

περιτομή καρδίας as Remedy for Moral Depravity in Kenyan Christianity: A Theological-Ethical Diagnosis from Romans 1–2

Benard Ombori
St. Paul University

Abstract

This article investigates Paul's reinterpretation of circumcision in Romans 2:24–29. It gives particular attention to περιτομή καρδίας and its theological-ethical significance for addressing moral depravity in contemporary Kenyan Christianity. It approaches this text through a theological-exegetical method and an illustrative case-study approach. It reads this text as Paul's diagnosis of the collapse of moral conduct, presumption of covenant and the public dishonouring of God's name. The article uses four Pauline categories to diagnose selected Kenyan ecclesial patterns: 1) confession-conduct disjunction; 2) sacred authority without accountability; 3) public dishonour of God; 4) the need for Spirit-enabled inner renewal. Selected examples from Roman Catholic, ACK, PCEA, SDA and Pentecostal/Charismatic contexts in Kenya are examined through these categories. This article states that the challenge of moral depravity is not just a "sociological/administrative" one but "theological." When outward religiosity is not accompanied by internal transformation, it undermines the credibility of Christianity and makes public witness and preaching a form of implied blasphemy. The study does not challenge the need for institutional reform. Rather, it argues that governance, discipline, ministerial formation and public accountability become durable only when grounded in Spirit-shaped moral agency. It therefore presents περιτομή καρδίας as a paradigm for ethical renewal, restored ecclesial credibility, and coherent public witness in Kenyan Christianity.

Keywords: *περιτομή καρδίας; Moral Depravity, Spirit-Enabled Ethical Renewal, Outward Religiosity, Pauline Ethics, Kenyan Christianity, African Ecclesiology*

1.0 Introduction

Concerns over moral failure within Kenyan Christianity raise important questions about the church's public witness and moral credibility. Kenya has lively worship, doctrinally orthodox churches and a vibrant Christian public presence. The United States Department of State (2023, pp. 2–3) estimated Kenya's population at 57.1 million. It further reported that, according to 2019 government estimates, Christians constituted 85.5% of the population (Pew Research Centre, 2021, p. 2). Yet, scandals such as sexual misconduct, financial mismanagement, nepotism, leadership abuse, and prosperity-driven religiosity have pointed to the lack of alignment between the professed faith and ethical practice (Gifford, 2009, p. 42; Njenga, 2014, pp. 215-217;

Reisinger, 2022; Mwaura, 2005, p. 54; Parsitau, 2014, pp. 161-164; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013, p. 172; Otieno, Ayako & Kandago, 2021, p. 35).

In Romans 1:18-32, Paul presents a theological diagnosis of such collapse in his discussion of moral depravity. He describes human rebellion against God as not merely a matter of physical vice but an even greater corruption of mind (*νοῦς*) and heart (*καρδίας*). The moral depravity of individuals is the corruption of their nature and intentions, and their ethical failure, social disorder, and alienation from God. It is seen in jealousy, wickedness, murder, corruption, sexual perversion and acceptance of evil (Rom. 1:29-32). Ethical collapse occurs when humanity turns from God, resulting in moral chaos (Wright, 2013, p. 89; Dunn, 2018, p. 54; Moo, 2000, p. 110; Schreiner, 2018, p. 73).

Pauline theology has traditionally addressed sin, justification, law, and grace (Barclay, 2015, pp. 566–570; Dunn, 2018, pp. 89–91; Moo, 2018, pp. 98–100). However, less attention has been paid to *περιτομή καρδίας* as a theological-ethical framework for addressing moral depravity in contemporary African Christianity. This gap is significant for Kenya, where Christian credibility is undermined when exploitation, financial mismanagement, consumerist religion, and unethical leadership practices become publicly known. This has been observed in selected public cases and scholarly discussions (Gifford, 2009, p. 42; Parsitau, 2014, pp. 161–164; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013, p. 172). In Pauline terms, the problem is more than damage to the church's reputation. It is the conflict between religious profession and moral conduct, and can be an occasion for the dishonoring of God's name in the public square (Rom. 2:24).

African theologians have long addressed the issues of Christian ethics, communal responsibility, and the obligation of Christian moral witness as integral aspects of church life (Oduyoye, 2001, p. 41; Mugambi, 2002, p. 88). But the present article identifies a narrower gap. In Kenyan Christianity, Romans 2:24–29 has rarely been used to link outward religiosity with the public dishonoring of God's name. It has also been used too little to explain the need for inward renewal by the Spirit. The question is not whether African theology lacks moral concern, but whether Paul's argument about circumcision of the heart can help diagnose churches that have strong institutions, distinctive worship and theology, yet lack moral coherence.

This article, therefore, argues that moral depravity in Kenyan Christianity is not only a sociological or administrative crisis. It is also a theological crisis of divided identity. What the church confesses

is not always reflected in what it practices. The article places selected Kenyan ecclesial failures within Paul's movement from moral disorder (Rom. 1:18–32) to covenantal presumption (Rom. 2:17–24) and, finally, to circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2:28–29). Thus, it helps to advance Pauline ethics, ecclesiological, and public witness theology within Africa. It stands out as a central tenet that Christian credibility is not achieved through mere religiosity, but through the agency of the Spirit. This moral agency comes out in responsible, truthful, and holy behavior.

1.1 Methodological and Ethical Approach

This article is qualitative, theological-exegetical, and contextual. The article analyses Romans 2:24–29 using a grammatical-historical approach. Romans 1:18–2:23 serves as the broader argumentative context. It specifically focuses on the subject of *βλασφημία*, *δι' ὑμᾶς*, *νόμος*, *περιτομή* and *περιτομή καρδίας*. The context is not a statistical survey or primary field study. Instead, it is an illustrative case-study reading of publicly documented ecclesial patterns in five Kenyan Christian traditions: Roman Catholic, ACK, PCEA, SDA, and Pentecostal/Charismatic. These denominations have been selected because they are theologically diverse, large, and visible streams of Kenyan Christianity. They were also selected because public records and secondary scholarship provide documented examples of ethical lapses within some of these selected ecclesial traditions. The evidence used is limited to biblical texts, peer-reviewed theological scholarship, secondary sociological literature, official or public reports, and accessible media reports. The article does not, therefore, claim that all members, leaders, or congregations in these traditions are morally compromised. Its concern is with publicly visible patterns that weaken Christian credibility.

The theological virtue perspective is combined with a moral agency perspective. Inner transformation is therefore connected to the moral agency of the transformed person. In this framework, the honor of God and credible public witness emerge as the proper outcomes of transformed covenant life. This does not set inward renewal against outward obedience, but presents obedience as the outward fruit of inward transformation by the Spirit. Rather, it presents Paul's concept of *περιτομή καρδίας* as producing outward practices of accountability, justice, truthfulness, holiness, and protection of the vulnerable. In this sense, the article combines means and goals: Spirit-renewed character is the means, while restored ecclesial credibility and the honor of God are the telos.

2.0 African Theological Responses to Moral Collapse: Structure, Community, and Heart Renewal

In African theology, moral formation has not been overlooked. In Mbiti's (1991) account of *utu*, the character is communally formed and socially accountable. He, thus, highlights the communal formation of character and the responsibility to society. Magesa's theology of abundant life and moral life in Africa is grounded in the notion that ethical living is the foundation of "right relationships" with God, neighbor, community, and creation (Magesa, 1997, p. 156). Oduyoye challenges oppressive religious and social systems and calls for transformation in relational life, especially where power damages human dignity and communal wholeness (Oduyoye, 2001, p. 55). In the theology of reconstruction, the rebuilding of African societies is the primary focus, and is done through justice, responsible leadership, and moral renewal (Mugambi, 2002, p. 88). Likewise, African theology offers important resources for public ethics and communal accountability through its emphasis on hospitality, justice, and ecclesial responsibility (Gathogo, 2011, p. 88). These contributions show that African theology contains important communal, structural, and inward resources for ethical renewal. Hence, the language of external reform is too general, because it may wrongly suggest that African theologians are concerned only with outward change.

The present article makes a more specific claim. While Pauline scholarship has addressed *περιτομή καρδίας* in relation to covenant identity, law, Spirit, and inward obedience, its use as a theological-ethical framework for addressing contemporary ecclesial moral failure remains less developed, especially in African ecclesial contexts. Likewise, research on Christianity in Kenya has examined clerical misconduct, financial accountability, leadership failure, prosperity religiosity, and public credibility. However, these concerns have not been sufficiently brought into sustained dialogue with Paul's argument in Romans 2:24–29. This article does not argue that African theology lacks ethical reflection or that Romans 2 lacks scholarly attention. Rather, it addresses the limited application of Paul's notion of *περιτομή καρδίας* to selected Kenyan ecclesial issues as a framework for moral renewal, responsible leadership, and renewed public witness.

The following three gaps are related to the present article. First, Pauline scholarship has tended to discuss Romans 2:28–29 in relation to circumcision and law, Jewish identity, and covenant membership. However, less attention has been given to *περιτομή καρδίας* as a biblical-theological lens for examining contemporary moral and ethical inconsistency within the church. For example,

Pauline scholars have discussed the relationship between outward religious identity and inward obedience. However, this insight needs to be extended to contemporary church contexts, where religious identity is often preserved even as moral credibility comes under public scrutiny (Dunn, 1998, pp. 188–210; Cranfield, 2004, pp. 130–150). Second, in the African context, discussions of corruption, leadership failure, and public credibility in the church often raise the need for governance, accountability, and communal reform. However, these concerns have not always been explicitly linked to Paul’s diagnosis of outward religion and inward disobedience. Third, Church ethics in Kenya has often been analyzed through sociological, institutional, and media lenses. However, ethical failure also needs theological interpretation, since it explains how professing Christians can bring public dishonor to God’s name.

This article is designed to fill these gaps. It takes a grammatical-historical approach to the reading of Romans 1:18-2:29, with particular attention to *βλασφημία* and *περιτομή καρδίας*. In Romans 1:18-32, moral disorder is revealed as the outcome of distorted worship and disordered desire. In Romans 2:17-24, the danger of having religious privilege without obedience is revealed. Then in Romans 2:28-29, the covenant identity is linked to the inner, Spirit-empowered renewal of life through the concept of *περιτομή καρδίας*. This Pauline logic is then illustrated with some examples from the Roman Catholic, ACK, PCEA, SDA, and Pentecostal/Charismatic contexts in Kenya. The examples are used as illustrations rather than an exhaustive list. They are not intended to condemn whole denominations, but to show that outward religious identity can lose credibility when it is not accompanied by inward obedience to the Spirit of God.

1. *περιτομή καρδίας*: Paul’s Ethical Remedy for Religious Presumption and Moral Failure

In Romans 1–2, Paul diagnoses moral depravity as a theological and anthropological disorder before it becomes a visible social or institutional failure. The problem lies in the *καρδία*, the inner centre of desire, will and moral accountability (Rom. 1:21). Where the heart is darkened, religious knowledge and visible covenant identity cannot produce genuine ethical coherence. According to Paul, sin is not only the violation of the outside rules, but it is the “misuse of worship” (Wright, 2002, p. 227), “misguided desire” (Moo, 2018, p. 144), and “covenantal disloyalty” (Moo, 2018, p. 144). Romans 2:17–24 best expresses this diagnosis of religious presumption, in which Paul exposes the confidence in possessing the law as a covenant marker when it is detached from

covenant obedience. Although his interlocutor boasts in God and moral teaching, his actions do not reflect the moral demands of the law he claims to uphold.

The New Perspective on Paul partly informs this reading. The article is not meant to imply Judaism was a “works righteousness” religion. Instead, following Pauline scholarship, this article views circumcision, law, and covenant membership as identity markers that could be misused when detached from obedience. The issue in Romans 2 is therefore not Jewishness or the law itself, but covenantal boasting that fails to embody the law’s moral purpose (Dunn, 1998, pp. 188–210; Wright, 2002, p. 333). This is important because Paul’s critique of outward religiosity is not anti-Jewish. Rather, it is a theological warning about all religious communities that have a sacred identity but no moral coherence.

Paul’s interlocutor asserts the covenantal privilege, but his actions go against his profession, which results in the dishonoring of the Lord’s name (Rom. 2:24). It is not irreligiousness that Paul is worried about, but hypocrisy, the external worship devoid of the internal truth. When religious identity is disconnected from moral authenticity, it ceases to be a witness and becomes *βλασφημία*, the reversal of Israel’s covenantal vocation (Wright, 2002, p. 333; Jewett, 2007, p. 219).

In Romans 2:24, the direct responsibility of the blasphemy is assigned to covenant insiders whose behavior is inconsistent with their confession by the causal clause *δι’ ὅμᾶς*. The present passive verb *βλασφημία* further emphasizes its current and communal nature, indicating that blasphemy is a continuous, collective event rather than a one-off. Paul, therefore, locates his teaching in the prophetic tradition of Israel, as Israel’s moral degradation led to the blatant desecration of God’s name (Isa. 52:5; Ezek. 36:20-23; Dunn, 2018, p. 138; Schreiner, 2018, p. 146). Blasphemy, then, is not presented in the form of a doctrinal deviation, but rather as ethical failure; the credibility of the revelation of God is in the obedience of His people in their lives.

In Romans 2:25-29, Paul redefines the identity of covenants found in the *περιτομή καρδίας*. The circumcision, per se, is validated as significant in the sense that it is accompanied by inner obedience to the Law. Further, its significance is made conditional and not automatic. The contingency of the third-class conditional (*ἐὰν νόμον πράσσης*) is underlined, and the perfect tense *γέγονεν* shows a radical change in the covenant where the failure of observing it transforms circumcision to uncircumcision (Moo, 2018, pp. 181-183; Schreiner, 2018, p. 149). This rhetorical contradiction is increased by the presence of submissive Gentiles who are supposed to fulfill the

righteous demands of the Law (*τὰ δικαιώματα τοῦ νόμου*) in the prospect of Paul returning this logic of divine accounting (*λογίζομαι*) in Romans 4 (Barclay, 2015, pp. 381-384).

This argument concludes with a radical reformulation of the covenant identity (Rom. 2:28-29). By the *οὐ ...ἀλλ'* construction, Paul shifts Jewish identity from the visible (*ἐν τῷ φανερῷ*) to the invisible (*ἐν σαρκὶ περιτομῇ*), redefining covenant belonging in terms of circumcision of the heart rather than external signs. The act of redefining means that circumcision of the heart is presented as a sign of the Spirit, rather than the letter. It is an inner process and not a simple procedure. Paul's language of *περιτομὴ καρδίας* draws on the Deuteronomic and prophetic traditions of inward renewal (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; Ezek. 36:26–27). These traditions show that ritual practice is inadequate when separated from ethical obedience, justice, and truth (Cranfield, 2004, p. 173; Dunn, 1998, p. 284; Wright, 2013, p. 829-831). Covenant faithfulness can't be judged from outward signs. Their need is inward transformation. Only through the help of the Holy Spirit can they fulfill the moral purpose of the law.

Moral corruption arises from distorted desires and divided loyalty. In this ethical framework, *περιτομὴ καρδίας* is presented as a theological remedy for inward moral disorder. Outward obedience cannot become true covenant obedience without inward obedience. It requires a renewed will and transformed desire (Rom. 2:29; 6:16). Thus, both the ethics and the inner transformation are inseparable, in Paul's view. Increasing legalism was not Paul's concern but rather changing the nature of moral agency (Moo, 2018, p. 182). Likewise, Barclay (2015, p. 444) demonstrates that the Spirit plays a crucial role in the renewal of moral agency. Legal and institutional mechanisms continue to be essential for accountability and communal peace and harmony, but not sufficient for integrity, self-control, or covenantal loyalty without an inward renewal.

Paul's argument also operates in an honor-shame moral framework. In Romans 2:24, the dishonor does not rest only on the offender, but extends to the God whose name the offender bears before others. The clause *δι' ὑμᾶς* ("because of you") thus ensures a public responsibility for the covenant-insiders, for what they do confirms or disconfirms their profession to outsiders. In this situation, hypocrisy is not merely a verbal contradiction. It is a public failure of covenant witness. It is dishonor to be shared with missional implications because the moral incoherence of God's people leads outsiders to misjudge God's nature (Malina and Neyrey, 1991, pp. 32-35). Hence,

περιτομή καρδίας is not merely a teaching about inward piety. It is also a public ethic of honoring God through credible living, truthful leadership, justice, and responsible communal life. It shows that inward transformation must become visible in ethical responsibility.

Paul does not deny the significance of outward religious identity, law, ritual or communal belonging in Romans 2:24-29. Instead, it calls them into question when it replaces the internal compliance. It requires Spirit-enabled restoration, a restoration that focuses on confession and behavior in the context of moral harmony with God's will and credible testimony to others. This theological argument links Paul's categories with the selected Kenyan ecclesial contexts.

2. Pauline Categories for Kenyan Cases

The next contextual section does not identify Kenyan churches as those of Israel in Paul's time. Rather, it draws analogical comparisons between them. Paul's argument in Romans 2:24–29 is applied to the Kenyan case studies through four categories. First, Romans 2 makes clear that knowledge and covenant obedience are not the same. Knowledge of the true God does not necessarily lead to faithful action. Second, it illustrates how sacred privilege can be distorted into a barrier against moral responsibility. Third, it assumes that public criticism is not directed only at the offender. It also becomes a dishonoring of the God whose name the offender claims to bear. Fourth, it offers circumcision of the heart by the Spirit as the renewal in the heart that manifests itself in ethical practice. The following categories are used to analyze selected Kenyan cases. They provide the theological lens for interpreting those cases. The cases are illustrative and diagnostic. They are not meant to represent the entire Christian population in Kenya and are not exhaustive.

3. Public Orthodoxy and Moral Fracture: Paul's Diagnosis of Kenyan Christianity

The Kenyan case studies that follow are not meant to provide a picture of the general corruption of Kenyan Christianity. They are selected public examples that show how moral failure can coexist with strong doctrine, vibrant worship, and institutional visibility. When communities that publicly claim the name of God fail to embody truth, justice, and accountability, their witness becomes vulnerable to the kind of public dishonor described in Romans 2:24. Significant and diverse streams of Kenyan Christianity are considered, including the Roman Catholic tradition, ACK, PCEA, SDA, and Pentecostal/Charismatic traditions. The analysis considers the legitimate power of each of the traditions in question (sacrament, episcopal order, Presbyterian governance,

Adventist identity, or charismatic vitality) and how it can become ethically contaminated when detached from *περιτομή καρδίας*.

First, the article examines the case of sacramental and clerical authority in selected Roman Catholic settings as a test case for the loss of trust in respect of authority in the church. In the Kenyan Catholic context, safeguarding and accountability concerns have been recognized through child-protection and diocesan programs, including a survey on child abuse in the Catholic Church in Kenya (KCCB, 2009) and more recent initiatives addressing child abuse within the Church (ADN Communications, 2022). At the same time, other studies point to clergy abuse, institutional silence, and delayed accountability in some contexts (Gifford, 2009, p. 42; Njenga, 2014, p. 215). In the broader Roman Catholic context, Winfield and Muhumuza (2018) present examples of abuse involving religious women, including cases from Africa. Reisinger (2022) further examines reproductive abuse and institutional silence in contexts of clergy sexual abuse. Later canonical reform also indicates institutional recognition that adults, not only minors, may be victims of clerical abuse when ecclesial authority is misused (Winfield, 2021). These case studies are not intended to be representative of the Roman Catholic tradition. They demonstrate a need to hold sacred office and sacramental authority to account clearly to maintain moral credibility. If there is no connection between sacred authority and truthfulness and accountability, then it can be a source of public dishonor, as in Romans 2:24.

Second, in some ACK contexts, moral corruption may appear through administrative manipulation, nepotism, and political entanglement. In such cases, episcopal office may be shaped by ethnic, political, or economic interests rather than by spiritual qualifications and ecclesial discernment (Mwaura, 2005, p. 54). There are internal conflicts over resources in the church, which have left a lack of trust in church leadership (Gifford, 2009, p. 44). However, leadership conflicts have also persisted at St Andrews Church in Kapenguria, due to allegations of irregularities and favoritism (Kakai, 2023; Shanzu, 2025). Paul's critique of those who teach others but fail to teach themselves applies here (Rom. 2:21). The contrast between liturgical power and ethical deadness reflects the concern of Romans 2:21. It reveals a form of religiosity that preserves outward form but lacks true righteousness. Inner integrity can be defeated by institutional ambition, and ecclesiastical titles can lead to a loss of moral responsibility and public trust.

Third, in some PCEA contexts, the issue is not the absence of doctrine or order. Rather, the concern is that governance, administration, and presbytery leadership may be compromised by patronage, factionalism, ethnic or economic loyalties, perceived irregularities, favoritisms, financial misappropriation, or resource-related conflict (Gifford, 2009, p. 44). When elders, presbyteries, or church courts are perceived to serve institutional interests rather than truth, justice, and repentance, public trust is undermined. Paul's question in Romans 2:21 applies to any church whose visible structures are strong but whose moral accountability is selective. If this is the case, the problem is not merely administrative. It is also theological. Outward order may be maintained while ecclesial office is gained or preserved at the expense of inward integrity and ethical consistency. In this context, *περιτομή καρδίας* calls for disciplined leadership, honest stewardship, and communal truthfulness. It places covenant integrity above institutional reputation.

Fourth, in some SDA contexts, the issue is not the absence of doctrine, Sabbath observance, or lifestyle distinctiveness. The concern is whether these are matched by consistent accountability, credible discipline, and ethical practice. This may manifest as poor family ethics, lack of protection of children, administrative responsibilities, intergenerational sensitivity in worship practices (Knight, 2000, p. 139; Masimba, 2011, p. 21; Kuria, 2014, p. 210; Otieno, Ayako, & Kandago, 2021, p. 35). The focus is not on treating individual allegations as proof of denominational failure as a whole. Instead, Paul's warning is examined on communities that say they are distinctively religious but aren't living up to the ethical requirements for that distinctiveness (Rom. 2:17–24). Prophetic identity can become performative when institutional image takes priority over repentance, pastoral responsibility, and truth. In Paul's view, the risk is for those who would speak the name of law, prophecy, and discipline to be lawless, to be misled by prophecy, to be unrenewed.

Fifth, in some Pentecostal and Charismatic settings, ethical danger may arise when revivalism, prophetic authority, miracle claims, prosperity preaching, and media visibility are detached from accountability and cruciform discipline. The concern is not that Pentecostal/Charismatic churches are inherently more immoral than other traditions. Rather, their public prominence can magnify the ethical impact of their witness on society (Parsitau, 2014:161–164; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013, p. 172; Gifford, 2009:42, 112; Gathogo, 2011, p. 119). Paul's critique of exchanging the truth of God for a lie (Rom. 1:25) becomes relevant where spiritual gifts are commodified, pastoral power is personalized, worship becomes spectacle without moral formation, and financial practices lack

transparency. Therefore, *περιτομή καρδίας* calls charismatic vitality back to humility, truthfulness, financial transparency, cruciform accountability, and holiness.

Taken together, the five cases reveal a shared Pauline pattern: outward religious identity without corresponding inward covenant faithfulness. There are legitimate manifestations of religious liveliness in each denomination, whether in sacramental authority, episcopal continuity, Presbyterian governance, doctrinal distinctiveness, or charismatic vitality. Each of these strengths can be an alternative to being truthful, repentant, accountable, and transformed by the Spirit, though. The problem is not the denomination itself, but outward religiosity detached from *περιτομή καρδίας*. Romans 2:24–29 becomes relevant where sacred identity is displayed without corresponding moral obedience. It is in such disjunction that public dishonor arises. The solution has to be internal and institutional – Spirit-renewed hearts have to produce accountable institutions, and accountable institutions have to produce Spirit-renewed hearts.

4. Synthesis: From Public Dishonor to Spirit-enabled Moral Agency

In both the Kenyan ecclesial cases and Romans 1–2, a common theological theme appears: moral failure arises when professed truth is not embodied in practical conduct. In Paul's context, this contradiction moves from disordered desire (Rom. 1:18–32), to religious presumption (Rom. 2:17–24), and finally to the need for circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2:28–29). In the Kenyan cases, a similar pattern appears when sacrament, episcopal authority, denominational identity, prophetic charisma, or doctrinal distinctiveness protects reputation rather than producing repentance, justice, and moral renewal.

The remedy is not to give up on outward religious practices. Paul does not deny the continuing significance of the law. Rather, he denies that possession of the law can substitute for obedience. His concern is not the law itself, but its misuse as a marker of covenant privilege apart from inward obedience. Therefore, *περιτομή καρδίας* identifies the heart as the center of Spirit-enabled renewal, where inward transformation becomes visible in outward ethical life. It is inward re-creation through the Holy Spirit, by which the heart is turned toward obedience, truthfulness, and covenant faithfulness. The Spirit-renewed heart must become visible in truthful leadership, public accountability, transparent finances, credible discipline, and protection of the vulnerable. Therefore, religious markers—doctrine, ritual, office, denominational identity, theological

diversity, institutional strength, and numerical visibility—cannot secure moral credibility unless they are joined to Spirit-enabled moral agency.

This synthesis provides a clearer account of the article's ethical stance. Spirit-shaped moral agency is the means of renewal. Renewal is accomplished through the Spirit's inward work, and its goal is God's glory and the recovery of credible Christian witness. Ethical reform, then, is dependent on both moral and institutional change. Changed individuals must help form accountable institutions. Accountable institutions must also help form changed persons. Consequently, Kenyan Christianity does not need more religiosity or religious performance. It needs inward renewal that produces credible faith, moral integrity, and accountable witness. It demands communities that are unified in doctrine and discipline, worship and justice, in charisma and character. Only Spirit-enabled renewal can address the implied blasphemy of Romans 2:24. It also restores credible public witness by grounding covenant identity in inward transformation, as expressed in Romans 2:29.

5. Toward Inner Transformation and Ethical Renewal in Kenyan Ecclesial Structures

The use of *περιτομή καρδίας* in Kenyan Christianity calls for inward, communal, and institutional change. Paul's argument does not permit a choice between heart renewal and visible obedience. The Spirit-renewed heart should be manifested in the building of structures for the truth, justice, holiness, and public credibility. Institutional reform is necessary, but it should not be treated as a standalone solution. Policies, disciplinary procedures, financial accountability, safeguarding mechanisms, and leadership structures are visible means through which moral responsibility can be practiced. In Paul's view, institutional reform must be accompanied by inward transformation by the Spirit of God. Without this renewal, outward change may produce only mere conformity. Romans 2 does not reject law, structure, or outward obedience. It rejects confidence in them when inward renewal is absent. Thus, with this approach, *περιτομή καρδίας* does not supplant the existing elements of the church. Instead, it provides them with theological and ethical richness. Therefore, a church's reputation, its distinctiveness, and the number of people attending should not be confused with its moral integrity or Spirit-led obedience.

First, leadership accountability needs to be enhanced in the real governing bodies of Kenyan churches. Moral credibility should be measured by repentance, transparency, financial integrity,

safeguarding, and disciplined service. It should not be measured by office, charisma, ethnicity or numerical success. Documented discipline and restorative pastoral care, ethical audits, and accountable appointment procedures should be expected as normal features of institutional reform if driven by Spirit-led leadership.

Second, spiritual formation needs to go beyond performance-based religiosity. The values of confession, reconciliation, stewardship, sexual integrity, family responsibility, and truth-telling are to be central to the life of a congregation as a discipleship community. Conscience should be shaped and strengthened by worship and doctrine, not just by denominational affiliation. This is the case with parishes, local churches, fellowships, youth ministries, women's ministries, men's ministries, and small group ministry.

Third, theological training institutions should give greater attention to students' moral and spiritual formation. This is a practical corollary of the article's argument. The doctrine and pastoral skills should be taught at seminaries, Bible colleges, and denominational training programs. They must also equip students to discern right from wrong, manage finances responsibly, prevent harm, resolve conflicts, lead faithfully, and bear truthful public witness. Academic achievement remains important, but it cannot be the sole measure of ministerial competence. This recommendation is not based on a survey of theological training centers. It arises from the article's theological argument that religious knowledge, when not inwardly appropriated, may produce moral dissonance.

Fourth, credible public witness is restored through transparent, accountable and ethically coherent ecclesial practice. Kenyan churches that condemn corruption, injustice, tribalism, or social decay must reflect the same ethical values in their own governance, leadership, and accountability structures. These are not merely administrative practices. They are outward signs of inward covenant faithfulness. They safeguard the honor of God's name before the public through annual reporting, responsible handling of allegations, financial transparency, and credible disciplinary procedures.

Fifth, Kenyan churches should recover communal confession and restorative discipline. Paul's teaching on *περιτομή καρδιάς* does not allow the church to hide behind institutions or replace inward renewal with outward displays of humility. It calls for a transformation that begins in the heart and becomes visible through truthful repentance, responsible correction, and healing before

God and the community. Churches must therefore resist silence, denial, and institutional self-protection. Where wrong has occurred, it should be confessed, corrected, and, where possible, restituted. The vulnerable must be protected, and the repentant should be restored with care.

Finally, national and interdenominational networks, such as councils, conferences, synods, diocesan bodies and ministerial fellowships, can adopt this Pauline approach. They can also develop shared ethical commitments for ecclesial renewal. These pledges are not intended to replace denominational doctrine. Rather, they can help churches testify together that Christian identity must be joined to moral credibility. Thus, *περιτομή καρδίας* is not just a metaphor but a model for renewed leadership, discipleship, accountability, and public honor to God in Kenyan Christianity.

In conclusion, this article has argued that *περιτομή καρδίας* provides a Pauline theological-ethical framework for interpreting moral depravity in Kenyan Christianity. The problem is not merely administrative or sociological. Romans 2:24–29 shows that outward religious identity dishonors God when it is detached from inward obedience and covenant faithfulness. The selected Kenyan cases illustrate this danger without condemning entire denominations. They show that sacramental authority, episcopal order, Presbyterian governance, Adventist identity, and charismatic vitality all require moral renewal by the Spirit. Christian credibility in Kenya, therefore, requires renewed hearts and accountable ecclesial structures. In this way, *περιτομή καρδίας* becomes a model for renewed leadership, truthful discipleship, public accountability, and the honor of God's name.

References

- ADN Communications. (2022). 'Child safeguarding and protection training in the Archdiocese of Nairobi'. Archdiocese of Nairobi, 4 April. Accessed on 27 April 2026 at: <https://archdioceseofnairobi.org/?p=6214>
- Asamoah-Gyadu, J. K. (2013). *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity in Africa*. Oxford: Regnum Africa.
- Barclay, J. M. G. (2015). *Paul and the gift*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Cranfield, C. E. B. (2004). *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Vol. 1). Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Dunn, J. D. G. (1998). *The theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Dunn, J. D. G. (2018). *Romans 1–8* (Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 38A). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic.
- Gathogo, J. (2008a). *African churches and ethical renewal*. Nairobi: CUEA Press.
- Gathogo, J. (2008b). African theology of reconstruction and its relevance for the Kenyan church. *Journal of African Christian Thought*, 11(2), 45–59.
- Gathogo, J. (2011). Clergy misconduct and public trust in Kenya. *African Ecclesial Review*, 53(1), 87–102.
- Gifford, P. (2009). *Christianity, politics and public life in Kenya*. London: Hurst & Company.
- Jewett, R. (2007). *Romans: A commentary*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Kakai, O. (2023). 'ACK church in West Pokot calls on Archbishop Ole Saito to sort out the split', *Daily Nation*, 3 October. Accessed on 10 February 2026 at: <https://nation.africa/kenya/counties/west-pokot/ack-church-in-west-pocket-wrangles-4388008>
- Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB). (2009). *Child Protection Policy*. Nairobi: Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops.
- Knight, G. R. (2000). *A search for identity: The development of Seventh-day Adventist beliefs*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald.
- Kuria, J. (2014). Sabbath observance in Kenya: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, 10(1), 205–222.
- Magesa, L. (1997). *African religion: The moral traditions of abundant life*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa.
- Malina, B. J., & Neyrey, J. H. (1991). 'Honor and shame in Luke–Acts: Pivotal values of the Mediterranean world', in Neyrey, J. H. (ed.), *The Social World of Luke–Acts: Models for Interpretation*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, pp. 25–65.

- Masimba, T. (2011). *Application of Biblical Worship Principles in the New Life Seventh-day Adventist Church in Nairobi, Kenya*. Doctor of Ministry project report. Andrews University. Accessed on 12 February 2026 at: doi: 10.32597/dmin/78.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1991). *African religions and philosophy* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Heinemann.
- Moo, D. J. (2018). *The letter to the Romans* (2nd ed.). William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Moo, D. J. (2000). 'Romans.' In: G.F. Hawthorne, R.P. Martin and D.G. Reid, eds. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Downers Grove: IVP, pp. 56–58.
- Mugambi, J. N. K. (2002). *Christianity and African Culture*. 3rd ed. Nairobi: Acton Publishers.
- Mwaura, P. (2005). Doctrinal rigidity in mainline churches in Kenya. *African Journal of Practical Theology*, 3(1), 44–60.
- Mwaura, P. (2005a). *Church Leadership and Governance in Kenya*. Nairobi: Uzima Press.
- Njenga, M. (2014). Leadership and financial accountability in Kenyan churches. *Journal of African Church Ethics*, 2(4), 212–221.
- Oduyoye, M. A. (2001). *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Otieno, O. L., Ayako, R., & Kandago, D. (2021). 'Luo rituals Pertaining to Ancestral spirits' veneration and their implication on Christian worship: A study in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Kenya Lake Conference', *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion*, 4(1), pp. 28–42. Accessed on 12 February 2026 at: <https://doi.org/10.47604/jpcr.1324>.
- Parsitau, D. S. (2014). Spectacle and prosperity in neo-Pentecostal churches. *Journal of African Pentecostal Studies*, 5(2), 161–164.
- Pew Research Center. (2021). *International religious freedom: Kenya*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.
- Reisinger, D. (2022). Reproductive abuse in the context of clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. *Religions*, 13(3), Article 198. Accessed on 12 February 2026 at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030198>
- Schreiner, T. R. (2018). *Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Shanzu, I. (2025). 'Row deepens in ACK Kapenguria Diocese', *The Standard*, 25 November. Accessed on 10 February 2026 at: <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/rift-valley/article/2001534959/row-deepens-in-ack-kapenguria-diocese>
- United States Department of State. (2023). *2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Kenya*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State.
- Winfield, N., & Muhumuza, R. (2018). 'After decades of silence, nuns talk about abuse by priests', *Associated Press*, 27 July. Accessed on 12 February 2026 at: <https://apnews.com/article/africa-religion-sexual-abuse-only-on-ap-5ef7c4d017784093992929314fd87621>

- Winfield, N. (2021). 'Vatican Law Criminalizes Abuse of Adults by Priests, laity', *Associated Press*, 1 June. Accessed on 10 February 2026 at: <https://apnews.com/article/europe-sexual-abuse-by-clergy-laws-religion-6aa5ce9537419375091fdcf335c74f78>
- Wright, N. T. (2002). Romans. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 10). Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Wright, N. T. (2013). *Paul and the faithfulness of God*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.