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## **COVENANT AND COMMUNAL IDENTITY: BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR UNITY IN A RELIGIOUSLY AND ETHNICALLY DIVIDED NIGERIA**

**Williams Peter Awoshori, Ph.D**

Department of Christian Religious Studies,  
 Faculty of Religion and Philosophy, Taraba State University, Jalingo  
 Email: [frmutala@yahoo.com](mailto:frmutala@yahoo.com)  
 +234806944824

### **Abstract**

Nigeria's socio-political history has been marred by deep-seated ethno-religious divisions, often exacerbated by the absence of a unifying ideological or theological framework that can foster national integration. The study addressed this challenge by examining the biblical themes of covenant and communal identity as theological resources for promoting unity in Nigeria. The objective was to explore how covenantal theology and the concept of communal identity, as rooted in Scripture, could provide ethical and spiritual models for building inclusive and reconciled communities. A qualitative research design was adopted for this study. Data were collected through textual analysis of biblical texts and relevant theological literature, as well as through case studies of interfaith initiatives and peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria. The data were analysed using thematic content analysis. Findings revealed that the biblical covenant emphasises mutual responsibility, justice, and divine faithfulness, while communal identity encourages inclusive belonging beyond ethnic or religious lines. These concepts were found to be applicable in addressing sectarianism, political polarisation, and the breakdown of national cohesion. The study recommended the integration of covenantal ethics in theological education, civic curriculum reforms, and the establishment of interfaith collaborations grounded in shared moral values. The study concludes that a covenantal approach to unity in Nigeria is both theologically sound and practically viable, offering a transformative framework for national reconciliation and peacebuilding.

**Keywords:** Covenant Theology, Communal Identity, National Unity, Ethno-Religious Conflict, Biblical Ethics.

### **Introduction**

Nigeria stands as one of the most religiously and ethnically diverse countries in Africa, with over 250 ethnic groups and significant populations of Christians, Muslims, and adherents of traditional African religions. This diversity, while a potential source of strength, has often fuelled deep divisions, recurrent conflict, and mutual suspicion, especially between the North and South, and between major ethnic groups such as the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo. The ethno-religious violence that plagued cities like Jos, Kaduna, and Zangon Kataf has shown how quickly tensions can escalate into large-scale conflict. These divisions not only threaten national unity but also undermine trust in state institutions and frustrate developmental progress (Udoiem, 2021). Scriptural themes of covenant and communal identity offer a compelling lens through which to engage this national crisis. The



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biblical idea of covenant describes a binding relationship rooted in faithfulness, justice, and collective responsibility. In both Old and New Testament traditions, the covenant was not merely a private spiritual pact but a communal reality that shaped law, social ethics, and political structures (Wright, 2019). The covenant community, as seen in Israel and later in the early Christian Church, was called to model unity in diversity, reflecting divine values of peace and justice. In Nigeria's context, where ethnic allegiance often supersedes national loyalty, the recovery of such a covenantal identity could inspire frameworks for reconciliation and nation-building grounded in theological convictions rather than partisan ideologies.

The ideal Nigerian state, as enshrined in its constitution and national ethos, aspires toward unity in diversity, equal citizenship, and mutual respect among its various groups. However, the reality remains starkly different. Deep-seated distrust, ethno-religious violence, and the manipulation of religious sentiment for political ends have fragmented the nation's social fabric. Political elites often exploit ethnic and religious identities to secure power, resulting in systemic exclusion and marginalisation (Ilesanmi, 2018). The consequence is a nation in which communities operate in silos, national cohesion is weakened, and peace remains elusive. Faith-based efforts toward reconciliation, though commendable, have yet to be consistently grounded in a coherent theological vision that speaks to the Nigerian context.

This study aims to explore the biblical foundations of covenant and communal identity and how these can inform pathways to unity in Nigeria's divided landscape. The central research question posed is: How can the biblical concepts of covenant and communal identity provide a theological framework for national unity in Nigeria? Through examining scriptural models of covenantal living and their emphasis on shared moral vision, collective accountability, and inclusive community, this paper seeks to develop a contextual theology that contributes meaningfully to peacebuilding and socio-political harmony. The overarching argument is that a renewed understanding of covenantal relationships, rooted in both divine justice and communal responsibility, can inspire sustainable efforts toward unity across Nigeria's religious and ethnic fault lines.

## Conceptual Framework

**Covenant:** The term *covenant* refers to a solemn and binding agreement, often established between two parties, which includes mutual obligations and expectations. In the biblical context, covenant (*berit* in Hebrew; *diathēkē* in Greek) signifies a relational pact initiated by God, grounded in divine faithfulness and calling for human obedience and loyalty. The concept functions as a theological cornerstone for understanding God's interaction with humanity, particularly with the nation of Israel and, later, the Church (Wright, 2019).

Throughout Scripture, several covenants shape the biblical narrative. The covenant with Noah (Genesis 9) establishes God's commitment to preserve creation; the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12, 15, 17) lays the foundation for a chosen people through whom all nations will be blessed. The Mosaic covenant (Exodus 19–24) introduces a legal and ethical framework that binds Israel in worship, justice, and community living. The Davidic covenant (2 Samuel 7) points to a lasting kingship, culminating in the New Covenant through Jesus Christ, which embraces all humanity and promises inward transformation (Jeremiah 31:31–34; Luke 22:20).

Each of these covenants is not limited to individual piety but embodies a communal and ethical vision. The Mosaic covenant, for instance, calls for social justice, equitable distribution, care for the vulnerable, and fidelity to divine law (Brueggemann, 2016). The New Covenant, instituted in Christ, erases barriers of ethnicity, social class, and gender, calling believers into one reconciled body (Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:14–16). This transformative aspect of covenant identity places responsibility on the believing community to model unity, reconciliation, and peace.



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**Communal Identity:** Communal identity refers to the shared sense of belonging among a group of people, often shaped by common history, values, language, and belief systems. In biblical theology, this concept is not grounded in ethnicity or geography alone but in participation in God's covenant. Communal identity, therefore, involves not only mutual belonging but also shared responsibility, ethical commitments, and spiritual solidarity under divine sovereignty (Bosch, 2011). Biblical communal identity is evident in Israel's formation as a nation. Their identity stemmed from God's covenant, expressed through collective worship, festivals, laws, and narratives of deliverance (Deuteronomy 6:4–9). The early Church similarly reflected a shared identity rooted in Christ. Despite vast cultural differences between Jews, Greeks, Romans, and others, the New Testament Church cultivated unity through baptism, the breaking of bread, and mutual support (Acts 2:42–47; Romans 12:4–5). Paul's theology articulates the vision of the Church as one body with many parts, stressing that no member is dispensable (1 Corinthians 12:12–27).

African societies have historically reflected strong communal identities. The maxim "I am because we are," derived from African humanism, resonates with biblical communal ethics. Families and clans traditionally functioned through mutual obligations, collective memory, and shared resources. However, in postcolonial Nigeria, ethnic identity often competes with national unity, with many citizens perceiving state institutions through tribal lenses. Religious identities, in turn, have reinforced these divisions when manipulated by political elites (Udoiem, 2021).

Although communal identity can promote solidarity, it may also breed exclusion when narrowly defined. In biblical history, Israel occasionally misused their covenant status to justify nationalistic superiority, disregarding God's universal mission (Amos 9:7; Jonah 4:1–11). Similarly, Nigerian ethnic and religious affiliations have been weaponised, creating parallel societies with little national cohesion. Churches too, at times, reinforce tribal divides through ethno-linguistic segregation in worship and leadership. A critical reassessment of communal identity, therefore, demands a return to the inclusive and justice-oriented models found in Scripture and the early Church.

## **Relationship between Covenant and Communal Identity**

A coherent link exists between covenant and communal identity in the biblical narrative. God's covenant always implies the formation of a people—a community bound by shared values, ethical codes, and collective memory. Covenantal relationships inform not only theological beliefs but also societal norms and political behaviour. Communal identity emerges from this divine-human bond and is maintained through relational fidelity, ethical responsibility, and inclusion. In the context of Nigeria, recovering this linkage can offer an alternative to divisive identity politics. When covenant is understood as a call to justice and peace, and communal identity as a shared participation in God's redemptive mission, the Church can model a counter-narrative to fragmentation. This study proceeds on the premise that covenant and communal identity are not only theological concepts but practical tools for constructing a more unified, morally grounded society.

## **Ethno-Religious Divisions in Nigeria: An Overview**

Nigeria's identity as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation stem from its colonial formation, which amalgamated diverse peoples into one political entity in 1914. Before colonisation, the different ethnic nationalities had distinct systems of governance, religious traditions, and socio-cultural norms. The North was predominantly Islamic, having experienced a long history of Islamic scholarship and emirate rule, particularly through the Sokoto Caliphate. The South, in contrast, featured a mosaic of indigenous religions and, later, a strong Christian presence following European missionary activity in the 19th century (Falola, 2020). These varied legacies laid the groundwork for distinct ethno-religious identities that persist to this day.



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The post-independence period failed to produce a shared national identity. Instead, Nigeria's ethnic groups often competed for political dominance, resource control, and regional autonomy. The civil war of 1967–1970 exemplified how fragile the Nigerian union had become. Since then, ethno-religious conflicts have periodically erupted, with the Middle Belt becoming a major flashpoint due to its location at the crossroads of the predominantly Muslim North and Christian South. Despite constitutional provisions affirming unity and equal rights, ethnic affiliations continue to shape political appointments, voter behaviour, and even access to public services (Mustapha, 2019).

### **Causes and Manifestations of Ethno-Religious Conflict**

Several factors contribute to Nigeria's persistent ethno-religious tensions. Among them are historical grievances, inequitable distribution of resources, exclusionary politics, religious extremism, and manipulation of identity for political gain. Politicians often use ethnic or religious sentiments to mobilise support, especially during elections. These tactics deepen divisions and create zero-sum dynamics, where one group's gain is perceived as another's loss (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005). Additionally, inter-religious mistrust has been fuelled by inflammatory preaching, hate speech, and religiously motivated violence, especially in places like Jos, Kaduna, and Southern Kaduna. The manifestations of these tensions are visible in inter-communal violence, sectarian killings, the destruction of places of worship, and cycles of reprisal attacks. For example, the 2001 and 2008 crises in Jos resulted in the loss of hundreds of lives, displacements, and destruction of property. Attacks are not limited to physical violence; they also include systemic exclusion from employment, education, and leadership roles based on ethno-religious identity (Human Rights Watch, 2013). In many states, laws and informal practices favour 'indigenes' over 'settlers', leading to entrenched segregation and resentment.

### **Socio-Political Implications of Division**

The ethno-religious divide has far-reaching implications for national development. Firstly, it weakens national loyalty, making it difficult for Nigerians to see themselves as citizens first before being Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, or Christian or Muslim. This fractured identity affects national cohesion and hampers policy implementation, especially in areas of education, security, and healthcare. Secondly, it fuels insecurity. Insurgent groups such as Boko Haram and bandit militias have exploited religious sentiments to gain support or justify violence, deepening societal polarisation (Adewumi, 2021). Furthermore, religious identity has become a determining factor in political appointments and access to public resources. This phenomenon, known as the 'religious balancing act', often leads to tokenism rather than meritocracy. It also fosters feelings of marginalisation among minority groups. The result is a society in which institutions are perceived as favouring particular religious or ethnic groups, thereby undermining trust in the state. Such divisions also affect interfaith relations and hinder national conversations on justice, equality, and reconciliation (Marshall, 2018).

### **Religion's Dual Role: Aggravator and Healer**

Religion in Nigeria plays a paradoxical role. On one hand, it exacerbates tensions when weaponised for political or ideological purposes. On the other, it possesses a unique potential for healing and unity. Faith communities have been at the forefront of relief efforts, reconciliation initiatives, and peacebuilding processes. Interfaith organisations such as the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and the Kukah Centre have worked to foster dialogue, mutual understanding, and collective action in the face of crisis (Okoye, 2020).

Despite these efforts, religious institutions often fall short of their prophetic mandate to speak truth to power and model inclusive community. In many cases, churches and mosques have mirrored



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societal divisions, preaching tribal loyalty instead of national solidarity. Theological education frequently omits rigorous reflection on national identity, justice, and the socio-political dimensions of faith. As a result, religious narratives that should unite have sometimes been used to alienate. This underscores the urgent need for a theological re-engagement with biblical models of unity rooted in covenant and communal identity.

### **Covenant as a Framework for National Unity**

**Theological Significance of Covenant in Scripture:** Biblical covenants serve as foundational expressions of God's relationship with humanity, marked by justice, mercy, and communal accountability. Unlike secular contracts, which are often individualistic and conditional, divine covenants involve a sacred, binding commitment that shapes the moral and social framework of an entire community. The covenant with Noah (Genesis 9) demonstrates God's commitment to preserving creation, offering a universal promise irrespective of race or creed. The Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12:1–3) initiates a redemptive agenda for all nations through the chosen family of Abraham. These covenants outline a framework of inclusion, moral responsibility, and divine-human partnership that transcends tribal boundaries (Wright, 2019).

The Mosaic covenant introduces a comprehensive socio-political structure for Israel, emphasising justice, equity, and communal ethics. It centres on obedience to divine laws, care for the marginalised, and faithfulness to a God who liberates from oppression (Exodus 20–24). Importantly, this covenant was not restricted to priests or kings but required the participation of the entire nation. It provided a model where leaders and citizens were equally accountable to the law, promoting communal flourishing. Such a structure challenges models of governance rooted in favouritism, ethnic patronage, or religious bigotry; ailments common in Nigeria's political landscape (Brueggemann, 2016).

**Covenant as Inclusive and Justice-Based:** Covenants in Scripture consistently highlight God's concern for justice, inclusion, and moral integrity. The Deuteronomic tradition, in particular, underscores that covenantal faithfulness demands just treatment of strangers, widows, and the poor (Deuteronomy 10:17–19). This principle reflects a vision of society where all persons, regardless of origin or class, are treated with dignity. Similarly, the prophetic writings criticise covenant-breaking practices such as corruption, oppression, and idolatry—moral failures that echo contemporary Nigerian realities (Isaiah 1:15–17; Amos 5:21–24).

In the New Testament, Jesus' institution of the New Covenant shifts the focus from ethnic exclusivity to spiritual inclusivity. He gathers disciples from various social backgrounds, ministers to Samaritans, and establishes a community founded on love, forgiveness, and shared identity in God (Luke 22:20; John 13:34–35). Paul furthers this vision by declaring that in Christ, ethnic, gender, and socio-economic barriers are abolished (Galatians 3:28). These texts provide not only spiritual insight but a radical sociological framework for building inclusive communities.

In the Nigerian context, a covenantal framework could inspire a shift from politics of exclusion to politics of covenant, where political, religious, and ethnic leaders pledge mutual responsibility for justice, peace, and equity. This would require a collective moral vision grounded not in mere tolerance but in covenantal faithfulness to the principles of justice and inclusivity as outlined in Scripture (Ilesanmi, 2018). Such a paradigm challenges the status quo and offers a counter-narrative to divisive identity politics.

**National Unity through Covenantal Leadership:** Leadership in a covenantal society is grounded in service, humility, and accountability. Biblical covenants involve leaders who are answerable to





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God and their people. Moses, for instance, serves as a mediator who not only conveys divine laws but also intercedes for his people, accepts criticism, and shares power with others (Exodus 18:13–26; Numbers 11:16–17). David, though flawed, is held to covenantal standards of justice and is rebuked when he violates them (2 Samuel 12). Jesus epitomises servant leadership, laying down his life for others and teaching his followers to lead through love and humility (Mark 10:42–45).

This vision contrasts sharply with many Nigerian leaders who treat governance as personal privilege rather than covenantal trust. Nepotism, corruption, and religious partisanship often define public office, eroding citizens' trust in government institutions. A covenantal model demands that leaders view their positions as sacred trust agreements, where power is exercised for communal good, particularly in the service of the marginalised and vulnerable (Ajayi, 2020). Such leadership would reinforce national unity by promoting equitable access to resources, fair representation, and consistent justice.

Faith communities have a vital role in modelling and advocating for covenantal leadership. Churches, mosques, and interfaith coalitions must reclaim their prophetic voice, challenging leaders to govern according to ethical and inclusive principles. The covenantal tradition provides the theological legitimacy for such advocacy, reminding both leaders and citizens of their shared responsibility in nurturing a just and unified nation.

### **Biblical Models of Communal Identity and Peacebuilding**

**Israel as a Covenant Community:** The nation of Israel provides the earliest model of covenant-based communal identity. Formed through the liberating act of God from Egyptian bondage, Israel's identity was anchored not in ethnicity alone but in its covenantal relationship with Yahweh. This relationship shaped every aspect of their national life—from worship and law to justice and communal ethics. The Decalogue and subsequent legal codes outlined a society where the pursuit of justice, care for the marginalised, and fidelity to divine principles were expected of every member (Exodus 20; Leviticus 19:15–18). The community was called to function as a priestly nation and a light to the other nations (Exodus 19:5–6), revealing the universality of the covenant's ethical demands (Wright, 2019).

In Israel, communal identity was ritualised through festivals, corporate worship, and collective memory. The Passover, for instance, was not merely a meal but a national act of remembrance and unity, reinforcing their shared history and destiny (Exodus 12:14–28). This ritual life continually reminded the people of their obligations to God and to one another. It also provided regular opportunities for reconciliation, particularly through the Day of Atonement, which addressed both personal and communal sins (Leviticus 16). Such a model underscores that a covenant community is not only accountable to divine law but is also responsible for repairing internal fractures.

Contemporary Nigeria can draw from this model by reinvigorating communal practices that promote shared memory, restorative justice, and intergroup solidarity. As Israel's covenant identity transcended tribal divisions among its twelve tribes, Nigeria's diverse groups can embrace a unifying vision grounded in shared moral commitments rather than mutual suspicion. Faith-based organisations in Nigeria could revive this notion of national memory through civic liturgies, joint commemorations, and interfaith engagements rooted in justice and truth-telling.

**The Early Church: Unity in Diversity:** The early Church presents another significant model of communal identity grounded in covenantal inclusion. Emerging within a multi-ethnic and politically volatile Roman Empire, the Church confronted deep divisions between Jews and Gentiles, slaves and freemen, men and women. Despite these divisions, it crafted a counter-cultural identity based on baptismal unity, shared worship, and mutual care (Acts 2:42–47). Believers sold their possessions



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and shared their resources, ensuring that no one lacked basic needs. This radical economic and spiritual fellowship mirrored Israel's covenantal justice while expanding its scope to include all peoples (Bosch, 2011).

Paul's theology articulates this inclusive communal identity with theological precision. In Galatians 3:28, he affirms that in Christ, distinctions of ethnicity, social status, and gender no longer determine belonging. This does not deny difference but relativises it under the overarching identity in Christ. In Ephesians 2:14–18, Paul depicts Christ as the one who has “broken down the dividing wall of hostility”, creating one new humanity from the divided. The Church thus becomes a model of reconciled community, bearing witness to God's redemptive mission.

In the Nigerian context, where church congregations often reflect tribal affiliations, the early Church's model presents a challenge and an opportunity. Churches can become spaces where ethnic barriers are dismantled and covenantal identity in Christ supersedes tribal loyalty. This demands intentional inclusion, cross-cultural fellowship, and a theological reorientation toward unity. Pastors and Christian leaders must preach and practise this vision to counter the ethnic enclaves that often dominate denominational structures.

**Paul's Theology of Peace and Reconciliation:** Pauline theology offers a profound foundation for peacebuilding rooted in covenantal thinking. Reconciliation is central to Paul's gospel, not only in the sense of humanity's reconciliation with God but also in terms of restored human relationships. In 2 Corinthians 5:18–20, believers are described as ambassadors of reconciliation, entrusted with a ministry that mirrors God's own reconciling initiative. This is not passive acceptance of difference but active peacemaking—a covenantal responsibility placed upon the Church as God's representative community (Marshall, 2018).

The metaphor of the “body of Christ” in 1 Corinthians 12 further illustrates the kind of unity envisaged. Each member of the body is essential, and no part can claim superiority or dismissiveness over another. Diversity is acknowledged, but unity is prioritised. Such ecclesial vision requires humility, mutual respect, and shared service. This theological framework challenges Nigeria's socio-political structure, where exclusion and dominance often prevail. When applied to Nigeria's religious and ethnic context, Paul's vision implies that peacebuilding must move beyond political negotiation to include spiritual transformation and moral renewal. Faith communities must, therefore, embody reconciliation in their liturgies, community life, and public engagements. Programmes focused on trauma healing, truth-telling, and forgiveness must be theologically grounded in the reconciling work of Christ. This would enable Christian communities to serve not merely as mediators in conflict zones but as prophetic witnesses to a new form of communal life, deeply rooted in covenantal justice and grace.

### **Lessons for Nigeria's Contemporary Reality**

The biblical models of covenant community from Israel, the early Church, and Pauline theology collectively affirm that unity is not uniformity but a shared identity forged through ethical commitment, reconciliation, and divine purpose. Such models are particularly relevant for Nigeria, where deep divisions have resisted political solutions. A theology of communal identity rooted in Scripture offers not only moral clarity but also practical tools for peacebuilding—rituals of forgiveness, inclusive worship, economic solidarity, and accountable leadership.

This approach requires faith communities to go beyond charity and humanitarian interventions. They must embody and promote a radical rethinking of identity, where being Nigerian is not secondary to being a Christian but integrated within a covenantal framework that respects difference while promoting justice and peace. National unity will remain elusive if churches merely replicate ethnic



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divisions or support corrupt political structures. Biblical models provide a vision for ecclesial and national renewal through covenantal identity and communal solidarity. Ultimately, the Nigerian Church must become a living expression of what it preaches. Its unity must be visible in inter-ethnic leadership, interdenominational cooperation, and public advocacy for justice. Only then can it offer a credible witness to a nation torn apart by difference and yearning for wholeness.

### **Communal Identity in the Nigerian Context**

Communal identity refers to the collective sense of self that emerges from a group's shared values, history, beliefs, practices, and social relationships. It includes elements such as language, customs, kinship ties, religious beliefs, and mutual obligations that bind people together into a cohesive unit. Communal identity can be expressed through common ancestry, cultural heritage, social institutions, and shared experiences that help define "us" in contrast to "them" (Jenkins, 2014). In many African societies, including Nigeria, identity is deeply tied to one's ethnic group and religion, shaping not only personal identity but also socio-political allegiances and communal expectations.

The concept is rooted in social identity theory, which posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). This identity becomes a basis for solidarity, group pride, and collective action, but also for exclusion, stereotyping, and intergroup conflict. In Nigeria, communal identity often intersects with ethnicity and religion, creating both bonding capital within groups and bridging challenges across them (Akinrinade, 2020). The intertwining of communal identity with political, economic, and religious institutions has historically fuelled tensions, especially in areas marked by cultural and religious plurality.

Critically, communal identity is neither fixed nor inherently conflictual. Rather, it is constructed, negotiated, and performed in social and political contexts. While it can serve as a force for mutual care, resilience, and belonging, it may also be weaponised to serve political agendas, deepen divisions, and justify exclusion or violence (Falola, 2022). The challenge, therefore, is not the existence of communal identities but how they are shaped and deployed in national discourse and public policy.

### **The Nature of Communal Identity in Nigeria**

Nigeria's communal landscape is characterised by extraordinary diversity, with over 250 ethnic groups and numerous religious affiliations. Among the dominant ethnicities are the Hausa-Fulani in the North, Yoruba in the South-West, and Igbo in the South-East, alongside myriad smaller groups such as the Tiv, Idoma, Nupe, and Ibibio (Suberu, 2015). Religion overlays this ethnic mosaic, with Islam, Christianity, and indigenous beliefs often overlapping or competing in various regions. These complex layers of identity serve as primary sources of social cohesion within groups and friction between them.

Historically, the colonial policy of indirect rule accentuated ethnic divisions, favouring particular groups for administrative convenience and thereby institutionalising communal separateness (Osaghae, 1994). Post-independence politics has continued to reflect ethnic and religious loyalties, with regional power-sharing, ethnic patronage systems, and sectional nationalism shaping political behaviour and governance. In the current Fourth Republic, political parties often draw support from particular ethnic or religious bases, and election outcomes are frequently contested along these lines (Ibeanu & Orji, 2021). This identity-based mobilisation undermines national unity and hampers democratic consolidation.

Furthermore, communal identity has become a framework for accessing state resources. Federal character principles, zoning arrangements, and ethnic balancing in appointments reflect attempts to placate identity groups, yet often reinforce the perception of entitlement and marginalisation. When





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communities feel excluded from power, justice, or opportunity, grievances arise, leading to ethno-religious agitation, secessionist calls, or insurgency, as seen in the cases of Boko Haram in the North-East, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the South-East, and herder-farmer conflicts in the Middle Belt (Kwaja, 2018).

### **Reimagining Communal Identity through Theological Engagement**

Biblical theology presents communal identity not merely as a sociological category but as a sacred calling grounded in divine covenant. From the covenant with Abraham to the new covenant in Christ, the people of God are formed, not by tribal bloodlines or territorial claims, but by relationship with God and ethical commitment to justice, mercy, and holiness (Wright, 2010). The Church, as a covenant community, is called to transcend ethnic, cultural, and social divisions, embodying a reconciled humanity in Christ (Galatians 3:28).

In Nigeria's divided context, the biblical vision of a new community founded on love, mutual service, and shared purpose offers a prophetic critique of identity politics and an alternative framework for unity. Churches have the potential to become laboratories of reconciliation, where people from different backgrounds can experience restored relationships and model inclusive citizenship. Theological education, pastoral engagement, and ecclesial structures need to cultivate a theology of covenant and hospitality that nurtures communal belonging without excluding others.

Engaging Scripture and African communal traditions in dialogue can yield a contextual theology that affirms difference while resisting division. Concepts such as ubuntu, communal reciprocity, and kinship ethics resonate with biblical visions of solidarity and mutual care (Mugambi, 1995). Reimagining communal identity through such integrative lenses can foster a new narrative for Nigeria—one where diversity is a gift, not a threat, and where covenantal bonds take precedence over sectarian interests.

### **Exemplars from Nigeria**

The Nigerian socio-political landscape presents a fertile context for exploring how covenantal and communal principles might serve as instruments of peace and unity. A compelling case is the Jos Peace Dialogue Forum (JPDF), which emerged as a community-led effort to foster interfaith harmony in Plateau State after several outbreaks of ethno-religious violence. The initiative, supported by both Christian and Muslim leaders, exemplifies covenantal relationships rooted in mutual trust, respect, and shared responsibilities. Although the forum lacked formal theological language, the structure and commitments bear strong resemblance to the biblical covenant model—voluntary agreements anchored in fidelity and moral obligation (Yusufu, 2017).

Another instructive example is the work of the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) based in Kaduna, which has focused on dialogue between Christians and Muslims, particularly among youth and women—two groups often marginalised yet pivotal in community transformation. The IMC's approach draws from the Abrahamic concept of being a "blessing to the nations" (Genesis 12:2–3), thus invoking a shared theological heritage to inspire mutual accountability and respect. This spiritual underpinning subtly echoes the biblical covenantal ethos, which calls communities into moral obligation with each other and with God (Marshall, 2019).

In Benue State, local church-based organisations such as the Christian Rural and Urban Development Association of Nigeria (CRUDAN) have combined biblical teaching with peacebuilding. Their focus on "shalom" theology, comprehensive peace in personal, communal, and ecological dimensions, aligns with the covenantal vision of wholeness and mutual flourishing. This holistic outlook has been useful in rebuilding trust between Tiv and Jukun communities, who have experienced cyclical conflicts over land and ethnicity (Ishaya, 2020).



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These examples illustrate that while the term "covenant" may not always appear explicitly in these peacebuilding efforts, the principles inherent in covenantal theology—faithfulness, responsibility, remembrance, and community—are operational. They provide a promising framework for creating moral and social cohesion across religious and ethnic boundaries. However, these efforts are often localised and lack institutional support from the broader church and state apparatus. To be truly transformative, these models must be adopted at systemic levels, including political institutions, denominational leadership, and educational systems.

### **Challenges to Implementing a Covenantal Approach**

Although covenantal theology offers a promising lens for fostering unity in Nigeria, significant obstacles hinder its implementation. One major challenge is the entrenched sectarianism that defines much of Nigeria's religious and ethnic identity. Many communities perceive "the other" as a threat to their cultural survival, often reinforced by narratives of historical betrayal and socio-economic marginalisation. This climate of suspicion undermines the possibility of forming trust-based relationships that covenantal ethics demand (Ibrahim, 2018).

Another considerable obstacle lies in the theological fragmentation within Nigerian Christianity itself. With over 500 registered Christian denominations in the country, many of which are influenced by varying doctrinal emphases—ranging from prosperity gospel to deliverance ministries—the theological underpinnings of covenant and communal identity are often obscured or altogether neglected (Adogame, 2021). Without a shared theological vision, it becomes difficult to formulate a consistent covenantal ethic that could be adopted across the denominational spectrum.

Institutional failures also complicate efforts. The Nigerian state has not been neutral in interreligious conflicts and is frequently perceived as favouring one group over another. This perception further fractures trust between communities and diminishes the moral authority of covenantal initiatives (Aghedo and Osumah, 2014). Additionally, the absence of theological education that explicitly engages with issues of ethnicity, conflict resolution, and national unity means that emerging church leaders often lack the intellectual tools to bridge spiritual and socio-political divides through biblical frameworks.

Globalisation and digital media have introduced both opportunities and distractions. While digital platforms can facilitate intergroup communication and theological education, they also amplify polarising voices and promote doctrinal individualism. The covenant, as a theological category, assumes communal obligations and shared memory—values increasingly eroded in a consumer-driven religious culture that prioritises personal prosperity over collective well-being (Obaji, 2020). In light of these challenges, implementing a covenantal approach to national unity in Nigeria will require both theological reformation and institutional recalibration. Churches, theological institutions, and civil society organisations must collaborate to cultivate a covenantal ethos that transcends doctrinal and ethnic boundaries. Without such concerted effort, covenantal ideals risk remaining theological abstractions, rather than active instruments of societal healing and transformation.

### **Proposals for a Covenantal Framework for National Unity**

**Reconstructing National Identity through Covenant Theology:** Nigeria's persistent ethno-religious divisions call for a reimagining of national identity beyond the colonial legacy and identity politics that have fragmented the nation. A covenantal framework provides a theological and ethical basis for such reconstruction, by placing emphasis on shared responsibility, moral obligation, and inclusive belonging. As the biblical narrative illustrates, covenantal relationships transcend familial or ethnic ties and instead forge bonds rooted in commitment to justice, mercy, and collective purpose (Wright, 2019).



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To reconstruct national identity along covenantal lines, both faith-based institutions and civic structures must promote a new social narrative that celebrates diversity while cultivating common purpose. This approach entails a renewed civic ethos built upon mutual respect, hospitality, and accountability. It challenges citizens to move from a consumerist understanding of nationhood to a participatory model where every group contributes meaningfully to the collective good (Ilesanmi, 2018). In practical terms, public education curricula, national celebrations, and civic orientation programmes should reflect covenantal values—justice, inclusion, truth-telling, and stewardship. Furthermore, national symbols and foundational documents—such as the Constitution and national pledges—could be reinterpreted theologically and ethically as communal covenants. This would not entail the imposition of religious doctrine but a recalibration of public life around ethical principles that resonate across religions and ethnicities. The goal is not the erasure of difference but the harmonisation of identities under shared moral commitments, thereby giving substance to the often-repeated yet poorly realised goal of “unity in diversity.”

**Institutionalising Covenantal Leadership and Governance:** One of the most urgent applications of the covenantal framework lies in the realm of leadership. The biblical vision of leadership under covenant is profoundly counter-cultural—it involves servant leadership, moral integrity, and accountability to the governed and to God (Deuteronomy 17:14–20; Mark 10:42–45). In Nigeria, political leadership often functions in antithesis to this model, characterised instead by patronage, impunity, and sectarianism. Reorienting leadership culture along covenantal lines requires theological education, structural reforms, and ethical mentorship across both political and religious sectors. Theological institutions in Nigeria should incorporate courses in public theology, civic ethics, and covenantal leadership. These teachings must equip emerging Christian leaders to approach political and community engagement not merely as participation but as vocation grounded in biblical responsibility. Likewise, interdenominational forums could draft a national covenant charter for leadership that outlines expectations for transparency, equity, and justice. This document could serve both as a teaching tool and as a benchmark for holding leaders to account, particularly within the Church.

Beyond the Church, covenantal leadership can be institutionalised in governance through reforms in electoral processes, public service recruitment, and constitutional interpretation. For instance, instead of focusing solely on “federal character,” which often reinforces ethnic quotas, a covenantal framework would insist on ethical competence, fairness, and restorative justice. Leaders would be expected to model sacrificial service and ensure equal access to opportunities, regardless of religious or ethnic affiliation (Ajayi, 2020). Such governance, built on covenantal trust, could repair the frayed bonds between citizens and the state.

**Promoting Covenantal Citizenship and Inter-Communal Solidarity:** A covenantal society thrives not only through ethical leadership but also through responsible and active citizenship. Covenantal citizenship involves a commitment to the common good, mutual obligations between citizens, and accountability to future generations. In biblical terms, this form of citizenship is expressed in communal stewardship, care for the stranger, and the pursuit of justice in everyday life (Micah 6:8; Jeremiah 29:7). Translating this ethic into the Nigerian context requires civic education that transcends formal schooling to include religious, media, and community spaces.

Churches, mosques, and traditional institutions should promote a theology of belonging that affirms the dignity of all Nigerians, irrespective of tribe or creed. This should involve teaching materials, sermons, and community discussions that emphasise biblical and moral obligations to love neighbours and work for societal well-being. Youth and women’s fellowships in particular could



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serve as agents of this transformation, embedding covenantal ethics into everyday interactions and decisions (Uzor, 2021).

Moreover, initiatives that foster inter-communal solidarity, such as shared economic projects, joint festivals, and peace walks, can serve as practical enactments of covenantal citizenship. These events offer platforms to heal historical grievances, celebrate cultural diversity, and build relational trust across fault lines. Importantly, such solidarity should not be based on superficial tolerance but on deep-rooted ethical commitments to justice and shared destiny. In this way, Nigerians can learn to see themselves not merely as members of distinct identity blocs but as co-covenant bearers in the collective task of national renewal.

**Education and Ecclesial Reform as Vehicles of Covenant Renewal:** For a covenantal framework to gain traction, education must play a transformative role. Formal and informal education systems need to recover moral instruction, civic formation, and theological reflection that promote unity, integrity, and justice. Christian theological institutions, seminaries, and Bible colleges must reform their curricula to integrate themes of national identity, public theology, and peacebuilding, while also engaging African cultural paradigms that resonate with biblical covenant (Mugambi, 1995).

Beyond theological education, general school curricula should promote the history, values, and narratives of unity in Nigeria's founding documents and religious traditions. Civic education must be elevated beyond rote learning to practical formation in citizenship and communal ethics. Partnerships between religious institutions and state education boards could help design programmes that reflect covenantal values without compromising religious neutrality. Such efforts would ensure that emerging generations are formed as covenantal citizens, equipped to bridge divides and promote the common good.

Ecclesial reform is also crucial. Churches must embody the principles they preach, diversity in leadership, equitable resource sharing, reconciliation among congregants, and advocacy for the marginalised. Denominations must move beyond ethnic boundaries in pastoral appointments, educational initiatives, and evangelistic outreach. The Church must be reimagined not as a spiritual enclave but as a covenantal community called to participate in national transformation. Only through such reforms can it offer a credible and prophetic witness to a nation in search of unity and justice.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The biblical themes of covenant and communal identity offer a robust theological framework for fostering unity within Nigeria's multi-ethnic and religiously fragmented society. Covenant, as demonstrated throughout the Scriptures, reveals a divine commitment to communal relationship grounded in justice, mutual accountability, and divine fidelity. Likewise, the notion of communal identity, as shaped through Israel's collective memory and shared destiny, underscores the centrality of togetherness over tribalism or individualism. Within the Nigerian context—marked persistently by ethno-religious violence, sectarian political structures, and fragile national cohesion—these biblical principles provide a moral and spiritual blueprint for healing, reconciliation, and holistic national transformation. The study has demonstrated that the covenantal relationship found in biblical texts transcends ethnic boundaries and invites people into a new identity founded on divine promises and mutual responsibility (Brueggemann 2002). This identity fosters a theology of inclusion, which is imperative in a society where differences in creed and culture have been exploited for political gain and social division (Iwuagwu 2021). A return to covenantal principles would urge religious leaders, policy-makers, and community influencers to prioritise the common good, justice, and reconciliation in national discourse and governance. The case studies examined underscore the viability of





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covenantal ethics in building interfaith alliances and community resilience, even in areas historically troubled by strife.

To move forward, theological institutions, churches, and mosques must embed covenantal ethics in their teachings, liturgies, and community programmes. The Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), alongside the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), should collaborate in promoting community-building initiatives inspired by covenantal mutuality and shared responsibility. Furthermore, civic education curricula in schools should be revised to incorporate biblical and ethical concepts of communal identity to foster early formation of inclusive citizenship. Government agencies should also recognise and support faith-based peacemaking efforts, creating legal and financial frameworks for interfaith dialogue that are rooted in scriptural principles.

Nonetheless, a covenantal approach to unity in Nigeria presents not merely a theological ideal but a practical strategy grounded in time-tested principles of social solidarity and divine justice. While challenges such as mistrust, politicisation of religion, and weak institutions may impede progress, the transformative power of covenant and communal identity remains a hopeful path toward national cohesion. This study contributes to the growing body of literature that insists on a contextual, biblically grounded model for healing Nigeria's divisions, while inviting further empirical research and interfaith engagement to expand the scope and impact of these findings.

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