages, use indigenous musical forms, wear culturally appropriate clothing, and organise community life through lawful customs. Syncretism begins when the substance of worship or doctrine is altered, when ancestors, spirits, rituals, sacred objects, or rival revelations are incorporated as sources of divine access alongside Christ.

Religious tolerance means allowing people to hold and practice beliefs one considers false, within just limits that protect life and the rights of others. Religious liberty is the civil freedom to believe, change belief, worship, assemble, teach, and live according to conscience without unjust coercion. Neither tolerance nor liberty means that every belief is true. A government may protect a person's right to worship an idol without declaring idolatry righteous.

Civic cooperation joins citizens around limited public goods such as safety, sanitation, education, lawful order, or disaster response. Humanitarian cooperation serves people in need. Peacebuilding seeks to prevent violence, repair trust, and establish conditions for just coexistence. Common grace describes God's non-saving goodness in creation and providence, including moral insight, social order, skill, restraint of evil, and benefits enjoyed by believers and unbelievers alike. These goods make cooperation possible, but they do not create spiritual fellowship.

Mission is the church's participation in God's purpose to make disciples of all nations through gospel proclamation, church formation, teaching, mercy, justice, and obedient witness. Evangelism is the clear announcement of the good news of Jesus Christ with a call to repentance and faith. Separation is the refusal of spiritual or institutional participation that would imply approval of false worship or another gospel. Schism is culpable division within the body of Christ. Sectarianism elevates a party, tradition, personality, or secondary doctrine into a boundary Christ did not establish. Apostasy is the abandonment or repudiation of the faith once confessed.

These distinctions expose the central error of unity without truth. It takes civic categories and fills them with salvific meaning. Peace becomes reconciliation with God. Fraternity becomes adoption. Dialogue becomes communion. Shared ethics become shared worship. Religious freedom becomes theological equality. The result is a category mistake with eternal consequences.

Four Orders of Doctrine and Fellowship

Not every disagreement has the same weight. Churches need a disciplined theology of doctrinal order, often called theological triage, without turning that discipline into permission to minimise whatever the age dislikes.

First-order doctrines define the Christian faith itself. They include the triune God, the full deity and humanity of Christ, His sinless life, substitutionary death, bodily resurrection, lordship, the necessity of grace, repentance and faith, the authority of Scripture, and final judgment. A teacher who denies the Son, replaces the gospel, rejects the resurrection, or presents another object of worship does not merely differ over church custom.

Second-order doctrines shape the constitution and ordinary fellowship of the local church. Baptism, the Lord's Supper, church government, ordination, discipline, and some questions of spiritual gifts belong here. Faithful Christians may recognise one another across these differences while remaining unable to share one ecclesial structure without disorder or dishonesty.

Third-order doctrines permit substantial disagreement within the same congregation or cooperative work. Interpretations of prophetic details, questions of Christian liberty, and many applications of wisdom may belong here, provided the disagreement does not undermine clear biblical teaching or holy living.

A fourth sphere concerns prudence, culture, and local administration. Meeting times, musical styles, architectural forms, educational methods, and many organisational choices should not be converted into tests of orthodoxy.

The categories are useful only when Scripture governs them. Theological triage becomes corrupt when leaders quietly demote doctrines because donors, governments, universities, media, or partner institutions find them embarrassing. The same device can also be abused in the opposite direction when a denomination promotes its entire confessional inheritance to first-order status and treats every other believer as suspect.

The church needs both courage and proportion. It must know where unity is required, where organisational separation may be necessary, where disagreement can be borne patiently, and where partnership would become false witness. The person who refuses every partnership is not automatically faithful. The person who accepts every partnership is not automatically loving.

Babel: Unity Can Organise Rebellion

[Genesis 11:1-9](#) is often remembered as an explanation of linguistic diversity, but its theological centre is organised autonomy. Humanity shares one language and coordinates a city-building project. Cooperation itself is not condemned. God created human beings for community, communication, cultivation, and ordered work. The problem lies in the purpose: "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky. Let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we will be scattered throughout the earth" ([Genesis 11:4](#)).

The builders seek ascent, security, permanence, and fame apart from submission to God. They gather against the divine commission to fill the earth. They make the human name central. Their unity becomes a technology of disobedience.

Babel therefore destroys the sentimental assumption that agreement is morally self-authenticating. People can agree to suppress truth, centralise power, protect injustice, or worship falsely. The strength of cooperation may increase the scale of rebellion. A small lie harms a household. An institutional lie can train a civilisation.

Yet Babel must not be used as a slogan against all international cooperation, urban development, common language, or social organisation. Scripture condemns the project because of its theological direction, not because bricks, cities, or planning are inherently evil. The Christian test is not "Is this global?" but "What authority governs it, what good does it seek, what worship does it imply, and what freedom of conscience does it preserve?"

Pentecost answers Babel without erasing creation's diversity. In [Acts 2:1-13](#), the Holy Spirit does not force every nation into one human language. He makes the mighty acts of God intelligible across languages. The miracle serves proclamation. Diversity is not abolished; it is gathered beneath the lordship of Christ. Babel says, "Let us make a name." Pentecost proclaims the name above every name.

This contrast should govern Christian thinking about global religious unity. A worldwide fellowship centred in the apostolic Christ is not Babel merely because it crosses borders. A local coalition that suppresses Christ can repeat Babel's logic even if it contains only a few institutions. Scale is not the decisive question. Allegiance is.

Sanctified by Truth: What Jesus Prayed in John 17

[John 17](#) is frequently quoted as though Jesus prayed for unity without doctrinal content. The prayer itself permits no such reading. Jesus speaks to the Father on the eve of His crucifixion. He has revealed the Father's name, given the disciples the Father's words, distinguished them from the world, and prepared them for mission. The unity for which He prays is woven into revelation, sanctification, love, and participation in the life of the Father and Son.

Jesus first asks, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" ([John 17:17](#)). Sanctification means consecration to God and moral transformation. The disciples are set apart not by vague spirituality but by the Father's truth. Jesus then prays not only for the apostles but for those who will believe in Him through their word ([John 17:20](#)). The apostolic witness is therefore not an optional historical shell around a timeless experience. It is the divinely appointed means through which later believers come to faith.

The requested unity is "as you, Father, are in me and I am in you" ([John 17:21](#)). This analogy does not make believers divine or erase personal distinction. It describes a communion grounded in the triune life and mediated through Christ. The Father and Son are not united by ignoring truth about one another. Their unity is holy, personal, loving, and perfectly consonant with who they are.

Jesus also gives His people the glory the Father gave Him "so that they may be one as we are one" ([John 17:22](#)). This glory is not institutional prestige. In John's Gospel, Christ's glory is revealed supremely in His self-giving obedience, cross, resurrection, and return to the Father. Christian unity is therefore cruciform. It cannot be sustained by pride, denominational rivalry, ethnic domination, or competition for influence.

The missionary purpose is explicit: "May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me" ([John 17:21](#)). Division among believers obscures the gospel. Churches that confess the same Lord but refuse reconciliation over pride, property, personality, ethnicity, or minor custom contradict the prayer. Yet the mission is not served by creating a larger body that no longer knows what to confess. The world is to believe that the Father sent the Son, not merely admire religious cooperation.

[John 17](#) therefore excludes two opposite errors. Sectarianism violates Christ's desire that His people manifest their real unity. Pluralistic ecumenism violates the truth, apostolic witness, and Christological centre that constitute that unity. Jesus did not pray that everyone who is religious would be one. He prayed for those given to Him, guarded by His name, receiving His word, sanctified in truth, and believing through apostolic testimony.

The chapter's governing distinction follows: unity is received before it is administratively manufactured. Councils, covenants, networks, and common statements may serve an existing unity in Christ. They cannot create the Spirit's communion where the apostolic gospel is denied. A committee may arrange chairs. It cannot regenerate hearts.

One Body, One Lord, One Faith

[Ephesians 4:1-16](#) joins unity to doctrine, character, gifts, and maturity. Paul urges believers to walk worthy of their calling "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" ([Ephesians 4:2-3](#)). Unity is already given by the Spirit and must be kept. It is not invented by negotiation.

The foundation is confessed in a sevenfold pattern: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all ([Ephesians 4:4-6](#)). This is neither doctrinal minimalism nor theological vagueness. The unity is trinitarian, Christological, ecclesial, sacramental, eschatological, and confessional. "One faith" cannot mean mutually contradictory accounts of God, Christ, salvation, and Scripture.

At the same time, unity is not uniformity. Grace is given "to each one" according to Christ's gift ([Ephesians 4:7](#)). The ascended Lord gives varied ministers to equip the saints. The body grows as every part works properly. Diversity of gift, culture, language, vocation, and service belongs within unity. The church is not made one by making every member identical. It is made one by joining different members to the same Head.

The purpose of ministry is maturity, "so that we may no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching" ([Ephesians 4:14](#)). A unity that avoids doctrine produces the very immaturity Paul seeks to overcome. The answer is "speaking the truth in love" ([Ephesians 4:15](#)). Truth without love becomes a weapon. Love without truth becomes complicity. Biblical maturity refuses the divorce.

The phrase "one Lord" also establishes a boundary. Jesus cannot be one lord among many spiritual authorities. "One faith" cannot include gospels that contradict His cross. "One baptism" cannot signify union with Christ while joint worship implies that union with Christ is unnecessary. The church's unity is spacious enough to gather every nation and narrow enough to exclude another gospel.

No One Comes to the Father Except Through Me

Religious pluralism often seeks to preserve Jesus by reducing the scope of His claim. He becomes the Christian path to the Father rather than the only way for all humanity. [John 14:1-7](#) does not permit that domestication.

Jesus speaks to troubled disciples, promises the Father's house, and identifies Himself as the way to it. Thomas asks how they can know the way. Jesus does not answer with a method, moral code, or universal religious principle. He answers with His person: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" ([John 14:6](#)).

The three nouns interpret one another. Jesus is not merely a guide who knows the way. He is the way because access to the Father occurs through union with Him, His atoning death, resurrection, priesthood, and life. He does not merely teach true ideas. He is the truth as the incarnate revelation of the Father. He does not merely improve life. He is the life through whom the dead are raised.

The final clause is universal and exclusive: no one comes to the Father except through Him. It does not say no one comes to a Christian conception of God. It names the Father whom the Son uniquely reveals. To detach the Father from the Son is to construct another deity.

[Acts 4:8-12](#) makes the same claim in public proclamation. Peter speaks after the healing of a man and identifies Jesus as the rejected stone made cornerstone. "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved" ([Acts 4:12](#)). The claim concerns salvation, not merely ecclesial preference. It is grounded in the saving act and exalted identity of Jesus.

First Timothy 2:1-6 holds universal concern and exclusive mediation together. Christians pray for all people because God desires all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. The reason is not that many mediators correspond to many cultures. "For there is one God and one mediator between God and humanity, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all" ([1 Timothy 2:5-6](#)). The universal scope of the ransom grounds worldwide proclamation. It does not erase the one Mediator.

Christian exclusivity is therefore not a claim that Christians are ethically superior, culturally central, or naturally worthy. It is the confession that sinners of every nation possess no saving name except the name given by God. The Christian stands beside the Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, traditional religious adherent, secular humanist, and nominal church member as a person who also needed mercy. The narrowness belongs to the Saviour's identity. The breadth belongs to the invitation: everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved ([Romans 10:9-13](#)).

The charge of arrogance must therefore be answered by humility, not doctrinal surrender. A beggar is not arrogant for saying where bread may be found. He becomes arrogant when he forgets that he was starving.

The Early Church in a Religiously Crowded World

The apostolic church did not emerge in a secular vacuum. The Roman world contained imperial cults, civic deities, mystery religions, household gods, philosophical schools, Jewish communities, magic, divination, and local traditions. Religious diversity was ordinary.

[Acts 17:16-34](#) records Paul's encounter with Athens. He observes its objects of worship, recognises religious concern, and quotes Greek poets. This is serious cultural engagement. He does not begin with insult. Yet he refuses to treat the city's altars as alternative routes to the true God. He announces the Creator who does not live in temples made by hands, calls all people everywhere to repent, and declares a coming judgment through the risen Man appointed by God.

The pattern is instructive. Paul discovers points of contact without confusing them with saving agreement. He acknowledges partial truth while exposing idolatry. He uses shared language without allowing the audience to define its final meaning. Dialogue becomes a road to proclamation, not a substitute for it.

First Corinthians 8-10 provides an equally careful boundary. Christians know that an idol is nothing in the world and that there is one God and one Lord. They may buy meat sold in the market without conducting an investigation into its history. They may eat in an unbeliever's home. Yet they may not participate in an idolatrous meal as worship, because "what they sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God" and believers cannot share in both the Lord's table and the table of demons ([1 Corinthians 10:20-21](#)).

This distinction remains essential. Ordinary association is not spiritual communion. Eating with neighbours is not worshipping their gods. Entering a public building is not endorsing every belief represented there. Yet participation in ritual can communicate allegiance even when a participant privately reinterprets the act.

Second Corinthians 6:14-18 similarly warns against an unequal yoke. The passage uses a chain of contrasts: righteousness and lawlessness, light and darkness, Christ and Belial, believer and unbeliever, God's temple and idols. It does not command social isolation. Paul had already clarified that avoiding all sexually immoral or idolatrous people would require leaving the world (1 [Corinthians 5:9-10](#)). The prohibition concerns binding participation that compromises identity, holiness, and worship.

The early church's boundaries were therefore neither tribal nor porous. Gentiles entered without becoming Jews, but they abandoned idols. Believers shared life across ethnicity, class, and nation, but not across contradictory gospels. The church was radically inclusive regarding who might repent and believe, and radically exclusive regarding whom it worshipped.

From Creedal Unity to Modern Ecumenism

The early ecumenical councils were not interfaith gatherings. They were assemblies within the professing church seeking to confess truth about Christ and the triune God. Nicaea in 325 did not achieve unity by declaring Arius and Athanasius complementary. It formulated a confession because worship depended upon the identity of the Son. If the Son were a creature, Christian worship would be idolatrous and salvation incoherent.

The councils were historically complex and entangled with imperial politics. Their participants were fallible, and coercive uses of ecclesiastical power deserve criticism. Yet the creedal achievement demonstrates a point modern unity discourse often forgets: the church sometimes preserves unity by drawing a doctrinal boundary.

The East-West schism, medieval conflicts, the Reformation, confessionalisation, state churches, colonial expansion, and later denominational fragmentation created wounds that cannot be dismissed. Christians have anathematised one another carelessly, fought wars, competed for converts, used state coercion, and identified cultural dominance with the kingdom of God. The credibility of Christian witness has been damaged not only by false doctrine but also by sinful division.

The modern ecumenical movement arose partly from missionary concern. The 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh is widely treated as a major starting point because divided Protestant missions recognised that rivalry weakened witness. Its continuation structures helped generate later missionary and unity movements. The World Council of Churches was formally constituted in Amsterdam in 1948 after earlier Faith and Order and Life and Work streams converged (World Council of Churches, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

The WCC's current constitutional basis describes it as a fellowship of churches confessing "the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures" and seeking to fulfil their common calling to the glory of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (World Council of Churches, 2022). This confession is more substantial than generic interfaith spirituality. It should be represented accurately.

The Roman Catholic Church's modern ecumenical engagement was decisively shaped by the Second Vatican Council. *Unitatis Redintegratio* named the restoration of Christian unity as a principal concern, acknowledged elements of sanctification and truth outside the Roman Catholic structure, and encouraged dialogue, prayer, and reform (Second Vatican Council, 1964). *Nostra Aetate* addressed relations with non-Christian religions, urged respect and dialogue, and rejected discrimination (Second Vatican Council, 1965). *Dominus Iesus* later reaffirmed the uniqueness and salvific universality of Jesus Christ while criticising relativistic theories that treat religions as complementary salvific paths (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2000).

Evangelical cooperation developed through missionary societies, Bible agencies, student movements, the Lausanne Movement, and global networks. The Cape Town Commitment affirms the oneness of Christ's body across traditions while also confessing Jesus as unique Lord and calling the church to bear truthful witness in a pluralistic world (Lausanne Movement, 2011).

This history prevents crude judgment. Ecumenism is not one doctrine, one institution, or one motive. It includes serious attempts to overcome sinful hostility, coordinate mission, clarify disagreement, and bear public witness. It also contains pressures toward institutional preservation, doctrinal ambiguity, political alignment, and interfaith expansion. The faithful response requires evaluation, not slogans.

The Lord's Table and the Limits of Visible Unity

Visible unity becomes concrete wherever Christians preach together, recognise one another's ministries, receive baptism, share the Lord's Supper, exchange members, or speak publicly as one church. These acts are not merely gestures of goodwill. They communicate judgments about the gospel, the church, and the people with whom communion is being declared.

The Lord's Supper is especially instructive. Paul describes the cup as participation in the blood of Christ and the bread as participation in His body. Because there is one bread, the many are one body (1 [Corinthians 10:16-17](#)). The meal therefore expresses a unity Christ has created through His sacrifice. It cannot be reduced to a diplomatic symbol that institutions may exchange while disagreeing about the identity of Christ, the meaning of His death, the nature of saving faith, or the authority of His Word.

This does not mean that every difference concerning sacramental theology, church government, spiritual gifts, or liturgical form necessarily places a church outside Christianity. Faithful believers disagree about baptismal subjects and modes, the precise understanding of Christ's presence in the Supper, episcopal and congregational structures, and the continuation of particular gifts. Such disagreements affect the form and sometimes the possibility of local sacramental fellowship, but they should be assessed according to their relation to the apostolic gospel rather than converted automatically into declarations that no believers exist outside one's tradition.

The opposite error is to treat the table as though it could repair contradictions simply by gathering the contradicting parties. A common meal does not create a common Lord. Public communion may become false witness when it implies that mutually exclusive gospels are interchangeable. Paul did not heal the Galatian crisis by arranging a broader ceremony. He named the distortion because the truth of the gospel was at stake ([Galatians 1:6-10](#); 2:5, 14).

The same principle governs recognition of ministers. A pastor may honour the civil office, learning, courage, or humanitarian service of a religious leader without recognising that person as a minister of Christ. Courtesy is not ordination. Friendship is not ecclesial fellowship. A platform shared to oppose violence differs from a pulpit shared to lead the church in worship. The church should explain these distinctions rather than forcing members to interpret ambiguous ceremonies for themselves.

This is where doctrinal order matters. First-order doctrines concern the identity of the triune God, the full deity and humanity of Christ, His atoning death and bodily resurrection, salvation by grace through faith, the necessity of repentance, the authority of Scripture, and the final judgment. Denial of these truths does not create a smaller denomination. It alters the religion being confessed.

A second order includes doctrines that deeply shape the church's worship, government, discipline, and sacramental life. Disagreement here may restrict formal cooperation or membership without requiring believers to deny that every person on the other side belongs to Christ. A third order includes important matters on which churches may differ while maintaining substantial fellowship. A fourth order includes prudential and cultural decisions that should rarely divide believers.

This taxonomy is not a mathematical device that removes the need for wisdom. Some doctrines move in practical importance when circumstances change. A secondary issue can become a first-order test when it is used to deny biblical authority or justify another gospel. A cultural form can become spiritually serious when it is joined to idolatry. A ministry partnership that seems narrow can widen gradually until participants are expected to endorse what they once merely tolerated.

The test is not only what a statement says but what the partnership requires. Does it require silence where the gospel requires speech? Does it make correction impossible? Does it present conversion as an embarrassment? Does it place the church's name beside prayers addressed to another god? Does it teach ordinary believers that doctrinal contradictions are spiritually harmless? Does it grant the same ecclesial recognition to those who confess the apostolic Christ and those who deny Him?

Christian unity must be visible, but visibility is not achieved only by large ceremonies. It is visible when churches forgive offences, refuse ethnic division, share resources, receive persecuted believers, cooperate in mission, honour faithful ministries outside their networks, and speak truth without rivalry. A quiet partnership in Scripture translation may display more genuine unity than a televised service whose language is designed so carefully that no one can tell which God is being worshipped.

The church should therefore seek the widest fellowship truth permits and refuse the narrowest fellowship pride demands. It should not build walls where Christ has made brothers and sisters, and it should not remove boundaries where Christ has commanded discernment. The same Lord who prayed that His people would be one also warned against false prophets and another gospel. Love hears both words.

The Strongest Case for Visible Christian Unity

The most compelling case for ecumenism begins with Scripture, not institutional ambition. Jesus prayed for His people to be one. Paul condemned factionalism in Corinth. The church is one body. Baptised believers across traditions often confess the Trinity, the incarnation, the resurrection, and the creeds. They may face persecution together, translate Scripture together, serve the poor together, and recognise the Spirit's work beyond their own denomination.

Division can become scandalous. In some towns, multiple churches possess half-empty buildings, competing programmes, and weak theological education, while the surrounding community lacks mercy, discipleship, and truthful witness. Leaders may refuse cooperation because of personal rivalry. Missionaries have sometimes exported denominational disputes into communities that did not create them. Congregations have split over property, succession, ethnicity, music, political loyalty, or wounded pride while claiming doctrinal necessity.

Visible cooperation can correct these sins. Churches can pray for one another, recognise genuine believers, exchange learning, respond jointly to disaster, defend persecuted minorities, resist corruption, train leaders, and avoid duplication. Unity can make the gospel's reconciling power visible.

Interfaith cooperation also has a serious moral case. In societies marked by Christian-Muslim violence, ethnic conflict, attacks on houses of worship, or political manipulation of religion, dialogue can protect life. Religious leaders may restrain rumours, open humanitarian access, defend minorities, and prevent retaliation. The African Union's Interfaith Dialogue Forum explicitly seeks to engage religious communities in peace, human rights, and inclusive development, while KAICIID supports interreligious platforms in regions affected by conflict and displacement (African Union, 2025; KAICIID, 2026a).

The moral force of these concerns should not be minimised. A Christian who refuses even to speak with a Muslim neighbour during communal violence may not be defending the gospel. He may be abandoning neighbour-love. A pastor who will not stand publicly against the burning of a mosque has misunderstood religious liberty. A church that welcomes freedom only for itself does not love justice.

The strongest inclusivist case likewise begins with serious questions. What of people who never heard a faithful gospel presentation? What of those whose only exposure to Christianity came through abuse, conquest, hypocrisy, or distortion? Does God's universal saving desire imply wider possibilities than strict accounts allow? Cornelius feared God before Peter arrived. Melchizedek served God outside Israel's covenant institutions. The Magi responded to limited light. [Romans 2](#) speaks of conscience and judgment according to knowledge.

Universalists press further. If God desires all to be saved, if Christ draws all, if every knee will bow, if all things are reconciled through the cross, and if God will be "all in all," does the final victory of grace include every person? They argue that eternal conscious punishment appears disproportionate, defeats divine love, or grants evil an everlasting remainder. Some interpret biblical judgment as corrective rather than retributive.

These are not foolish questions. They arise from Scripture, moral concern, missionary history, and grief over division and loss. A faithful answer must be better than suspicion. It must show why the biblical remedy for Christian failure is repentance rather than the revision of Christ, and why God's universal mercy does not abolish the conditions He has revealed for receiving it.

When Ecumenism Becomes Doctrinal Minimalism

Ecumenism becomes spiritually dangerous when unity is treated as the controlling good and doctrine as an obstacle to be managed. The process is rarely announced as apostasy. It often begins through practical decisions.

A coalition wishes to keep all members at the table, so statements are written at the level of maximum ambiguity. Repentance disappears because traditions define sin differently. Atonement is described as love without judgment. Mission becomes service because evangelism may offend partners. The resurrection is affirmed without asking whether it was bodily. Jesus is called Lord, but the meaning of lordship is left open. Scripture is honoured, but no agreement exists about whether it can correct contemporary moral consensus.

Institutional incentives intensify the pressure. Funding may depend upon broad participation. Public legitimacy may reward moderate language. Government access may require a unified religious voice. Media exposure may favour leaders who present doctrine as private while translating faith into shared ethical values. None of these factors proves corruption in a particular organisation. They do create predictable temptations.

The World Council of Churches' formal basis remains explicitly Christological and trinitarian, and fairness requires acknowledging that fact. Yet its own historical explanation states that the basis functions as "less than a confession" and is not a creedal test applied uniformly to persons. Member churches retain considerable interpretive freedom (World Council of Churches, 2002). The tension is therefore structural: how much doctrinal divergence can a fellowship bear while still speaking of one faith?

The same question confronts every ecumenical body, not only the WCC. A local pastors' association may include leaders who deny the Trinity, preach prosperity transactions, bless sexual immorality, or claim new revelation above Scripture. If the association continues common worship while refusing to address another gospel, its unity has become false witness.

The issue is not whether every member agrees on every doctrine. The issue is whether the organisation's practices imply spiritual communion where foundational contradiction exists. A council can host dialogue among disagreeing churches without declaring full fellowship. Dishonesty begins when the outward sign communicates more unity than the truth permits.

Nicaea provides a severe analogy. The council is now celebrated as a symbol of unity, but its unity was achieved through confession against error. A commemoration of Nicaea that uses the creed as ceremonial heritage while treating Christological contradiction as harmless turns orthodoxy into museum furniture. It admires the courage of the fathers after removing the conditions that required courage.

Church leaders must therefore ask concrete questions before joining ecumenical structures. What doctrines define membership? What happens when a member publicly denies them? Are joint services treated as expressions of real communion? Does the body permit clear evangelism? Are statements crafted to honour Christ or merely avoid offence? Can member churches correct one another? Is social influence becoming more important than theological truth?

An organisation need not be secretly controlled to become spiritually compromised. It may drift through politeness, fatigue, fear, and the ordinary desire to keep a successful institution alive.

Interfaith Dialogue: Conversation Is Not Communion

Christians should know how to converse with people of other religions. Ignorance produces caricature. Caricature produces contempt. Contempt destroys witness and can contribute to violence.

Honest dialogue requires each participant to describe beliefs truthfully. A Christian should not tell a Muslim that the Trinity is really another form of Islamic tawhid. A Muslim should not be required to pretend that the Qur'an affirms the Christian doctrine of the cross. A Hindu should not be reduced to a simple label such as polytheist when Hindu traditions are internally diverse. A Buddhist should not be described as secretly believing in the biblical Creator. Respect begins by allowing people to disagree.

Dialogue can serve several lawful purposes. It can clarify doctrine, correct rumours, protect communities, facilitate humanitarian work, resolve disputes, and create conditions in which the gospel can be heard without coercion. Christians may participate as Christians, openly and peacefully.

The danger begins when dialogue acquires a hidden rule: no participant may claim that another religion is false in any salvific sense. Conversation then becomes managed pluralism. The conclusion is predetermined before the discussion begins.

Joint prayer raises a sharper question. People sometimes argue that believers of different religions can pray side by side because God understands each heart. Private intention matters, but public worship also teaches. If a Christian minister, Muslim imam, Hindu priest, traditional religious leader, and secular spiritual guide jointly invoke "God" without clarifying incompatible meanings, observers may reasonably conclude that the differences are secondary.

Public ceremonies after national tragedy create difficult pastoral situations. Governments seek inclusive language. Grieving citizens need solidarity. Religious leaders may stand together to condemn violence and comfort families. A Christian can participate in a civic memorial, read Scripture, lament, and pray explicitly in the name of Jesus without pretending that all prayers address the same God. What should be refused is a liturgy designed to represent contradictory worship as one spiritual act.

Common sacred spaces create similar ambiguity. A room available at different times to different groups may simply protect religious liberty. A deliberately fused altar containing symbols from incompatible religions communicates theological synthesis. The architecture may preach before any speaker does.

Christian chaplains in universities, hospitals, prisons, militaries, and workplaces face growing pressure to become generic spiritual-care providers. Compassionate service is legitimate. A chaplain should not exploit vulnerability. Yet neutrality cannot require the chaplain to deny the source of hope, offer false assurance, or lead worship that contradicts conscience. Professional courtesy must not become spiritual impersonation.

The guiding principle is truthful presence. Christians should be present enough to serve and clear enough not to mislead.

Religious Pluralism and the God Above All Gods

The popular claim that all religions are different roads to the same summit sounds humble because it refuses to privilege one path. In fact, the speaker claims a view from above the mountain. He knows the destination, understands every path better than its travellers, and judges contradictions to be merely apparent.

Sophisticated pluralism recognises the problem and constructs a philosophical solution. Hick distinguishes ultimate reality, "the Real in itself," from the many personal and impersonal ways it is experienced within religious traditions. Religions become culturally conditioned responses that may transform people from self-centredness to reality-centredness (Hick, 2004).

The proposal seeks moral generosity, but it carries a high theological cost. The triune God, Allah, Brahman, nirvana, and other ultimate realities cannot retain their own asserted identities. They become phenomenal appearances within Hick's larger theory. The pluralist therefore does not merely accept religions. He revises them.

Doctrinal contradiction remains decisive. Biblical Christianity confesses one Creator distinct from creation, one incarnate Son, one atoning death, one bodily resurrection, one life followed by judgment, and one Mediator. Islam rejects divine Sonship and the crucifixion as Christians understand it. Classical Buddhism does not organise salvation around reconciliation with a personal Creator. Hindu traditions differ greatly, but many include karma, rebirth, and liberation in ways incompatible with biblical resurrection and judgment. Traditional religions may invoke ancestors, spirits, divination, or ritual mediators forbidden by Scripture. Secular humanism rejects supernatural revelation and grounds hope in human agency (Sangwa, 2026a).

These differences cannot all be true in the same sense. Jesus was crucified or He was not. He is the eternal Son or He is not. Human beings live once and face judgment, or they pass through repeated rebirth. Salvation is reconciliation through Christ, liberation from samsara, submission under another revelation, or human flourishing without God. Contradiction is not cured by calling it diversity.

Pluralism also misdiagnoses intolerance. A person can believe another religion false and still defend the believer's life, property, conscience, and freedom. Conversely, a person can speak constantly of tolerance while excluding every conviction that resists pluralist control. The moral issue is not whether beliefs are exclusive. Every worldview excludes its negation. The issue is whether persons are treated justly.

Christianity's final claim is not that every religious question is simple or that Christians understand every mystery. It is that God has acted and spoken decisively in Jesus Christ. The incarnation is not one human image projected toward the unknown. It is the Word made flesh.

Inclusivism and the Unevangelised

Inclusivism deserves careful engagement because it attempts to hold together Christ's finality and God's universal mercy. It argues that salvation is always through Christ, but some may receive the benefits of His work without explicit knowledge of His name.

Several biblical truths give the question weight. God judges justly according to knowledge. Creation reveals His power and divine nature. Conscience bears witness. God is not confined to the church's institutional reach. Old Testament believers trusted promises before the incarnation. Infants and persons without ordinary cognitive capacity raise pastoral questions not answered through simplistic formulas.

Yet general revelation in [Romans 1](#) does not appear as a second saving covenant. Humanity suppresses the truth, exchanges God's glory, and stands without excuse. [Romans 2](#) teaches impartial judgment, not an autonomous path of justification by conscience. [Romans 10](#) asks how people will call on the One in whom they have not believed and how they will believe without hearing. The apostolic conclusion is missionary urgency.

Cornelius is frequently used as an inclusivist example. [Acts 10](#) describes him as devout, God-fearing, generous, and prayerful. God responds to him. Yet the angel does not assure him that his sincerity is already sufficient. He is instructed to send for Peter, who proclaims Jesus' death, resurrection, lordship, and forgiveness. The Holy Spirit falls as the gospel is received. The narrative shows that God may prepare and draw a person before explicit faith. It does not show that the gospel is unnecessary.

Melchizedek and the Magi demonstrate that God is free to reveal Himself beyond Israel's ordinary structures. They do not establish that later religions denying Christ are saving vehicles. Old Testament saints were saved by grace through faith in the promise of God, not by the independent sufficiency of a rival revelation.

The phrase "other sheep" in [John 10:16](#) refers most naturally to people beyond the immediate Jewish fold who will be gathered into one flock under one Shepherd. The verse supports Gentile mission. It does not describe stable flocks under other religions whose members need not hear the Shepherd's voice.

A responsible Christian position should confess what Scripture makes clear and remain humble where Scripture does not satisfy curiosity. God is perfectly just. No person will be condemned by mistake. Christ's atonement is sufficient. The church must preach to all. Scripture does not authorise confidence that sincere adherence to another religion saves.

The uncertainty surrounding exceptional cases must not become a doctrine that empties mission. If the apostles believed the devout unevangelised were safely included through implicit faith, their urgency, suffering, and insistence on repentance become difficult to explain.

Universalism and the Refusal of Final Loss

Universalism is attractive because it appears to magnify grace. The thought that every rebel will finally bow willingly, every wound will be healed, and every creature restored can seem like the most complete victory of divine love. Christian universalists often affirm judgment, but interpret it as purifying and temporary.

The strongest biblical arguments appeal to texts of universal scope. [Romans 5:18](#) speaks of one righteous act bringing justification and life for everyone. First Corinthians 15:22 says, "For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive." [Colossians 1:20](#) speaks of reconciliation of all things through the blood of the cross. [Philippians 2:10-11](#) foresees every knee bowing and every tongue confessing Jesus Christ as Lord. First Timothy 2:4 declares God's desire that all be saved. Universalists also argue that God's purpose cannot finally fail and that endless punishment is incompatible with finite sin.

These texts must be heard, not evaded. Christ's victory is cosmic. Every enemy will be subdued. The resurrection reaches all humanity. The gospel is genuinely offered to all. The scope of the atonement is sufficient for the world. Creation itself will be liberated from corruption.

Yet universal language does not automatically mean universal salvation. In [Romans 5](#), Paul's two humanities are defined by relation to Adam and Christ, and the wider letter repeatedly distinguishes those justified by faith from those under wrath. First Corinthians 15 concerns resurrection and the defeat of death, but resurrection includes judgment elsewhere in Scripture. [Philippians 2](#) describes universal acknowledgement of lordship, which can be willing worship or compelled recognition by defeated enemies. [Colossians 1](#) must be read with the same letter's warning that reconciliation is experienced by those continuing in faith. First Timothy 2 joins God's universal saving desire to one Mediator and the church's prayer and proclamation.

Jesus repeatedly speaks of a narrow gate, exclusion from the kingdom, outer darkness, destruction, and final separation ([Matthew 7:13-23](#); [Matthew 25:31-46](#)). Revelation describes a second death, exclusion from the holy city, and judgment according to works ([Revelation 20:11-15](#); [Revelation 21:7-8](#), 27). [Hebrews 9:27](#) joins death and judgment. Second Thessalonians 1:5-10 speaks of everlasting destruction away from the Lord's presence. Whatever interpretive debates surround the nature and duration of punishment, Scripture does not offer a clear promise that every unrepentant person will finally be saved.

The moral objection to judgment must also account for evil's seriousness. A universe in which repentance is ultimately unnecessary can trivialise agency, martyrdom, and the cries of victims. Divine judgment is not the opposite of love. It is love's refusal to call cruelty harmless.

This chapter affirms eternal punishment as part of the book's doctrinal standard while recognising that orthodox Christians debate the precise nature of final punishment. Annihilationism or conditional immortality differs from universalism because it still affirms irreversible loss. The present chapter's central concern is not to settle every detail of hell but to preserve the biblical urgency of repentance before judgment.

Hope must be located where Scripture locates it. We may pray for all, preach to all, and trust God's justice. We may not promise salvation to those whom Scripture calls to repent.

Modern Interfaith Architecture and the Public Language of Unity

Religious cooperation now operates through local councils, universities, humanitarian agencies, diplomatic forums, multilateral institutions, and global networks. The existence of such structures is publicly documented and should not be exaggerated into secret coordination.

The 2019 Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, called for dialogue, mutual cooperation, religious freedom, peace, and human fraternity. It also stated that the pluralism and diversity of religions are willed by God in His wisdom (Francis & Ahmad al-Tayyeb, 2019). That sentence has generated theological concern because divine permission of religious diversity is not identical to divine approval of contradictory worship. A charitable reading may understand the statement as defending freedom in providential history. A plain reading can suggest that religious plurality itself is positively willed in the same manner as human diversity. The ambiguity matters.

The United Nations designated 4 February as the International Day of Human Fraternity through Resolution 75/200, linking the observance to interreligious and intercultural dialogue, tolerance, and solidarity (United Nations General Assembly, 2020). Religions for Peace describes itself as a global multi-religious body and in 2026 continued promoting "Shared Sacred Flourishing" as a framework for interreligious action (Religions for Peace, 2026). The African Union's Interfaith Dialogue Forum engages religious leaders in peace, human rights, and development, while KAICIID and the African Union renewed a structured partnership for dialogue-driven peacebuilding in April 2026 (African Union, 2025; KAICIID, 2026b).

These initiatives do not prove that [Revelation 17](#) has been fulfilled. They do not show that every participant seeks an Antichrist system. Some programmes may save lives, protect minorities, restrain violence, and create space for lawful witness. False accusation would violate the very truth Christians claim to defend.

A responsible inference is narrower. A global vocabulary is being normalised in which religions are expected to contribute shared values, social cohesion, sustainability, dignity, and peace. That vocabulary may remain civic. It may also become a moral filter through which religion is considered acceptable only after exclusive truth claims are softened.

The decisive question is who defines the terms. When Christians enter policy spaces, are they free to say that all humanity is created by God, fallen in sin, accountable to judgment, and reconciled only through Christ? Or are they welcomed only as providers of moral energy for a prior political consensus?

The church should not fear public cooperation. It should fear becoming useful to every agenda except the Great Commission.

Africa: Peace Without Syncretism

Sub-Saharan Africa is not religiously uniform. Christianity and Islam are numerically dominant in much of the region, while traditional religious beliefs and practices often continue within Christian, Muslim, or hybrid identities. Pew Research Center's 2025 global estimates show rapid numerical growth of both Christians and Muslims in the region from 2010 to 2020 (Hackett et al., 2025). Religious proximity is therefore not an abstract theory. Christians and Muslims share families, markets, schools, workplaces, neighbourhoods, and national institutions.

Interfaith peacebuilding can be morally urgent where religious identity intersects with ethnicity, politics, land, migration, and economic competition. Nigeria, the Central African Republic, Mozambique, Kenya, and other contexts have seen violence in which religious labels and deeper conflicts reinforce one another. Dialogue may reduce rumours, protect civilians, and help leaders restrain retaliatory preaching.

Christians should participate in such efforts without shame when the purpose is truthful peace. The command to love one's neighbour does not stop at the church door. Defending a Muslim family from a mob is not syncretism. Opposing the burning of a mosque is not denial of Christ. Supporting equal protection under law is not religious pluralism.

Yet African churches face distinct pressures toward mixture. Traditional practices involving ancestors, divination, protective objects, ritual cleansing, or sacred intermediaries may remain beneath Christian language. A national ceremony may combine biblical prayer, ancestral invocation, Islamic recitation, and civil religion into one symbolic act. A pastor may condemn Western pluralism while practising local syncretism through fear of spirits, tribal ritual, or prophetic techniques.

The church must therefore test both imported and indigenous compromise. Western theology does not become true because it is academically prestigious. Traditional religion does not become biblical because it is African. Culture is a gift and a field of discipleship, not a final authority.

Family pressure requires special pastoral care. Converts from Islam or traditional religion may face rejection, inheritance loss, violence, or isolation. An ecumenical or interfaith theology that tells them explicit faith in Christ was unnecessary can deepen the wound. The church should receive converts as family, provide protection where possible, teach wisely, and avoid using their stories as propaganda.

Religious liberty must include the freedom to change religion. Peace that protects inherited identity but punishes conversion is not peace. Similarly, Christian witness must reject manipulation, bribery, political coercion, and contempt for family bonds. Conversion belongs to conscience before God.

The African church has a vital testimony to offer the world: robust public peace without theological surrender, hospitality without ritual mixture, and courageous evangelism without coercion.

Schools, Workplaces, Chaplaincies, and the New Neutrality

The pressure toward religious equivalence increasingly appears outside formal religious institutions. Universities organise multi-faith events, workplaces adopt spiritual wellbeing programmes, hospitals employ interfaith chaplains, and schools teach religious literacy. These practices can promote understanding and protect minorities. They can also form a hidden theology.

The hidden theology says religion is a private identity whose public value lies in wellbeing, social cohesion, and ethics. Doctrines concerning revelation, sin, salvation, and judgment are treated as internal languages that must not interrupt common life. The acceptable believer is sincere but non-exclusive.

A Christian student may therefore be encouraged to celebrate every religious festival but discouraged from inviting a friend to faith in Christ. A chaplain may be permitted to speak of hope but not repentance. An employee may share a generic inspirational prayer but not pray explicitly in Jesus' name. A theology department may treat all traditions as culturally constructed while granting secular naturalism the status of neutral reason.

Christians should not respond with fear or discourtesy. They should master the professional context, honour lawful policies, defend the rights of others, and seek reasonable accommodation. They should also recognise that neutrality is often a moral arrangement with its own doctrine of religion.

The key question is whether the institution permits truthful difference. Genuine plural civic space allows a Christian to be Christian, a Muslim to be Muslim, and a humanist to be humanist while protecting each from coercion. Ideological pluralism allows diversity only after every participant agrees that no claim is finally binding.

This distinction prepares the next chapter. Counterfeit unity is not sustained only by councils and declarations. It is taught through curricula, films, professional codes, news, entertainment, advertising, and repeated social rewards. Before people sign a pluralist statement, they are often catechised to feel that exclusive truth is unkind.

Babylon, the Last Days, and the Discipline of Prophetic Restraint

Scripture warns that religious deception will intensify. Jesus speaks of false christs and false prophets. Paul warns of apostasy and powerful delusion among those who refuse to love the truth. Revelation portrays beastly power, a false prophet, coerced worship, Babylonian luxury, and a corrupt woman influencing kings and nations ([Matthew 24:23-25](#); [2 Thessalonians 2:9-12](#); [Revelation 13:11-18](#); [Revelation 17:1-6](#)).

These texts justify vigilance. They do not permit careless identification. Revelation's symbols are theologically rich and historically debated. A single interfaith building, meeting, declaration, or leader cannot be declared the final fulfilment merely because the imagery feels suggestive.

The author has previously argued that interfaith peace can become a substitute gospel when it offers fraternity without new birth, peace without the cross, and shared sacred values without repentance (Sangwa, 2026b). That warning should be retained with disciplined evidence. Documented institutions may be evaluated according to their statements and practices. Hidden motives should not be invented. Theological resemblance is not proof of organisational identity.

What can be said responsibly is that a church trained to surrender Christ's exclusivity for social approval will be poorly prepared for greater deception. Apostasy usually requires prior formation. The conscience learns to feel embarrassment before it learns to deny. A generation repeatedly told that exclusive claims cause violence may later accept coercion against those who refuse religious synthesis.

The phrase "the last second before midnight" should therefore function as moral urgency, not date-setting. Christ may return. Every generation is one breath from personal judgment. The prophetic hour calls for holiness, truth, courage, and oil in the lamp, not feverish speculation.

The Bride must know the Bridegroom's voice before counterfeit unity asks for her signature.

The Sins of Sectarian Christianity

A chapter against false unity must not become an excuse for loveless separation. The New Testament condemns factionalism as seriously as doctrinal compromise.

The Corinthians attached themselves to Paul, Apollos, Cephas, or Christ in a party spirit. Paul asks, "Is Christ divided?" (1 Corinthians 1:13). Their error was not doctrinal seriousness but ministerial identity converted into rivalry. Similar patterns appear when believers speak as though Christ belongs to their denomination, network, nation, tribe, or favourite teacher.

Sectarianism often begins with a true conviction and adds pride. A church rightly values biblical preaching, then assumes no other church preaches faithfully. It rightly rejects false worship, then treats every unfamiliar practice as apostasy. It rightly protects doctrine, then refuses correction of its own tradition. It rightly separates from a false teacher, then discovers emotional pleasure in separation itself.

The fruit is visible. Rumour replaces inquiry. Other believers are described through their worst representatives. Historical wounds are preserved as identity. Cooperation in mercy is rejected because it may imply contamination. Small congregations duplicate weak institutions rather than share resources. Leaders fear that unity will reduce their control.

This sin is especially serious when churches agree on first-order doctrine but remain divided by ethnicity, language, class, or personality. A congregation may denounce interfaith unity while refusing fellowship with believers from another tribe. Such orthodoxy has not reached the heart.

Repentance requires humility. Churches should distinguish inherited suspicion from necessary separation, seek direct conversation, confess false accusation, forgive, and cooperate where truth permits. The goal is not one global bureaucracy. It is one body visibly loving its members.

A Framework for Cooperation Without Compromise

Churches and Christian institutions need more than warnings. They need a practical framework.

Level One: Civic Coexistence

Respect, legal protection, neighbourly relations, fair employment, ordinary friendship, and defence of houses of worship are required by love and justice. Christians should oppose violence and discrimination against people of every religion or none. No theological agreement is implied.

Level Two: Common-Good Cooperation

Relief work, health initiatives, peacebuilding, anti-corruption efforts, environmental stewardship, education, and protection of vulnerable people may be undertaken with non-Christian partners when the purpose is clear, governance is transparent, and no participant is required to endorse false worship. The narrower the task, the easier the boundaries are to maintain.

Level Three: Theological Dialogue

Honest explanation of beliefs, comparative study, conflict mediation, and public discussion are permissible and often useful. Christians should speak accurately, listen carefully, and refuse manipulation. Dialogue must not be defined in advance as the abandonment of evangelism or exclusive truth.

Level Four: Spiritual Fellowship and Joint Worship

Shared prayer as one religious body, sacramental communion, common confession, joint sacred ritual, and the presentation of religions as equivalent require shared faith in the apostolic Christ. Where that faith is absent, Christians should decline respectfully. The refusal is not hostility. It is truth about worship.

Summary of the cooperation framework

Level	Activity	Biblical assessment
Civic coexistence	Respect, legal protection, neighbourly relations, and defence of conscience.	Required by neighbour-love and justice; no theological agreement is implied.
Common-good cooperation	Relief, health, peacebuilding, education, anti-corruption work, and protection of vulnerable people.	Often permissible when the purpose is limited, governance is transparent, and false worship is not required.
Theological dialogue	Honest explanation, comparative study, conflict mediation, and public discussion.	Permissible when Christian truth is not concealed and dialogue is not defined as abandonment of mission.
Spiritual fellowship and joint worship	Shared prayer as one body, sacred ritual, sacramental communion, or presentation of religions as equivalent.	Requires shared faith in the apostolic Christ; must not become syncretistic or imply common access to God apart from Christ.

Several diagnostic questions should govern every proposed partnership. What is the stated purpose? Which public symbols and words will be used? Does participation imply spiritual equivalence? May Christians confess Christ clearly? Are vulnerable people protected? Is conversion treated as a right or betrayal? What financial or political incentives shape the arrangement? Can the church withdraw without retaliation? What will an ordinary observer reasonably think the event means?

Churches should adopt written policies before a crisis. Decisions made under the pressure of tragedy, funding, government invitation, or public scrutiny are easily inconsistent. Pastors should teach members why a civic event differs from a worship service and why kindness does not require theological ambiguity.

Before the Church Signs, Prays, or Joins

A church can lose clarity through one dramatic act, but more often compromise develops through a sequence of apparently minor permissions. A leader joins a committee without reading its theological assumptions. A congregation lends its building for a ceremony whose liturgy has not been reviewed. A university asks Christian chaplains to use language acceptable to every faith. A funding agreement requires "non-proselytisation" but leaves the term undefined. A national event invites clergy to offer prayers while expecting each to address a generic deity. No single decision appears decisive. Together they train the church to speak as though its Lord were negotiable.

Faithful governance should begin before the invitation arrives. Churches, schools, charities, and ministries need written principles for partnerships, worship, representation, funding, and public statements. Such policies do not replace prayer or pastoral judgment. They prevent urgency, celebrity access, political pressure, or financial need from becoming the hidden interpreter of doctrine.

The first question is identity. Who is participating, and in what capacity? A Christian may attend as a citizen, physician, teacher, mediator, relief worker, scholar, or pastor. The moral meaning changes when the person is presented as representing the church in spiritual communion. Private attendance at a civic reception differs from leading a combined liturgy.

The second question is purpose. Is the event intended to protect life, distribute food, resolve conflict, discuss beliefs, mourn publicly, celebrate religious diversity, or perform common worship? Broad language such as "unity," "spiritual solidarity," or "shared sacred values" may conceal important differences. Organisers should be asked what concrete actions will occur and what public message they intend to communicate.

The third question is speech. May the Christian name the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, confess Christ's death and resurrection, and pray in Jesus' name? Freedom to speak does not mean every civic event must become a sermon. It does reveal whether the partnership respects genuine religious difference or accepts Christianity only after its particular confession has been removed.

The fourth question is ritual. Will participants repeat common words, receive a blessing, handle sacred objects, stand before an altar, invoke ancestors or spirits, or join a prayer written to permit multiple theological meanings? Ritual performs theology. A sentence may be privately reinterpreted, but embodied participation communicates belonging to a public act.

The fifth question is audience. What will ordinary church members, converts, children, neighbours of other religions, and the wider public reasonably understand? Leaders often defend an ambiguous event by appealing to intentions known only to themselves. Pastoral responsibility includes foreseeable interpretation. If the ceremony appears to declare that all prayers reach the same God, a private reservation cannot repair the public lesson.

The sixth question is conscience. Are participants free to decline elements that violate conviction? Will employees, students, or clergy suffer professional penalties for refusing joint worship? A partnership that speaks of freedom while punishing conscientious nonparticipation has moved from coexistence toward managed religion.

The seventh question is mission. Is honest Christian witness welcomed, tolerated, restricted, or redefined as aggression? Dialogue becomes coercive when one side is permitted to retain its claims while the Christian must translate conversion, repentance, and lordship into neutral language. Peace cannot require one participant to become religiously invisible.

The eighth question is money and power. Who funds the programme? What outcomes are rewarded? Which vocabulary is required in reports? What access, status, or protection may be lost if the church refuses? Funding does not prove corruption, and cooperation with government or international institutions is not inherently compromise. Yet incentives shape institutions. Transparency allows the congregation to judge whether mission is serving partnership or partnership is serving mission.

The ninth question is accountability. Who reviewed the agreement? Were mature believers from more than one background consulted? Can concerns be raised without retaliation? Is there a process for correction and withdrawal? A charismatic leader should not bind an entire church to an interfaith structure by personal enthusiasm.

The tenth question is fruit. Does the partnership produce truthful peace, protection of vulnerable people, and opportunities for honest witness? Or does it steadily make Christ's exclusivity unspeakable, conversion shameful, and doctrinal conviction socially suspect? Fruit should be assessed over time rather than through the prestige of the launching ceremony.

Where a church discovers that it has compromised, repentance should be proportionate to the act. An unclear statement may require clarification. A misleading ceremony may require public explanation. A continuing partnership may need renegotiation or withdrawal. Money obtained under conditions that corrupted witness may need to be refused. Leaders should not defend yesterday's mistake merely because admitting it threatens reputation.

Where an invitation can be accepted faithfully, Christians should participate without fear. They may stand beside neighbours against violence, mourn the dead, distribute relief, defend religious liberty, and speak for peace. They should do so as Christians rather than as temporary pluralists. Their presence should communicate both neighbour-love and unashamed allegiance to Christ.

This discipline protects people of other religions as well. Honest neighbours deserve to know what Christians believe. It is patronising to assume peace can survive only if convictions are hidden. Mature coexistence permits genuine difference without violence. False peace demands public sameness while private disagreement is allowed only if it remains silent.

The church must therefore learn to say both yes and no with grace. Yes to justice, protection, conversation, mercy, and peace. No to shared idolatry, religious equivalence, another gospel, and worship whose object has been deliberately left undefined. A faithful no can protect the integrity of a faithful yes.

A Pastoral Word to Those at the Boundary

To the leader who knows the gospel but conceals it for access, funding, influence, or applause: repent. The institution you are protecting will not stand with you before Christ. If the compromise was public, correction should be public. Ambiguous statements that misled the flock require clarification.

To the sincere ecumenical Christian: your grief over division may reflect the heart of Christ. Do not let that grief be recruited against the truth by which Christ sanctifies His people. Seek reconciliation, pray across denominational lines, learn from faithful believers, and refuse pride. But do not call contradiction communion.

To the Christian peacebuilder: continue protecting life. Speak against hatred. Build channels through which rumours can be corrected before blood is shed. Defend Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, traditional religious, and secular neighbours from violence. Do this openly as a disciple of Jesus, without joining worship that denies Him.

To the person of another religion: you bear God's image and deserve truth, safety, and respect. Christians have sometimes spoken with arrogance, manipulated the vulnerable, or confused Western power with the kingdom of God. Such sins should be confessed. Yet honesty also requires saying that religious sincerity cannot reconcile contradictions or remove guilt before the Creator. Jesus Christ is not the property of one ethnicity. He is the crucified and risen Lord who commands all people everywhere to repent and offers mercy to all who come.

To the convert who has lost family, inheritance, friendship, or security because of Christ: your sacrifice is not meaningless. The church must not praise your courage on a platform and leave you alone afterward. You need family, protection, work, teaching, patience, and a community that honours your relatives without returning you to bondage.

To the universalist who cannot bear the thought of final loss: let that grief deepen evangelism and prayer. Do not turn compassion into a promise God has not made. The cross shows both the severity of sin and the immeasurable love of God.

To the sectarian believer: truth does not belong to your party. Examine whether pride, injury, tribal loyalty, or fear has been baptised as separation. Christ's body is larger than your circle and holier than your prejudice.

To the unconverted reader, whether religious or secular: inherited identity cannot save. Moral seriousness cannot atone. Spiritual experience cannot raise the dead. Repent and believe the gospel. The Father receives sinners through the Son.

Unity Under the Returning Christ

The future unity of God's people is not a vague parliament of religions. Revelation shows a multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language standing before the throne and the Lamb ([Revelation 7:9-10](#)). Their diversity remains visible. Their worship is one because the Lamb is one.

The nations do not enter the new Jerusalem by contributing separate saving lights. The glory of God illuminates it, and its lamp is the Lamb ([Revelation 21:22-27](#)). Nothing unclean enters. Grace gathers the nations without blessing their idols.

This is the unity for which the church waits and works. It is universal in invitation, multinational in membership, particular in confession, holy in character, and centred eternally in Jesus Christ.

Rapture readiness is not prophetic excitement attached to doctrinal carelessness. It is repentance, faith, holiness, love of truth, separation from idolatry, forgiveness, courage, witness, endurance, and watchfulness. The lamp is not filled with institutional prestige. The oil cannot be replaced by a declaration of fraternity.

The church should examine its partnerships, memberships, funding arrangements, liturgies, ceremonies, public language, and educational programmes. Where cooperation serves neighbour-love without false worship, it may be received gratefully. Where participation obscures Christ, repentance may require withdrawal, correction, or a clearer form of presence.

The last second before midnight is not the hour for proud isolation or diplomatic surrender. It is the hour to love every neighbour, protect every vulnerable person, confess every sin, repair every needless division, refuse every idol, and proclaim the only name by which sinners are saved.

Jesus Christ alone is Lord, and His church becomes truly one not by hiding His name, but by abiding in His Word, walking in His holiness, loving one another, and bearing truthful witness until He comes.

Counterfeit unity does not spread only through councils, interfaith declarations, or public ceremonies. Its assumptions are taught daily through schools, universities, films, news, advertising, music, professional training, digital platforms, and workplaces. The next chapter turns from religious institutions to these wider catechetical powers and asks how the modern age trains people to experience exclusive truth as harm before they have even examined whether it is true.

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