

# Reading Mark 9:38-40 with the Prism of Ecumenism in Nigeria

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2023.70960>

Received: 16 May 2023; Accepted: 23 June 2023; Published: 03 October 2023

## ABSTRACT

The effort to institute ecumenism in Nigeria has met with persistent failure. Although the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) was formed to promote unity among the various Christian denominations in the country, it has not been able to achieve its goal. Through the millennia, Mark 9:38-40 has been used to support official and unofficial ecumenism and religious dialogue activities. This study aims to investigate Jesus' synoptic utterances, combining redaction-critical and socio-historical analysis to re-present the interpretations of such New Testament echoes of what Jesus expects of the Church of our day. The exegesis of the text is founded on two major assumptions: first, pluralistic expressions were remnants of Christianity before 70 AD. Second, such diverse representations must be understood in their biblical canonical context, as well as in relation to later early Church efforts to streamline theology and ecclesial institutions. If successful, these must also point the way forward in the quest for Christian unity and peaceful coexistence, but we may need to reinterpret the purposes of ecumenism and dialogue.

**Keywords:** Prism, Ecumenism, Unity, Nigeria

## INTRODUCTION

Christian unity and peaceful cohabitation among Christians, as well as between Christians and other religions, are critical for any society's growth and stability. Experience has proven that the absence of such a reality is frequently deleterious to the public good and polity of society. This is especially evident in nations and cultures where religion is an integral component of people's daily life. Faith convictions are so crucial in such communities that differences in faith expressions can cause severe conflicts and crises. The long conflict between Roman Catholics and Anglicans that tore Northern Ireland apart and devastated so many lives and property for decades is a case in point. Other instances are not difficult to come by. Torture has already occurred and continues to occur in Nigeria as a result of religious intolerance. Religious persecution has become the norm in some regions of our country, and Christian believers have had to muster extra courage to worship on Sundays in those areas, not knowing which church will be the next bomb target.

Religious intolerance in other regions of the country takes the shape of denomination bashing and doctrinal attacks; frequently, highly uncharitable proclamations are voiced on public and private media in order to slander what may be called competing denominations. In fact, the phenomenon has encumbered the country's effort towards positive change and development in the areas of security and social stability, socio-economic prosperity, democratic transformation and consolidation, integration of values and national unity, among others. On a daily basis, the scandal of Christian divide manifests itself in numerous and subtle ways. Today, there are numerous government and private sector businesses in Nigeria where persons are unable to find productive job or advancement due to their religious affiliation.

Against such a background, it has become very necessary to revisit the whole question of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. There is no time more suitable for that than an era that has been tagged a period of New Evangelization. Thus, attempts to restore true love, understanding, and mutual coexistence to the entire Christian family and beyond must be included in the New Evangelization. Even if the intention and wish is voiced or just suggested, the emphasis in this exercise is usually not on a return to a united church; a monolithic body with one Christian faith statement. Rather, what is frequently required is the nurturing of

Unity in Diversity; that is, creating an environment in which each person's right is appreciated, recognized and respected as long as it does not affect the betterment of the human person. This article advocates a return to a time when we can confidently and openly say, "he who is not against us is for us."

That our focus text is very relevant to the discussion on hand is underscored by W. Harrington, who while commenting on Mark 9:38-41, notes that:

These sayings of Jesus have an import beyond their Marcan setting. Christians of any age must take seriously the admonition, "he that is not against us is for us." Again, in our day, we are better conditioned to listen and attend. We have Vatican II's 'Constitution on the Church in the Modern World' and its 'Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.' And as for the Disciples of Christ, in their relationship with one another, the 'Decree on Ecumenism' bids them set aside petty jealousy and strive for true brotherhood.[\[1\]](#)

### 1. The Synoptic Contexts of Mark 9:38-40

The first major problem with our chosen text may be located in the varied literary contexts provided by the various synoptic evangelists. While that betrays the interest of the different evangelists, it precludes the possibility of a unified interpretation. Most of the Marcan pericope on which we are working is absent from Matthew's gospel. Only one verse is represented in Matt 10:42 (=Mark 9:41), albeit, with some changes to reflect special Matthean interest in discipleship. That verse is, however, absent from the Lukan parallel, which represents the rest of the Marcan material in one way or the other (see Luke 9:49-50). Here, Luke simply represents John's report and Jesus' answer, which Luke abbreviated by not repeating the reason for John's action. Also in Luke, although it is placed in the context of the second passion prediction like Mark, Jesus does not continue the discourse like we have in Mark. Rather it immediately precedes the journey narrative section that begins in 9:51, with emphasis also on discipleship.

### 2. Literary Context of Mark 9:38-40

Mark 9:38-40 falls within the larger context of the second passion prediction and the multiple instructions given by Jesus to his disciples in 9:30-50, which takes place in Capernaum. Worthy of note, however, is the fact that the content of our focus pericope exhibits areas of divergence when compared to the other material in its surrounding. In fact, if 9:38-40 were excised from its present placement, the rest of the material would read almost seamlessly. So, one could actually conclude that the evangelist has inserted this material here in typical Marcan fashion without necessarily aiming for coherence, but, at the same time, establishing some thematic connections with the surrounding material. The material is thus sandwiched in between material that has the same theme on both ends. This view is akin to the suggestions by Joel Marcus that "Mark himself seems to be responsible for a catchword connection, since he probably inserted 9:38-40 or 41; 9:37 forms a smoother linkage with either 9:41 or 9:42 than it does with 9:38."[\[2\]](#)

Also important is the observation by Craig Evans that on a closer look:

The episode of the exorcist also compliments the earlier story of the disciples' discussion of who the greatest is (9:33-37). In that episode they are taught that to be first one must be last and servant to others. If they embrace this attitude, they can hardly have feelings of jealousy and rivalry for someone else through whom God is at work. Conversely they learn that an outsider is rewarded for the simplest act of kindness shown to one of Jesus' disciples.[\[3\]](#)

In an effort to strengthen the literary-contextual connections, Adela Yarbro Collins notes that "an important reason for the placement of vv. 38-40 here is the association of the phrase 'in your name' ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί σου, "en tō onomatisou") in v. 38 with the phrase 'in my name' ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματί μου, *epi tō onomatimou*) in v. 37. The theme of exorcism also recalls the exorcism of the epileptic in vv. 14-29. This link encourages an

ironic reading of vv. 38-40: the disciples were unable to drive out the spirit afflicting the epileptic, but a man who is not even following Jesus is exorcising successfully in his name. The comparison leads to a recognition of tension between two techniques of exorcism: prayer in v. 29 and calling upon the name of Jesus in v. 38.”[\[4\]](#)

This larger body of material (9:38-50), within which is located Mark 9:38-40, was subtitled “Followers in Trouble” by Bas M. F. van Iersel in his reader-response commentary. He opines that the sayings in this larger pericope are linked together by “identical or equivalent catchwords and phrases as well as by similarly-sounding opening words.”[\[5\]](#) He notes also that, despite the unity perceived from the said occurrences of catchwords and phrases, the sayings do not really fit together. Accordingly, “that would seem to indicate that the author has inserted an existing series of sayings in his book without properly adjusting them.”[\[6\]](#)

The effective use of the name of Jesus (indicated in Mark 9:38-40) is, however, in line with Ancient Near Eastern and Jewish cultural practice, where it was commonly believed that the name of a deity is both powerful and effective in countering negative powers and deceases (see 2 Kings 2:24; 5:11). Such effective use of Jesus’ name was prevalent in early Christianity as is evidenced in Acts 3:6, where Peter heals the lame man by calling on the name of Jesus. Notably, A. Y. Collins reinforces this concept, remarking: “the effective power of divine persons is made active by the use of their names in the cultural contexts of the New Testament. The reason is that, in certain contexts, no distinction was made between the person and the name.”[\[7\]](#) Such effective power would be explained in terms of “faith in his name” by Peter in Acts 3:16 and 4: 10. And in Acts 4:24-30, the author notes that, “the community in prayer” observes that, “signs and wonders are done in the name of Jesus.” [\[8\]](#)

This pericope has also been compared very favorably to, and read against the background of, the story of Eldad and Medad in Num 11:26-30, where, like Jesus, Moses responded more inclusively rather than restrictively.[\[9\]](#) The disciples may have been caught wrong-footed and cautioned by Jesus in their effort to arrogantly “set up an exclusive discipleship” and in their hostility toward others “who do not see things their way (9:38-41; 10:13-16).”[\[10\]](#) “The narrative,” as David Rhoads categorically points out, “explicitly rejects exclusion.”[\[11\]](#)

## TEXT AND ITS TRANSLATION

### Structure and Analysis of Mark 9:38-40:

The entire pericopé may be subdivided into three:

1. The report of John to Jesus (v. 38);
2. Jesus’ response to John’s approach (v. 39); and
3. Jesus’ enunciation “of a general principle with regard to treatment of outsiders” (v. 40).[\[12\]](#)

Verse 38: The report of John to Jesus

John, son of Zebedee, brother of James, one of the three close associates of Jesus (5:37; 9:2), initiates a conversation in 9:38. His role here has been identified as part of the original story. Up until this point, no other disciple but Peter has spoken in Mark’s gospel. “This is the only time when Mark calls attention to John alone,” noted William Lane, who further points out that given the other important occurrences of John in the privy company of others, “Mark shows in this way that even the most privileged of three disciples failed to understand what the passion signified for their life and mission,” especially since the use of the first person plural indicates that John represented the collective will of the twelve here.[\[13\]](#) The object of the complaint was an uncommissioned exorcist, unlike the commissioned disciples (6: 7-13). John expresses

what seems quite like a legitimate concern. The incident reported must have taken place when Jesus and his disciples had been separated, even for a brief moment, and John's statement stresses the exclusive character of the circle of the twelve. Van Iersel suggests that the only time within the gospel that that reported incident would have taken place would be when "the disciples were away on their mission to cast out demons by the power Jesus had given them" in 6:7-30. Yet within the context of the reported failure of the disciples to exorcise a demon in 9: 18 in part of their mission, John's "complaint creates an ironic contrast. The successful exorcism by one thought incompetent by the disciples puts their own failure in an unfavorable light."[\[14\]](#)

The address of Jesus as *didaskalos* (teacher) is here used, as in other places, in connection with the mighty deeds of Jesus. It calls to mind Jesus' authority, having been presented as sitting down to instruct in v. 35. [\[15\]](#) The full identity of the exorcist was not revealed. But he may either have been a non-Christian or a follower of Jesus outside the official circles represented by John. [\[16\]](#)

"In your name:" In ancient times, the name of a person or thing would usually be associated with his power or presence. "In the name of" then connotes "in the power of (see e.g. 11 :9; 13:13)." Alternatively, the phrase means "for the sake of," the sense in which it is used in 9:33-37. [\[17\]](#)

As already noted above, the influence of Num 11:26-29 on this episode is widely acknowledged by scholars. There, the effort by Joshua was to stop Eldad and Medad, who did not belong to a special select group, from prophesying. Moses rather than prohibiting them actually tolerated them. [\[18\]](#) In Acts 19: 13-17, the efforts by the Jewish exorcist to use the name of Jesus was outright failure. It has also been noted that there is evidence that "the name of Jesus is frequently invoked in later pagan magical texts." [\[19\]](#) In the same vein, Wilfrid Harrington has noted that "the apostolic church found itself faced with the problem of its attitude to non-Christian exorcists who invoked the name of Jesus (Acts 19:13-16)." [\[20\]](#) And the Markan community may have had one of such cases reflected in our focus pericopé.

Verse 39: Jesus' response to John's approach

The second reference to the name of Jesus in this verse offers a connection between this part of the discussion and what preceded it, especially since there is a previous mention of the name of Jesus as the motif for some other action in verse 37. The strange exorcist was definitely getting positive results from using the name of Jesus, and the disciples of Jesus tried to stop him. [\[21\]](#) The arguments regarding the means used by the disciples to dissuade the exorcist need not be rehearsed here since they are inconsequential to the focus of our paper. Importantly, Jesus' response to John makes such an endeavor a futile one. One must not miss the play on words in Jesus' statement in verse 39: "for one who does a mighty deed (*dynamis*) in the Lord's name will not be able (*dynasthai*) to work against the Lord. This union of the noun and verb is quite emphatic. [\[22\]](#)

It is difficult to pass up this episode without asking some social context questions; elusive as that endeavor may seem. While the dialogue presupposes that there are people driving out demons in the name of Jesus, it is, however, difficult to push the setting back to the time of Jesus himself. John's note that the person involved was not "following us" instead of "not following you," that is, Jesus, has been fingered as an indication that the episode is removed from the time of the historical Jesus. It has also been noted that Jesus' response in verse 39 "fits the situation of the early church better than the life of the historical Jesus. It fits well in a time in which the early Christians are engaged in mission and thus emphasizing the power available through faith in Jesus and his name. In addition, the setting is one in which there is concern about people 'reviling' (*kakologe?*) Jesus and especially his followers." [\[23\]](#) This suggestion may be supported by the text since the response of Jesus to John, who alone had spoken, is rendered in the 2nd person plural imperative, *k?lyete*. The Church or at least, all the disciples were in view in that response. Note that the same verb is used by Jesus in the encounter with the children in Mark 10:4. [\[24\]](#)

Lars Hartman has given the story another spin and, therefore, abandoned and challenged the arrogation of the story to the time of the early church by noting that:

The reader with a sharp ear for Greek style may get the feeling that John is eager to demonstrate that ‘we,’ that is, the disciples, really have engaged themselves on Jesus’ side, indeed, that they have ‘received’ Jesus by joining him. Therefore they have tried to stop somebody who had proceeded to cast out demons in Jesus’ name (v. 38), that is, to do what the twelve did as authorized by Jesus when he sent them out (6: 7, 13; cf. Acts 16:18; also Acts 3:6 9:34).<sup>[25]</sup> Such a ‘we/us’ creates a partnership between Jesus and the disciples, but Jesus’ short answer (v. 39a) refuses to accept such partnership. The Jesus of the narrative lowers the thresholds that the disciples want to keep high. He presents two reasons for his stand: The first is practical: somebody who uses Jesus’ authority against evil powers would not continue by reproaching him (v. 39b). The next reason (v. 40) is a general explanation of Jesus’ attitude. It sounds like a proverb, and there are examples of similar pronouncements. <sup>[26]</sup>

This opinion is in line with the opinion of other scholars who noted that the struggles of the of the second and third generation Christians and the efforts to streamline doctrine and practice would make it impossible for the *Sitz im Leben* of the pericope to be in the later community of Jesus’ disciples. Thus, even if a *Sitz im Leben* in the time of the historical Jesus remains inadmissible, a time before 70AD would be more probable setting as there are ample evidences of doctrinal steam-lining and ecclesial self-definition resulting from the post-70AD struggles with Formative Judaism. <sup>[27]</sup>

Verse 40: Jesus’ enunciation “of a general principle with regard to treatment of outsiders”

Verse 40 is linked to v. 39 with *gar*. Verse 39 is however the climax of the episode, and this saying may have been an independent saying of Jesus that is tagged on. Its addition presents it as a clarification of what came before. "The idea is that those who perform or benefit from exorcisms or other mighty deeds done in the name of Jesus, no matter who performs them, will not be 'against us' (*kath'hēmon*), but rather 'for us' (*huper hēmon*)"<sup>[28]</sup> Again, this verse, like v. 39, probably arose from the life situation of the early Church. In that case, the disciples of Mark’s community and even today’s readers can be creditably represented in the statement of Jesus, covered as it were by the power that comes from faithfully acting in the name of Jesus<sup>[29]</sup> note the manuscript variations in verse 40. Some texts read "anyone who is not against you, *hymōn*" (Syriac and Bohairic) while the more difficult but well attested traditions read “anyone who is not against us, *hēmon*” (Ⲁ, B, C, W, etc. f<sup>1</sup> 13, Sy<sup>s</sup>).<sup>[30]</sup>

Hence, Gundry summarizes the entire segment as follows: “the independent exorcist is not to be hindered, (1) because suspecting fellow believers outside one’s close circle underestimates the number of people loyal to Jesus (v. 19b); (2) because a sense of rivalry makes believers fail to recognize their friends (v. 40); and(3) because receiving a messenger of the gospel brings salvation to a quondam unbeliever (v. 41), whereas causing even a child who believes in Jesus to sin brings judgment on the believer who causes the sin (v. 42).”<sup>[31]</sup> Clifton Black supports this interpretation as do a variety of scholars, noting: “Adhering to the spirit of 9:35-37, 9:38-41 stresses gracious reception of anyone whose action, dynamic or modest, genuinely conforms to Jesus’ name and character.”<sup>[32]</sup> It must also be noted that elsewhere, Mark does demonstrate some hostility toward outsiders (scribes in 3:31-32; see 4:11; “these blasphemed against the Holy Spirit by attributing Jesus’ exorcisms to Beelzebul”). Not so with the exorcist in 9:38-40.<sup>[33]</sup>

## Insights into the Analysis

The foregoing analysis of the text forms a basis for this paper’s insistence that any genuine ecumenical or interreligious dialogue efforts must take Jesus’ statement in inclusiveness seriously. Such an effort amounts to a return to the early Christian (pre-70AD) spirit of inclusiveness that necessarily accommodates pluralistic

expression of faith. Marcus makes a note in his commentary that I find quite intriguing, regarding Jesus' response to John: "The pericopé's openness to outsiders, including non-Christian exorcists, contrasts with the restrictive attitude of the later church (see e.g. Acts 19:13-17; Justin, *I Apo.* 54-58; Augustine, *City of God*, 10.16; 22.10) but coheres with the probably authentic saying in Matt 12:27//Luke 11:19."[\[34\]](#) A cursory view of the history of interpretation of Mark 9:38-41 in the Early Church reveals the frequent use of the pericope in issues regarding sacramental practice amongst separated brethren and doctrinal heresies, such that while it sometimes encourages caution in dealing with such individuals and groups, it points to an outright dissociation of the church from those perceived as not being "with us." Examples of such teachings abound in Augustine and other church fathers.[\[35\]](#) It was never used ecumenically. In the mind of these early church fathers, anyone who was not in line with official teaching of the church was a heretic. Such positions definitely gave birth in part to the later divisions, separations, and proliferations that came to be characteristic of Christianity.

Nevertheless, the church in more recent times, especially since the Second Vatican Council has, time and again, recognized the revelatory power ingrained in such pronouncements of Jesus that she actually takes recourse to them in support of efforts in dialogue and ecumenism. It becomes true then that "Jesus' response also implies that a force has been released into the world that will ultimately prove to be more potent than the ages' inbuilt inclination to slander—the power of Jesus' name itself for their own purposes may unexpectedly find themselves being drawn into its sphere of influence; the same eschatological *dynamis* that is manifested in the exorcism through speaking in the name will tame the tongue that uttered it."[\[36\]](#)

Also equally important are the suggestions by G. O'Collins and others that a shift in how we read and interpret scripture like our focus pericope and how we conceive ecclesiology is necessary for the furtherance of ecumenism. On the biblical side, he notes: "The fruits of biblical renewal registered themselves also in an unprecedented move towards distinguishing (but not separating) the kingdom of God from the Church. Deeper study of the Gospels— and, in particular, the Synoptic Gospels—had spread a new appreciation for the fact that the preaching of the kingdom constituted the heart of Jesus' ministry. New Testament scholarship had stressed how, in season and out of season, he proclaimed the divine kingdom *already* present in our world but *not yet* consummated. To be sure, he gathered disciples, selected a core group of twelve for a special leadership role in his community, and may have spoken of the coming church (Matt 16:18; 18:17). But for Jesus, the heart of the matter was the divine rule breaking into the world in his own person, words and deeds".[\[37\]](#)

In addition to such a broad-minded exegetical awareness, O' Collins further argues that the relationship between kingdom and ecclesia must be properly articulated and ordered. Therefore, he concludes that: "The conviction that, with the kingdom being the wider and greater reality, the Church serves the kingdom and not vice versa, opens up space for a more Christian and generous appreciation of where other faiths and their followers belong in the one great divine design to save all human beings."[\[38\]](#) Such a universal salvific scope is also characteristic of the very mission of Christ. So, a broader view is manifested "by respect for the scope of the divine kingdom," which is "matched by a presentation of Christ as head of the whole human race and then of the Church—a priority rooted in the New Testament which must shape any reflections on the religious others."[\[39\]](#)

### 3. Mark 9:38-40 and Ecumenism

A short historical overview of ecumenism by D. Mac Culloch rightly notes that ecumenism (of some sort) had been in the works before the Catholic efforts of Vatican II. The word ecumenism is derived from the Greek words *oikoumenē* ("the inhabited world") and *oikos* ("house") and can be traced from the commands, promises, and prayers of Jesus (see John 17:21).[\[40\]](#) It is the movement or tendency toward worldwide

Christian unity or cooperation.

Its provenance is traceable to the Protestant cycles. Just as Catholics discovered liberation theology in small communities of ordinary people in Latin America, Protestants had discovered ecumenism in their relative failures in small villages in India.[\[41\]](#) After the International Missionary Conference held at Edinburgh in 1910, Protestants began to use the term ecumenism to describe the gathering of missionary, evangelistic, service, and unitive forces. During and after the second Vatican Council (1962-65), Roman Catholics used ecumenism to refer to the renewal of the whole life of the church, undertaken to make it more responsive to “separated churches” and to the needs of the world. Vatican II signaled and “provoked a significant shift in Roman Catholic engagement with the wider world, including the wider church.”[\[42\]](#) That texts like Mark 9:38-40 played a very important role in the church’s effort to open these doors is well noted.

The Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, therefore, opened the way for the interaction between not just Catholic Church and other churches; it also gave room for interfaith dialogue. In 1961, Pope John XXIII established the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity. These positive moves seek to recover the apostolic sense of the early Church for unity in diversity, and it confronts the frustrations, difficulties, and ironies of the modern pluralistic world. Two important documents of Vatican II Council dealt decisively on this, namely; Decree on Ecumenism and Decree on Relation with non-Christians. In his seminal work, *Seeking Common Grounds*, John Cardinal Onaiyekan critically looked into the challenge of ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and other Christian denominations and non-Christians alike.[\[43\]](#)

### **The Nigerian Experience with Ecumenism**

John Cardinal Onaiyekan has suggested and rightly so, that a good starting point for dialogue is the recognition that, historically, religion is accepted as a major dimension of life, despite recent strong movements to either deny or ignore religion as irrelevant. Nevertheless, the resilience of religion against all odds goes to demonstrate its relevance even today. And until we recognize this, the role of dialogue would not be fully acknowledged.[\[44\]](#) Of course, religion has its own basic challenges. One of which, is, the inherent dogmatism that characterizes it. Yes, religion has its permanent and always unchanging principles, that is, often religion is not open to too much change. But in the real sense, if religion is to remain relevant, it must be open to the changes that happen around us. It must be prepared to adjust especially in the assessment of situations and realities around us. This does not by itself suggest wholesome acceptance of all that happens around us. Far from it! But as much as possible, religion should be ready to adapt to changes.

Ecumenism faces serious challenges today not only because of the plurality of religious beliefs but also the never-ending proliferation of churches. In Nigeria for instance, John Cardinal Onaiyekan notes that churches are founded largely by drawing people out of existing churches, and where “proselytism,” in its most negative sense, is the order of the day, we might not make much progress in any genuinely ecumenical way until this is addressed.

From the Catholic perspective, there are internal demands that challenge the ecumenical effort. A. Nichols notes, for example that, with regards to ecumenical movement, Catholics particularly, have a special mission to guard the unity for which Christ prayed, since they hold that unity to endure in its essential form in their own Church.[\[45\]](#) This by itself is not an easy task because of its demands. On their part, what needs to be done among Catholics is a major push to make sure that those that are baptized really have a new vigor and ardor about their faith. They must first have a full grasp of their faith and then make the required efforts to know about the faith of the other. Only in this way can they be adequately equipped to face the challenge of interaction with non-Catholics. With regards to ecclesiology, he further points out that: “We need to find a humbler, and therefore richer, vision of fidelity to our own tradition, one that leaves real conceptual, moral and spiritual room for us to affirm a self-evident truth: that a faithful and true Christian is always, precisely

as such, growing towards God, becoming converted more deeply. An ecclesiology of a perfect society effectively excludes this truth.”[\[46\]](#)

It is very easy to encourage ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue when you are Roman Catholic and seeking some common grounds. But part of this quest should listen to the other side of the story. Catholics must, therefore, be open to some of the views from the other side of the aisle and what they think of the Roman Catholic effort. “In *Ut Unum Sint*, John Paul II had recognized that the manner of Rome’s exercise of primacy was itself a significant obstacle to Christian unity, and had recognized, however carefully, the need for some kind of change in what he acknowledged was a new situation of religious diversity.[\[47\]](#) Yet the Holy Father insisted that the deposit of faith must not be compromised in the ecumenical process since “the unity willed by God can be attained only by the adherence of all to the content of revealed faith in its entirety.”[\[48\]](#)

### **Ecumenism and Conversion: Toward a Better Understanding**

First, it needs be said that ecumenism though may lead to conversion, does not necessarily suggest immediate conversion from one denomination to another. The primary objective is to pave way for effective dialogue upon which divergent Christian denominations may seek common grounds. Today, we have different experiences of religious diversity. Plurality of belief, including the right to non belief, has become a fact of our contemporary world. To make religion relevant today, we must recognize and affirm the inherent diversity thus making room for dialogue and mutual understanding. This challenge was highlighted again and given new prominence by the Holy Father, Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*.[\[49\]](#) This means acknowledging the fact that the spirit of religion is so vast, and the concept of God so immense, that no single religious structural system should claim to exhaust all that God stands for. This realization disposes us to understand and accommodate differences. This goes well beyond what we often call “religious tolerance,” which in itself is a negative concept since it presupposes that we are dealing with something unwanted and undesirable. We must go beyond spurious toleration to mutual respect. That movement is itself a form of conversion. Such a respect does not necessarily mean that I accept what the other says. But it certainly means that I accept his freedom to follow whatever religion he proposes for himself, provided he/she does not infringe on my own inalienable rights. Freedom of religion does not however mean that it does not matter what people preach because the freedom of one ends, where the rights of others begin, especially the right to life. So, the State has a role to play to determine the limits of such freedom in the light of the common good of the society. There is no easier way for different faiths to come together than when they consciously address shared needs and responsibilities while retaining their different convictions.

### **CONCLUSION**

From the study thus far, Mark shows through the story in the text studied that God’s kingdom develops not only through well-known authoritative leaders, but also through anonymous, insignificant figures such as the unknown exorcist. The evangelist conveys to the reader the diversity and inclusiveness of God’s kingdom. While many studies on the provided Marcan passage see the exorcist as an outsider of God’s kingdom, this study argues that the evangelist sees the exorcist as an authentic member of God’s kingdom, and his exorcism as a mystical manner of the kingdom’s growth. The twelve disciples are oblivious to the kingdom’s hidden expansion. They delineate the kingdom’s borders quite precisely. Mark illustrates the disciples’ restricted viewpoint and invites the reader in the true characteristic of God’s kingdom. Hence, lies the ecumenical paradigm for Christians in Nigeria.

As far as the mind can tell, a completely united Christendom is not a feasible expectation. Such Christian solidarity can only be described eschatologically. Only on the divine side of current reality will there be the



ultimate and absolutely all-encompassing union for which Christ begged. However, until then, believers must strive together to achieve harmonious coexistence, regardless of denomination or religious affiliation.

## FOOT NOTES

[1]Wilfrid Harrington, *Mark* (New Testament Message, 4; Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1979) 148-49. Note that our focus text ends at 9:40. That is because the author believes that the saying in 9:41 can stand on its own. Gundry actually keeps 9:38-42 together as one subsection (*Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000) 510-13.

[2]Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16, A New Translation and Introduction with Commentary* (The Anchor Yale Bible, 27A; ed. John J. Collins; NewHaven, CT.: Yale University Press, 2009) 671.

[3]Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20* (Word Biblical Commentary, 34B; eds. Bruce Metzger et al.; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Tnc., 2000) 66.

[4]Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007) 446.

[5]Bas M.F. van Iersel, *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 19981) 309-310.

[6]Van Iersel, *Mark*, 3 I 0. Marcus enlarges this larger section to 9:33-50 and titles it, "A Collection of Sayings on Christian Living" (*Mark 8-16*, 671). A. Y. Collins also notes that It has also been noted that the insertion of verses 38-40 here breaks off what came before from what came after, and that verse 4 1 actually belongs together with verse 37, with focus on children (*Mlark*, 449). See Gundry, *Afark*, 520-25 for a more detailed theory of interpolation. Scholars' efforts to delineate the pericope arc also illuminated and exhaustively discussed by Gundry in his notes on the pcricope. See also Marcus, *Marie 8-16*, 671

[7]A. Y. Collins, *Afark*, 446-47. Sec also Lars Hartman, *Mark for the Nations: A Text- and Reader-Oriented Commentary* (Eugene. OR:PICKWICK Publications, 20 I 0) 403.

[8]A. Y. Collins, *Mark*, 447. See also Acts 16:18 and 19:13-17 for the expression of the same idea. That early Christians performed healing in the name of Jesus is also attested in James 5: 14.

[9]A. Y. Collins, *Mark*, 448.

[10]Francis J. Moloney, *Mark: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004) 164, 193.

[11]David Rhoads, "Social Criticism: Crossing Boundaries," in *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (eds. Janice CapelAnderson and Stephen D. Moore; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press,1992:135-61) 156-57.

[12]Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 685.

[13]William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark: The Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; ed. F. F. Bruce; Grand Rapids,MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974) 342.

[14]Van Iersel, *Mark*, 3 I 0. Cf. A. Y. Collins, *Mark*, 446.

[15] Gundry, *Mark*, 510.

[16] Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 684.

[17] Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 671, 684.

[18] See Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 289.

[19] Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 684

[20] Wilfrid Harrington, O. P *Mark* (New Testament message. 4; Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1979) 14 7.

[21] Donahue and Harrington note here that the verb used, *kōiyein* has a wide range of meanings (“hinder. prevent, forbid”) (*Mark*, 285).

[22] Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 684-85. The verb *dynamai* is one of Mark's favorite verbs, occurring about 33 times in the gospel, compared to Matthew's 27 times and Luke's 26 times.

[23] A. Y. Collins, *Mark*, 448. Gundry weighs in on this discussion by noting that "the counter argument that Jesus' name would not have been used in exorcism during his lifetime has some strength, but is considerably weakened by the immediacy with which his name begins to be used after his lifetime not only in exorcism but also in miracle working and prayer and, above all, in the preaching of eternal salvation. The counter argument may also underestimate the impact that he made on his contemporaries while he was still ministering (*Mark*, 521).

[24] Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 684.

[25] Hartman, *Mark*, 403.

[26] Hartman, *Mark*, 403. See van Iersel, *Mark*, 311, for a different view on the "us" usage, either by the disciples or by Jesus, which sometimes gives the impression of the disciples over against Jesus or with Jesus. See also Gundry's note that rather than correcting John's use of "we" and "us," Jesus confirms and expands John's "us" to include himself (vv. 40-41) "in correlation with his preceding identification of himself with his disciples, even those who are children (see verse 37 again)" Yet he disabuses the minds of his disciples concerning any form of the kind of exclusion reported by John (*Mark*, 511).

[27] For a balanced view on some details on the Jewish-Christian relations in the post-70AD era, see Graham Stanton, *A Gospel for A New People: Studies in Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) and Andrew Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

[28] A. Y. Collins, *Mark*, 448-49.

[29] Commenting on the same verse, van Iersel, *Mark*, 311, notes that: "Jesus' reply comes as a surprise after the passage about the sending out of the twelve in 6:7-13. Although there was nothing in that passage to suggest that the authority over the unclean spirits was given exclusively to the disciples, the reader nevertheless had the impression that they needed an official mandate to be able to cast out demons. It is clear from Jesus' reply, however, that an outsider who calls upon the name of Jesus can also share in that power, provided that his appeal implies a positive attitude towards Jesus. In this indirect way the story alerts the readers to the fact that they, too, can play a part in fighting evil."

[30] See Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 685.

[31] Gundry, *Mark*, 513.

[32] Black, *Mark*, 217.

[33] Marcus, *Afark 8-16*. 687. Parallels to Ylark 9:40 may be found in Matthew and Luke but that "Q" representation expresses the verse negatively (Matt 12:30, '(Luke 11 :23)).

[34] Marcus *Mark 8-16*, 686.

[35] Augustine, *Harmony of the Gospels*, 4.6; *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*, 7.39; *Letters to Dardanus*, 187.36; *Faith and Works*, 4.6; and Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Christian Mode of Life*. All cited in Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, Eds., *Afark* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture; New Testament II; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998) 127-30.

[36] Marcus, *Luke 8-16*, 686.

[37] Gerald O' Collins, S. J., *The Second Vatican Council On Other Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 213) 156-57.

[38] G. O'Collins, *Second Vatican Council*, 157.

[39] G. O'Collins, *Second Vatican Council*, 157.

[40] D. MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity* (St Ives Plc., Great Britain: Clays Ltd, 2009) 979.

[41] MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, 979.

[42] Endean, "Anglican Establishment," 177.

[43] John Cardinal Onaiyekan, *Seeking Common Grounds, Inter-Religious Dialogue in Africa* (Collected Writings, Vol. I; Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications Africa, 2013) 245.

[44] Onaiyekan, *Seeking Common Grounds, Inter-Religious Dialogue in Africa*, 247.

[45] A. Nichols, *Rome and the Eastern Churches* (San Francisco: Ignatius) 20.

[46] Endean, "Anglican Establishment," 177.

[47] Philip Endean, S. J. "Anglican Establishment, Roman Catholics and Receptive Ecumenism," in *The Established Church: Past, Present and Future*, Eds. Mark Chapman, Judith Maltby and William Whyte (London: T & T Clark International, 2011:176-79) 176.

[48] Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint: On Commitment to Ecumenism* (Roma: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1995) no. 18.

[49] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (Rome: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2013) nos. 244-46.