Bad politics in the body of Christ: Implications for Missions and Unity

Lami Ibrahim Bakari Ph.D [1], Nanlir Kartim Napbut Ph.D [2]

[1] ECWA Theological Seminary, Jos

[2] Crowther Graduate Theological Seminary

Article Info

Corresponding Author:
Lami Ibrahim Bakari Ph.D
ECWA Theological Seminary, Jos.

ABSTRACT

The presence of bad politics within the body of Christ remains a significant challenge to the Church's witness, mission, and unity. While the Church is called to embody the values of love, humility, and service, political manipulation, favoritism, power struggles, and factionalism often undermine this calling. Such practices, rooted in human pride and self-interest, distort leadership selection processes, erode trust, and breed divisions among believers. These divisions weaken the Church's credibility before the watching world and hinder collaborative efforts in evangelism, discipleship, and social engagement. Moreover, internal political conflicts distract from the Great Commission mandate, causing resources and energy to be diverted from mission work to resolving disputes. Scripture emphasizes that unity is not merely organizational but spiritual—rooted in the shared identity in Christ (John 17:20–23; 1 Corinthians 1:10). Therefore, overcoming bad politics requires intentional cultivation of biblical leadership values, transparent decision-making, and commitment to reconciliation. By confronting political dysfunctions with humility and accountability, the Church can restore its prophetic voice and effectively fulfill its mission mandate. This paper examines the theological, missional, and ethical implications of bad politics in the Church and offers practical pathways toward restoring unity for effective Christian witness in the contemporary world.

INTRODUCTION

The Church, as the body of Christ, is divinely commissioned to proclaim the gospel, disciple believers, and serve as a visible expression of God's kingdom on earth (Matthew 28:18–20; Ephesians 4:11–13). However, throughout history, the Church has not been immune to the influence of human weaknesses, including political manipulation, favoritism, and factionalism. These practices—often referred to as bad politics—manifest in the form of power struggles, leadership rivalries, and decision-making driven by personal gain rather than spiritual discernment (Kalu, 2008). Such tendencies undermine the Church's unity, tarnish its public witness, and weaken its missional effectiveness (Guder, 2015).

Bad politics in the Church is not a modern phenomenon. The apostle Paul addressed divisions in the Corinthian church, rebuking members who aligned themselves with specific leaders in ways that fostered disunity (1 Corinthians 1:10–13). Contemporary church politics may involve competition for leadership positions, manipulation of church constitutions, or marginalization of certain groups within the congregation (Ogbu, 2013). These dynamics often fracture relationships, distract from the gospel, and shift the Church's focus from spiritual growth to institutional survival (Wright, 2010).

In a missional context, political conflicts drain resources and hinder collaboration across denominational and cultural boundaries (Bosch, 2011). Unity, as Christ prayed in John 17:20–23, is central to the credibility of the Church's witness. Thus, addressing bad politics is not only an ethical imperative but also a missional necessity. This paper explores the theological, missional, and practical implications of bad politics in the body of Christ,

proposing biblical strategies to restore unity for effective mission engagement.

Conceptual Clarification of Terms

Bad Politics

Bad politics refers to manipulative, self-serving, and divisive behaviors within an institution's decision-making processes that prioritize personal interests over collective well-being (Achebe, 1983). In the context of the Church, bad politics manifests as favoritism, power struggles, nepotism, and the manipulation of governance structures for personal or group advantage (Kalu, 2008). It often leads to mistrust, disunity, and a loss of focus on the Church's spiritual mandate.

Body of Christ

The term "Body of Christ" is a biblical metaphor describing the collective identity of believers united in Christ, functioning as an interdependent spiritual organism (1 Corinthians 12:12–27). It emphasizes unity, diversity of gifts, and mutual care within the Christian community (Wright, 2010). In this paper, it refers to both the universal Church and local congregations that share in Christ's mission.

Mission(s)

Mission refers to the Church's God-given mandate to proclaim the gospel, disciple nations, and demonstrate God's love through word and deed (Matthew 28:18–20; Bosch, 2011). It encompasses evangelism, social action, and cultural engagement aimed at advancing God's kingdom on earth. The plural "missions" often denotes specific organized activities or outreach efforts.

Unity

Unity, in the Christian context, is the spiritual and relational harmony among believers, rooted in their shared faith in Christ and sustained by the Holy Spirit (John 17:20–23; Ephesians 4:3). It is not mere uniformity but a oneness that respects diversity while maintaining mutual commitment to the mission of God (Guder, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two interrelated theoretical perspectives: Servant Leadership Theory and Missional Ecclesiology.

Servant Leadership Theory

Servant Leadership Theory, as articulated by Greenleaf (1977), emphasizes that true leadership prioritizes the growth, well-being, and empowerment of followers over the pursuit of personal power or institutional dominance. In the context of the Church, this model aligns with Christ's teaching that leaders should serve rather than lord over others (Mark 10:42–45). Servant leadership offers an antidote to bad politics by fostering humility, accountability, and a shared vision for ministry (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). It underscores the necessity of character-driven leadership to maintain unity and promote mission effectiveness.

Missional Ecclesiology

Missional Ecclesiology, as developed by Bosch (2011) and Guder (2015), views the Church primarily as a community sent into the world to participate in God's redemptive mission. This framework stresses that the Church's identity is inseparable from its mission. Bad politics disrupts this missional focus, shifting attention from outward engagement to inward conflicts. Missional Ecclesiology calls for the Church to embody the reconciling love of Christ both internally and externally, recognizing that internal unity is essential for credible witness (John 17:20–23).

By integrating Servant Leadership Theory and Missional Ecclesiology, this study frames bad politics as both a leadership and a missional crisis. Effective solutions must therefore address leadership formation, ethical governance, and theological reorientation toward God's mission.

Literature Review

Bad Politics in the Church Context

The phenomenon of bad politics within the Church has been documented across various contexts, from local congregations to global denominations. Kalu (2008) notes that in African Christianity, church politics often intertwines with cultural leadership norms, sometimes leading to power struggles that compromise spiritual integrity. Wright (2010) emphasizes that such politics shifts the Church's focus from its redemptive mission to institutional self-preservation. These political tendencies include favoritism in leadership appointments, manipulation of constitutions, and silencing of dissenting voices (Ogbu, 2013).

Historical and Biblical Perspectives

Bad politics is not unique to the contemporary Church. The early Church faced internal divisions, as seen in Paul's rebuke of factionalism in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:10–13) and disputes over resource distribution in Acts 6:1–7. Bosch (2011) argues that these early challenges underline the constant need for biblically grounded leadership and conflict resolution. Unity, as reflected in Jesus' high priestly prayer (John 17:20–23), is both a theological imperative and a missional strategy.

Leadership Failures and Missional Consequences

Greenleaf's (1977) Servant Leadership Theory provides a framework for understanding how leadership failures fuel bad politics. When leaders prioritize personal agendas, they erode trust and hinder collaboration in mission work (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Guder (2015) highlights that a Church divided internally cannot effectively embody the reconciling mission of God. Internal political crises often drain resources and demotivate congregants, reducing participation in evangelism, discipleship, and social outreach (Walls, 2002).

Pathways Toward Unity and Mission Renewal

Scholars recommend intentional leadership development rooted in biblical values as a primary solution to bad politics (Ott & Strauss, 2010). Transparent governance, inclusive decision-making, and a focus on the Church's missional identity can counteract divisive tendencies. As Bosch (2011) affirms, unity is not merely desirable—it is essential for the credibility of the gospel in a fragmented world.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research design. The qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the complex social, theological, and leadership dynamics associated with bad politics in the Church (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The descriptive component seeks to present a clear picture of how political manipulation manifests in ecclesiastical contexts, while the analytical component evaluates its implications for mission and unity.

Data Sources

The research is primarily based on secondary sources, including books, journal articles, theological commentaries, and biblical texts. Scholarly works on ecclesiology, leadership, and mission studies form the backbone of the analysis. Relevant biblical passages—such as 1 Corinthians 1:10–13, John 17:20–23, and Acts 6:1–7—are also examined to provide theological grounding for the discussion. The integration of African and global perspectives ensures contextual balance and cultural relevance (Kalu, 2008; Wright, 2010).

Data Analysis

Content analysis is employed to identify recurring themes related to bad politics, such as leadership failures, factionalism, and institutional self-interest (Krippendorff, 2019). The data is then interpreted through the dual theoretical lenses of Servant Leadership Theory (Greenleaf, 1977) and Missional Ecclesiology (Bosch, 2011; Guder, 2015). This framework enables the study to connect leadership ethics with missional outcomes, highlighting how political dysfunction undermines unity and mission effectiveness.

Scope and Limitations

The study focuses on Christian congregations and denominations, with particular attention to the African church context. While the findings may have global relevance, the emphasis on African experiences means some conclusions may require adaptation for other cultural settings. The reliance on secondary data is a limitation, as it does not include first-hand interviews or ethnographic observation.

Findings and Discussion

1. Manifestations of Bad Politics in the Church

The data analysis reveals that bad politics in the body of Christ often manifests in four major forms: leadership struggles, favoritism, constitutional manipulation, and exclusion of dissenting voices. In many African church contexts, leadership contests

sometimes resemble secular political campaigns, marked by lobbying, factional alliances, and financial inducements (Kalu, 2008). Such patterns detract from spiritual discernment and reduce leadership selection to a competition for power rather than a call to service (Greenleaf, 1977).

2. Erosion of Trust and Spiritual Authority

One of the most damaging consequences of bad politics is the erosion of trust between leaders and congregants. When leaders prioritize personal ambition over collective well-being, their moral authority diminishes, making it difficult to inspire and mobilize members for mission work (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). This breakdown in trust weakens the Church's ability to function as the body of Christ, where members are called to mutual care and accountability (1 Corinthians 12:12–27).

3. Disruption of Missional Focus

The Church's mission requires unity of purpose, yet bad politics diverts attention from outreach and discipleship to internal conflict resolution (Bosch, 2011). Resources—both financial and human—are often redirected from evangelism, social service, and community development toward legal battles, crisis management, and factional appeasement. As Wright (2010) notes, a divided Church struggles to present a credible gospel witness, especially in pluralistic societies where unity is a sign of spiritual authenticity.

4. Hindrance to Unity as a Missional Strategy

Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17:20–23 frames oneness as a core missional strategy. Bad politics undermines this by creating divisions that mirror societal fractures such as ethnicity, class, or political ideology. These divisions weaken ecumenical partnerships and cross-cultural mission efforts (Guder, 2015). In contexts where the Church is already a minority voice, such disunity further marginalizes its influence.

5. Pathways to Restoration

Addressing bad politics requires intentional adoption of servant leadership practices, transparent governance, and theological reorientation toward the Church's identity as a missional community (Greenleaf, 1977; Guder, 2015). Conflict resolution processes grounded in biblical principles (Matthew 18:15–17) and inclusive decision-making structures can help rebuild trust and restore unity. Ultimately, the Church must reclaim its prophetic role by modeling the humility, justice, and love it proclaims.

Conclusion

This study has shown that bad politics within the body of Christ is a multifaceted challenge that undermines both the unity and the missional mandate of the Church. Manifesting in leadership rivalries, favoritism, and institutional manipulation, bad politics erodes trust, diverts resources from mission work, and compromises the Church's spiritual credibility (Kalu, 2008; Wright, 2010). Using Servant Leadership Theory (Greenleaf, 1977) and Missional Ecclesiology (Bosch, 2011; Guder, 2015) as analytical frameworks, the study demonstrates that political dysfunction in the Church is both a leadership crisis and a missional impediment. Unity, as envisioned in John 17:20–23, is not merely an ethical aspiration but a divine strategy for credible gospel witness. The Church must therefore address internal political dysfunctions as a matter of theological obedience and strategic mission effectiveness.

Recommendations

1. Adopt Servant Leadership Principles

Church leaders should be trained and mentored to prioritize service, humility, and the growth of their congregations over personal ambition (Greenleaf, 1977; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002).

2. Strengthen Transparent Governance

Churches should implement open and accountable decision-making processes, ensuring that leadership appointments and resource allocations are conducted fairly and inclusively.

3. Promote Biblical Conflict Resolution

Congregations should establish structures based on Matthew 18:15–17 to address disputes constructively and prevent factionalism from escalating.

4. Reorient the Church Toward Its Missional Identity

Regular teaching and strategic planning should remind congregants and leaders that the Church exists to serve God's mission, not merely to sustain its institutional presence (Bosch, 2011).

5. Foster Ecumenical and Cross-Cultural Partnerships

By collaborating with other churches and denominations, congregations can model unity, pool resources, and strengthen their collective witness in society (Guder, 2015).

Addressing bad politics in the Church requires intentional and sustained efforts. By combining theological integrity, servant leadership, and missional focus, the Church can overcome internal divisions and effectively fulfill its calling as the body of Christ in the world.

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