

Gospel music in South-Western Nigeria in the 21st century: an ecclesiological review

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Abstract

The Church, as the ecclesial community of Jesus Christ, holds the divine mandate of evangelism - a commission rooted in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) - where gospel music plays an important role. Gospel music serves as both a theological and cultural expression capable of fulfilling this mandate. However, in South-Western Nigeria, the practice of gospel music has witnessed significant deviations: performers with questionable moral and spiritual integrity exploit the art form for fame, wealth, and influence. This study undertakes an ecclesiological review of gospel music and ministry in the region, arguing that gospel music remains an effective medium for evangelism and spiritual edification when practised within biblical parameters. Employing a qualitative research methodology, this study integrates theological exegesis, musicological analysis, and cultural hermeneutics to explore the origins, styles, and roles of gospel music in Christian contexts within the region. It recommends strategic ecclesial reforms and theological training to guide gospel musicians and church leaders towards maintaining the redemptive and mission-oriented ideals of gospel music. The study concludes that a biblically grounded gospel music ministry contributes significantly to spiritual renewal, church growth, and the preservation of doctrinal integrity.

Key words: church, ecclesiology, gospel music, ministry, south-western Nigeria, theology

Introduction

Gospel music in south-western Nigeria has evolved into a multifaceted phenomenon, intertwining spiritual devotion, cultural expression, and commercial enterprise. This evolution has led to the enrichment of the church, gospel ministry, and has as well brought about noticeable challenges within the ecclesiastical landscape. This article reviews the ecclesiological implications of gospel music in the region, examining its historical trajectory, stylistic developments, theological depth, and the roles of prominent gospel musicians.

The use of music in Christian worship and ministry is both ancient and foundational, and it is rooted in the scriptural traditions of the Psalms and the early Church. Gospel music, as a genre, emerged from the confluence of scriptural inspiration, African indigenous musical forms, and Western missionary influences. In South-Western Nigeria (a region dominated by Yoruba culture and language), gospel music has evolved into a powerful spiritual and socio-cultural force.

Despite the potential of gospel music, there has been a growing concern within ecclesiastical and theological circles about the decline in the spiritual integrity and theological depth of many gospel music practitioners in the region. This study, therefore, is an ecclesiological review of gospel music and ministry, with focus on the origin, development, present state, and the way forward.

This study adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative research methodology with an interdisciplinary approach. Ecclesiological inquiry provides the theological lens to assess the Church's role and responsibility in shaping gospel music ministry. Musicological analysis is applied to explore musical structures, stylistic elements, and cultural adaptations. The data for the study were drawn from biblical texts, scholarly literature, interviews with church leaders and gospel artistes, and participatory observation in gospel music events within Lagos, Oyo, and Ogun States of Nigeria.

Definitions of terms:

Church

The Church can be defined as a community of believers who have been called out from the kingdom of darkness into the marvellous light of Jesus Christ. The gathering of such believers in Christ, either in generic terms of all Christians or referring to a local assembly of Christians, is referred to as the Church.

Gospel Music

The term gospel music is related to the term gospel; it is a music typology of the church with potentials to reach others for Christ. The term "gospel music" therefore should seek to present the gospel i.e. the good news of Christ in the most communicable musical ways. While Church Music focuses on fulfilling the mandate of the Church, which includes worship, fellowship, and ministry, gospel music

focuses on the task of evangelising with the good news of salvation towards Christian maturation.

Ecclesiological review

Ecclesiology is a branch of study in Christian Theology that deals with the church, its study, origin, theology, nature, functions and structure. The term ecclesiological review, therefore, refers to a theological review of certain observable trends in the practice of gospel music within Christian circles in South-Western Nigeria.

Evangelism

The term ‘evangelism’ is from the Greek word “*evangelizo*”, which connotes “to witness” or “to share” the gospel of Christ to unbelievers with passion. In this study, the word ‘evangelism’ is used to denote the art of witnessing or sharing the gospel message of Christ to the people and of disciplining them as commanded in Matthew 28:19-20:

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matt. 28:19-20 NIV).

The above scripture refers to the great commission of Christians to the task of evangelism to spread the gospel of Christ through music, and it is a task that is most sacred and imperative.

Gospel music versus church music

The evolution of Christian music in Nigeria, particularly in the south-west, reflects the region’s dynamic religious landscape and its synthesis of Western missionary heritage with indigenous musical idioms. While ‘Gospel music’ and ‘Church music’ are frequently interpreted as though they are the same, there is the need to clarify the perspectives of the terms both musicologically and theologically. As observed by scholars such as Omoyajowo (1982) and Akinyele (2010), music in Nigerian Christianity plays both didactic and doxological roles, but the boundaries between entertainment, evangelism, and worship are often blurred.

Church music refers to musical expressions that are theologically grounded and structurally integrated into the liturgical and worship practices of Christian congregations. As indicated in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, the early church embraced a diversity of musical forms, psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs as a means of mutual edification, thanksgiving, and doxology. This biblical foundation is reinforced by the wider scriptural witness to the role of music in worship, including instrumental accompaniment (Psalm 150; 1 Chronicles 15:16), corporate singing (Psalm 95:1–2), and even bodily expressions such as dancing (Psalm 149:3; 2 Samuel 6:14). In the liturgical history of churches in south-west Nigeria, particularly among Anglican, Methodist, and Baptist traditions, European hymnody, often

translated into Yoruba and other indigenous languages, has historically dominated worship. However, recent decades have witnessed a growing incorporation of indigenous choruses and gospel songs, reflecting a broader biblical model of diverse and contextualised musical worship. A prominent example is the Yoruba hymn “*Ise Oluwa Ko Le Baje O*”, widely used in Anglican and Methodist liturgies. The hymn is theologically rich, articulating core biblical themes of divine immutability and covenantal faithfulness, and continues to serve as a meaningful expression of contextual theology in contemporary Nigerian worship.

Church music is integral to the liturgical structure of worship. It is selected or composed to align with the Church calendar, Scripture readings, and sacramental acts (White, 2000). Gospel music, by contrast, essentially functions outside formal liturgical confines and is often driven by individualistic or evangelistic purposes. Church music serves catechetical functions, teaching doctrine through music. Gospel music often emphasises testimony, personal experience, and emotional appeal. This distinction aligns with the Pauline understanding of order and edification in worship (1 Corinthians 14:26–40).

Church music is typically performed by choirs or the congregation under pastoral oversight. Gospel music is predominantly soloist-driven and often reflects the theological views of the artist rather than ecclesial consensus. In this sense, Gospel music is more prophetic and spontaneous, while Church music is liturgical and regulated.

The distinctive cultural milieu of South-West Nigeria has contributed to the emergence of hybridised forms of worship music, blending traditional liturgical expressions with contemporary musical styles. Numerous contemporary gospel artists, such as Nathaniel Bassey, Tope Alabi, Bidemi Olaoba, Sola Allison, TY Bello, among others, originated within ecclesial contexts but have since expanded their musical reach beyond strictly liturgical settings. Their compositions now function within both worship environments and the broader commercial music industry. For example, Nathaniel Bassey’s widely acclaimed song *Imela* is frequently employed in church services while simultaneously circulating on digital streaming platforms, thereby blurring the lines between sacred worship and artistic performance.

The trend toward musical hybridisation raises important ecclesiological and theological questions. As gospel music becomes increasingly shaped by entertainment-oriented aesthetics, there exists a potential risk of diminishing its doctrinal depth and compromising its liturgical integrity. As Cochrane (2001)

cautions, when worship music prioritises performance over theological substance, it may obscure the primary purpose of congregational worship, which is to glorify God and edify the body of Christ.

Ecclesiological foundations of gospel music

Ecclesiology - the theological study of the nature and mission of the Church - dictates that worship, evangelism, and discipleship are central to the life of the Church (Acts 2:42–47). Music functions as a medium of theological communication and community formation. In the Pauline epistles, music is considered both didactic and doxological (Colossians 3:16, Ephesians 5:19). Gospel music, when rightly employed, advances ecclesial objectives in worship, witness, and edification.

The term ‘gospel’ centres on witnessing the message of Christ for the salvation of souls into the kingdom of God. From the Greek interpretation of the term in the Bible, the term ‘gospel’ is a noun word and is often transliterated as the good news of Christ. Likewise, the word as a verb may be rendered as ‘to bring’ or ‘to announce the good news’. This means that the gospel is the good news of Christ, a message from Christ through a messenger who proclaims the good news in the most communicable ways to win others to Christ or the Christian fold, the church.

Reflecting on the term ‘gospel’, Ayeye (personal communication, July 19, 2022), asserted that it is either good news of salvation to those who may have received the Christ of the Gospels, or bad news to those who reject Christ. This assertion stresses the importance of the spiritual quality of what is termed ‘gospel music’. Robin (2015) notes that music (as melody, harmony, and rhythm, with lyrics) is endowed with a great formative power and aesthetic ingredients which can affect the ordering of the soul in ways that are either conducive to human flourishing or contribute to people’s disordering (Robin, 2015). Therefore, a good quality of music aimed at presenting the gospel has more potency to contribute to human flourishing toward Christ-likeness.

Ossaiga (personal communication, July 10, 2022), opined that gospel music is not limited to the good news of salvation but, in practice, it often deals with all other Christian themes about creation, praise, testimony, redemption, grace, etc. He further noted that although the genre of music is often called “gospel music,” however, it does not mean it must preach the gospel always.

Oyelowo (personal communication, July 14, 2022) submitted that a song containing Christian lyrics does not necessarily qualify as gospel music. He emphasised that for a message (in a song) to be considered truly gospel, the artiste must be born again. Citing Isaiah 29:13 to support his argument, he further contended that some singers

merely pay lip service to the gospel. As such, they may not be seen as proclaiming the full gospel, but rather as individuals seeking fame and personal gain through music. The potency of the gospel lies in the power of the cross, which proclaims Christ's birth, life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, and one that embodies Christian values. The quality of songs and gospel music that align with these values and theology should, by necessity, be life-changing, bearing testimony to the complete gospel of Christ. Those who deliver this message must be true witnesses of the gospel.

In south-western Nigeria, the weak ecclesiastical oversight of the music ministry has allowed secular values and celebrity culture to infiltrate spaces that ought to be sacred and ministerial. Gospel music is expected to embody the redemptive theology represented by Christ and His Church. It is essentially a genre of music belonging to the Church and the saints in Christ, intended to spread the good news of Christ to all. When such music is used in ministry contexts, it is expected to enhance the spiritual well-being of the audience. Anything short of these qualities in purpose, content, and in the personal integrity of its practitioners may not be regarded as truly representing the gospel of Christ.

While it may be difficult to define absolute parameters for what constitutes true Christianity and spirituality, the Bible provides clear standards for those who follow Christ, and are entrusted with the responsibility of spreading the gospel through music. Unfortunately, this 'gospel truth' is often misunderstood or misrepresented, even among professing Christians whose primary motivation for becoming gospel musicians is to gain popularity, fame, or commercial success. In this regard, it may be safe to conclude that not all musical activities undertaken by Christians qualify as gospel music. A performance that can rightly be termed gospel music must not be self-serving - it must truthfully present and represent Christ.

Ossaiga (personal communication, July 19, 2022) described gospel music as a genre of church music with a secular duality. This assertion, which highlights the sensual characteristics of some gospel music in south-western Nigeria, challenges the exclusivity of the term. While we may argue that gospel music is a form of popular music within the Church and the Christian community, and that it has significance within liturgical contexts, it also ministers to Christians outside the Church and serves as a means to preach and present the gospel of Christ to the broader world.

The Church, as a community of believers, holds the biblical mandate to evangelise and win souls with gospel music serving as a vital tool for this mission. Unfortunately, the term "gospel music" has often been misapplied. Some self-proclaimed gospel musicians lead lifestyles that do not reflect any genuine encounter with the Christ of the Gospels (1 Corinthians 1:14–15). While this trend is troubling, it remains indisputable that gospel music was originally intended as an integral part of church music to help fulfill its divine mandate. Therefore, it is a biblical imperative to recognize gospel music as a tool for advancing the Church's mission (Mark 16:15; Matthew 28:19–20; Romans 10:15; Philemon 1:6). To further explore

this issue, there is a need to examine the characteristics of gospel music, particularly with the goal of curbing its misuse in ministry within south-western Nigeria and beyond.

Prominent gospel musicians in south-west Nigeria and their contributions

Bola Are

Evangelist Dr. Bola Are (October 1, 1954 – present) was born in Erio-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria. She grew to become one of the earliest pioneers of Yoruba gospel music in Nigeria. Raised in a devout Christian home, she was mentored by notable prophets such as Apostle Ayodele Babalola and Prophet Babajide. Her music ministry formally began in the early 1970s with the formation of the Bola Are Gospel Group. Her songs are rooted in Yoruba Pentecostal traditions, combining prophetic declarations, indigenous praise styles, and moral exhortations. She has played a vital role in legitimising indigenous gospel music within conservative Christian contexts and continues to influence gospel musicians through her evangelistic ministry and recorded works.

Tope Alabi

Patricia Temitope Alabi (October 27, 1970 – present) was born in Lagos State, Nigeria, although she hails originally from the Yewa area of Ogun State. She began her career in the theatre arts as an actress before transitioning fully into gospel music. She gained prominence in the early 2000s with songs that combined biblical storytelling with traditional Yoruba music forms. Her music integrates Yoruba idioms, traditional drumming, chants, and biblical themes. She is particularly known for her spontaneous worship style, especially within the *Alujo* and *Orin Iyin* genres. Her contribution to redefining Yoruba gospel music for contemporary audiences remains a significant influence in charismatic Christian circles in Nigeria.

Sinach

Osinachi Kalu Okoro Egbu (March 30, 1973 – present), popularly known as Sinach, was born in Afikpo South, Ebonyi State, Nigeria. However, her gospel ministry largely developed in the Lagos area of south-western Nigeria. Sinach has served as a senior worship leader at Christ Embassy (Believers' LoveWorld Ministry), where she also began her music career. Her breakout hit "Way Maker" brought her international acclaim. Her music consists of contemporary worship with strong theological themes, often aimed at a global Christian audience.

As one of the few African gospel musicians to achieve global crossover success, Sinach represents the globalisation of Nigerian gospel music. Her songs have been translated into multiple languages and covered by artists worldwide. She continues to be a major influence in the gospel music space in Nigeria and beyond.

Mercy Chinwo

Mercy Nnenda Chinwo (September 5, 1990 – present) is of Ikwerre extraction but was born in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. She gained national attention after winning *Nigerian Idol* in 2012. Since transitioning from secular music to gospel, joining the EeZee Conceptz label, her Christian testimony has remained consistent. She blends Afro-pop, highlife, and contemporary gospel with strong doctrinal content. Her music resonates with younger, urban congregations.

Mercy Chinwo has reinvigorated contemporary gospel music with youthful energy and Afro-fusion elements while maintaining a strong Christian message.

Shola Allyson

Shola Allyson-Obaniyi (September 24, 1970 – present) was born in Ikorodu, Lagos State, Nigeria. She began her musical career as a backup singer and rose to fame with the soundtrack album *Eji Owuro*. Her theological and musical inclinations are shaped by Yoruba philosophy and Christian mysticism. Her music is characterised by deep, reflective lyrics, often sung in Yoruba, blending traditional folk music with spiritual teachings.

She occupies a unique space in Nigerian gospel music by fusing cultural heritage with spiritual introspection, appealing to both traditionalists and progressive Christian audiences.

Variants of gospel music in south-western Nigeria

Gospel music in south-western Nigeria embodies a rich blend of musical traditions, theological convictions, and cultural expressions. Some common characteristics of gospel music, predominant among the Yoruba, have emerged as variants of neo-traditional Yoruba popular musical genres. These include adaptations of performance practices from popular Yoruba music styles, which often serve as modes of sociological and musical expression. Notable among these are gospel-infused versions of African art music, Highlife, Juju, and Fuji music, alongside stylistic borrowings from Makossa, Hip-Hop, and Reggae, all re-contextualised with faith-based lyrical content, and performed with sacred intentionality.

These variants illustrate how gospel music has embraced musical syncretism while striving to maintain its Christocentric essence. Though cultural hybridity is inevitable, the gospel message must not be compromised. The following is a brief discussion of the key stylistic variants.

Gospel highlife and juju variants

Highlife and gospel music inspired by juju music elements draw from popular Yoruba dance-band traditions. Artistes like Ebenezer Obey, Yinka Ayefele, and other juju artistes in various social contexts, have adapted these forms to convey gospel messages in lively, percussive, and melodically rich formats that encourage participation and spiritual joy.

Gospel fuji and street pop variants

Gospel Fuji and Afro-street variants are characterised by urban street-style beats and rhythms, often mirroring secular Fuji or hip-hop sounds, while incorporating sacred lyrics. Artists like Adekunle Fuji, Testimony Jaga, Bidemi Olaoba, Dare Melody, Laolu Gbenjo and, recently, Gaise Baba blend Fuji and street influences into gospel music, appealing to younger demographics, which results in a blend of church and street cultures.

These styles are often upbeat and danceable, drawing from Fuji, Afrobeat, and Highlife music. The use of praise chants that is similar to Yoruba *oríkì* (panegyric praise poetry) - often directed at God but styled like those used for human kings or celebrities - is also common. Increasingly, gospel musicians incorporate auto-tuned vocals, hip-hop rhythms, and electronically generated beats, which are often performed with live bands and stage aesthetics similar to secular artistes. These stylistic and structural elements reflect the dynamic nature of gospel music in south-western Nigeria, and underscore the need for ecclesial guidance to harness these variants for genuine spiritual transformation.

Characteristics of gospel music in south-western Nigeria

Gospel music in south-western Nigeria does not exist in isolation from its broader social, religious, and cultural contexts. It has evolved by blending Christian theological themes with indigenous musical idioms and contemporary stylistic elements. As Eniolawun (2022) observes, the characteristics of gospel music in this region reflect both the spiritual commitments of the Church and the sociocultural realities of the Yoruba-speaking populace. Key characteristics include: validated lyrics and rich biblical theology; expressive christian faith and emotion; mass media dissemination; highly percussive and danceable rhythms; street-styled linguistic and stylistic approach; hybridisation of Western and African styles; performative enjoyment and entertainment; spontaneous and contextual composition; and functional harmonic simplicity.

Scripturally validated lyrics and rich biblical theology

One of the defining features of authentic gospel music in south-western Nigeria is the theological richness of its lyrics. Many songs are rooted in scriptural texts and they communicate essential Christian doctrines. For example, Bola Are's music frequently references Psalms and prophetic themes, while Tope Alabi's lyrics often explore divine providence, grace, and eschatological hope. This intentionality ensures that the music functions as both spiritual nourishment and doctrinal instruction. In the more recent times, popular Yoruba choruses, which were used during liturgical worship and evangelistic outreaches, are now frequently adapted in compositions to suit various contemporary Christian contexts.

Expressive of christian faith and emotion

Performance practices and lyrical content are emotive and deeply spiritual, often mirroring the communal worship expressions of Pentecostal and Aladura movements. Songs like Shola Allyson's *Ìrì* or *Ìm'òpòrè* evoke personal testimonies and collective lament or praise, resonating with the Yoruba worldview that values heartfelt emotional expression in worship.

Mass media dissemination

Gospel music has benefited greatly from mass media exposure. From radio broadcasts in the 1980s to contemporary YouTube and TikTok platforms, gospel artistes have leveraged media to expand their reach. Albums by Yinka Ayefele and televised concerts by Tope Alabi, Bidemi Olaoba, Laolu Gbenjo, Emma OMGee, and Mike Abdul have propelled Nigerian gospel music into global visibility and consumption.

Improvisation, spontaneous composition, and live-streamed performances on platforms like YouTube allow artistes to adapt their lyrics emotionally and contextually. Street-styled and party-like rhythms are often employed to entertain and energise participants in fashions similar to secular social gatherings. Artistes such as Laolu Gbenjo, Bidemi Olaoba, Lanre Teriba, and Mike Abdul, among many others, merge gospel with Fuji, Juju, and Afrobeat, thus illustrating the contemporary hybridity of gospel music (Aimiuwu, 2023). The widespread media presence, however, raises concerns of accountability, as public image may sometimes overshadow spiritual authenticity.

Highly percussive and danceable rhythms

South-western Nigerian gospel musical idiom is rhythmically vibrant and percussive. Traditional instruments such as the *gangan* (talking drum), *sekere* (gourd rattle), and *other traditional percussive musical instruments* are now commonly fused with electronic beats and other percussion effects. These instruments, often played alongside Western musical instruments in live band settings, maintain rhythmic energy and drive. For instance, Laolu Gbenjo's fusion of highlife and gospel music showcases this celebratory dance aesthetic, rooted in the Yoruba belief that divine encounters should be expressed through music and movement.

Street-styled linguistic and stylistic approach

Code-switching and multilingualism are prevalent in south-western gospel music, with artists often blending English, Yoruba, and Pidgin English to express sociolinguistic identity and enhance accessibility (Osuagwu, 2023). This approach, which mirrors street pop music, includes casual performance styles, slang usage, and spontaneous improvisation, especially in Christian concerts and gatherings. Musicians like Testimony Jaga incorporate gospel messages into Afro-street rhythms to reach urban youth and unreached populations.

Recently, Gaise Baba (in collaboration with Lawrence Oyor) popularised the chorus *I Have Decided to Follow Jesus, No Turning Back*, with a new Afro-street vibe. The accompanying video (shot in a church setting), adopted street-style aesthetics in costume, dance, and language. The artistes argue that these styles attract young people and give them space to express themselves while praising Christ. Though this remains debatable, the song quickly gained popularity, garnering millions of views within days of its release on YouTube. Nevertheless, this trend raises ecclesiological concerns about reverence, Christian decorum, authenticity of their genuine purpose for evangelism, and the line between sacred and secular performance.

Hybridisation of Western and African styles

Gospel music in the region often blends Western genres like R&B, jazz, rock, and hip-hop with indigenous forms such as fuji, juju, and apala, among others. While this

hybridisation enhances both cross-cultural appeal and theological contextualisation in some cases, the negative association they may evoke is a concern to Christianity and its values. For example, TY Bello's music exemplifies the fusion of spontaneous worship with ambient, West-influenced soundscapes.

Performative enjoyment and entertainment

While gospel music serves didactic and evangelistic purposes, it is also consumed for enjoyment. Large-scale concerts like *The Experience* in Lagos draw thousands of participants, combining entertainment with spiritual uplift. However, the entertainment dimension sometimes overshadow the spiritual core of gospel music, prompting calls for a more worship-centred approach (Ekundayo, 2018).

Spontaneous and contextual composition

Improvisation is central to Yoruba musical tradition, and it remains prominent in gospel music. Artistes often engage in spontaneous composition during live performances, dynamically responding to spiritual atmospheres. Artistes like Adeyinka Alaseyori, Tope Alabi, and Emma OMGee are known for their spontaneous lyrical flows at worship events and concerts. These spontaneous performances often draw on philosophical themes or re-working of familiar Yoruba choruses (see Appendix for examples), reconfiguring them rhythmically and thematically to fit the moment. This practice strengthens the music's emotional and spiritual immediacy.

Functional harmonic simplicity

Musically, most gospel songs in south-western Nigeria rely on simple harmonic progressions, typically revolving around the tonic (I), subdominant (IV), and dominant (V) chords. This simplicity facilitates congregational singing and makes it easier to replicate in churches with limited musical instrument resources. For example, this harmonic framework is evident in songs like *Oruko Jesu* by Lara George or *Eyin ni Baba* by Tope Alabi.

Some ecclesiological concerns of gospel music in south-western Nigeria

While the majority of Christians in south-western Nigeria may not actively differentiate between sacred and secular influences in gospel music, some church leaders and spiritually discerning believers continue to raise ecclesiological concerns about the increasing convergence of 'street culture' and worship. A recent case is Gaise Baba's *No Turning Back*, which sparked controversy among Christians and the clergy. Critics questioned the spiritual integrity of the artiste, the appropriateness of the song's stylistic choices, and its relevance within sacred context.

Moral and spiritual integrity

Although there are gospel artistes known for their upright character and spiritual depth, several musicians (some affiliated with prominent churches in Nigeria), have faced public scandals that undermine the credibility and witness of the Church. Gospel music, as a ministry, requires that its practitioners maintain a life that is consistent with Christian virtues as outlined in Scripture (see 1Timothy 3:1–7). The erosion of these values remains a critical concern for the Church in Nigeria.

Doctrinal dilution

An increasing number of gospel songs emphasise prosperity, self-promotion, and material gain, and often neglecting the core theological pillars of the Christian faith such as the atonement, salvation, and sanctification. Adedeji and Nwobu (2022) argue that this doctrinal shift dilutes the redemptive message of the gospel and misleads listeners. The Church must, therefore, caution against gospel music that promotes sensual dancing, seductive dressing, or ambiguous moral messaging. As Jesus warns in Matthew 6:24 (New International Version), *“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to one and despise the other.”* Gospel music must be anchored in holiness and fidelity to biblical doctrine.

Entertainment against edification

Some worship events and gospel concerts now mimic secular entertainment in style and atmosphere, prioritising visual appeal and crowd excitement over spiritual edification. This shift is increasingly noticeable during congregational worship services where popular gospel artistes are invited to minister - more like to perform. While entertainment may accompany artistic expression, it must not overshadow the primary goal of edification (Ekundayo, 2018). Gospel music should serve as a conduit for worship and transformation, and not as mere spectacle.

Gospel music as a tool for evangelism and church growth

Gospel music can function as a tool for evangelism and Church growth if it is shaped by sound theology and a clear sense of mission. Crusades, radio broadcasts, and live-streamed worship services are avenues and platforms through which gospel music can reach a broad spectrum of listeners across socio-economic and cultural boundaries. Due to their emotional depth and memorable melodies, most gospel songs help listeners absorb and retain core truths of the Christian faith. In the south-western cultural context where oral tradition is central to community life, music plays a vital role in spiritual communication and shared identity of the people. Today, a growing number of gospel artistes and worship communities are returning to biblically grounded lyrics, seeking to refocus the genre on Christ rather than on trends. This shift reflects a deeper desire to ensure that gospel music not only inspires but also faithfully communicates the essence of the Christian message.

Some recommendations for preserving the integrity and purpose of gospel music ministry

In light of the profound theological, cultural, and ministerial implications of gospel music discussed in this study, it is imperative that the Church, both locally and ecumenically, takes intentional steps to safeguard the sacred purpose of gospel music. The following ecclesiological responses are recommended to address current distortions and restore gospel music to its biblical function within the body of Christ:

Reinforcement of the theological purpose of gospel music in preaching and teaching

Pastors and church leaders must intentionally teach the theology of worship and music from the pulpit. Gospel music is not merely entertainment - it is a medium for spiritual formation, doctrinal instruction, and prophetic witness. Scriptural exhortations (as contained in Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19) should guide congregations in understanding music as a means of grace and a form of communion with God.

Creation of pastoral structures to guide and support gospel musicians

Many gospel artistes lack pastoral guidance or theological mentorship, leaving them susceptible to worldly influences. Churches should establish music ministries or worship departments that provide counseling, spiritual direction, and theological training to gospel musicians. Churches can also invest in or partner with recording studios and content platforms to help gospel musicians produce works that align with biblical values, offering alternatives to secular industry standards.

Recognition and ordination of itinerant gospel music ministers as extension of Church mission

Gospel musicians who serve as itinerant evangelists should be formally recognised and commissioned by their local churches, similar to the commissioning of missionaries. Such affirmation provides spiritual oversight and accountability, aligning the musician's ministry with the Church's broader theological and missional vision.

Establishment of Church disciplinary and restorative processes for addressing issues of erring ministers

When gospel musicians fall into moral or doctrinal error, the Church must respond with both truth and grace. Following biblical models of discipline (Matthew 18:15–17; Galatians 6:1), churches should lovingly correct, counsel, and provide pathways for restoration. When gospel artistes are aware of ecclesial consequences, they are more likely to prioritise holiness and doctrinal soundness.

Full integration of gospel music into the ecclesial and missional agenda of the Church

Gospel music should not be treated as a peripheral or an entertainment arm of the Church. It must be acknowledged as central to worship and outreach. Musicians should be included in strategic ministry initiatives, particularly in areas such as youth discipleship, ecumenical outreach, and missions. Such integration would strengthen the Church's theological and missional identity.

Provision of material encouragement and long-term investment for music ministers

Financial neglect often pushes gospel musicians toward commercialism and secular partnerships. Churches should develop sustainable support systems that include fair honoraria, housing assistance, and funding for musical production. The example of Nathaniel Bassey, whose ministry flourished under pastoral and material support, illustrates the long-term benefits of such investment.

Evaluation of the theological affiliation and ecclesial backgrounds of guest music ministers

Before churches invite guest gospel musicians to minister, they should evaluate the latter's theological positions, lifestyle, and ecclesial affiliations. Ensuring doctrinal alignment maintains spiritual coherence within the congregation and affirms the importance of integrity in public ministry.

Development and dissemination of national guidelines for gospel music practice

Christian associations such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) should take the lead in formulating policy documents that articulate the theological, ethical, and ministerial standards expected of gospel musicians. These guidelines should be integrated into seminary curricula, music schools, and leadership development programmes.

Fostering sustainable engagements between ecclesial and music industry bodies

Church leaders and gospel music practitioners should maintain regular dialogue through forums, roundtable discussions, and workshops. These platforms can facilitate conflict resolution, theological education, and collaborative planning. Active engagement ensures that the Church retains influence over the direction of gospel music in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Gospel music in south-western Nigeria represents both a cultural treasure and a theological heritage entrusted to the Church by the Spirit of God. It is a dynamic and prophetic art form through which the Church proclaims the gospel, teaches sound doctrine, nurtures worship, and confronts societal ills. However, as this study has shown, gospel music is currently at crossroads and threatened by secularisation, moral laxity, and doctrinal confusion.

This ecclesiological review has emphasised that the Church must reclaim gospel music as a sacred ministry under the authority of Scripture and ecclesial oversight. It is not sufficient to criticise the degeneration of gospel music from the sidelines. The Church must lead in its reformation, offer theological clarity, pastoral support, and institutional accountability that affirm its redemptive purpose.

While acknowledging the commercial realities of the contemporary music industry, the Church must resist the commodification of sacred gifts, and champion a vision of gospel music that prioritises spiritual transformation over entertainment. There are still gospel musicians who pursue their calling with reverence, theological depth, and ministerial integrity. These individuals deserve the Church's support, recognition, and protection.

As gospel music continues to evolve and expand across liturgical and public spaces, its future will be shaped by the theological convictions and ecclesial structures that support it. If the Church embraces its role as a steward of this musical heritage (such as in cultivating musicians, evaluating messages, and setting spiritual standards), it will ensure that gospel music remains a faithful witness of Jesus Christ in the Church and to the world.

Ultimately, gospel music must remain a tool for evangelism, a vehicle for discipleship, and a wellspring of communal worship. Its melodies and lyrical content must echo the heartbeat of the gospel; its ministers must reflect the character of Christ. Only then can it fulfill its divine mandate as a voice of hope, truth, and transformation in a broken world.

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Appendix:

**Selected Yoruba Gospel Songs
commonly used in the Area and their translation in English.**

1. Me lo ni n o ro. (Gods grace are numerous and uncountable. How many shall I count?).



2. Jesu Seun fun mi (Jesus has done for me, what no man could do).



3. Jesu nikan ni mo ni ni Baba (I have only Jesus as my father, help me extol his name)

Jé-sù ni - kan ni mo ni ni Bà - bá - Jé-sù ni - kan ni mo ni ni Bà -

bá Pè é - ẹ bá mi kó-ki - ki Rẹ pè é, ẹ bá mi kó-ki - ki

Rẹ Pè é - ẹ bá mi kó ò-ki-ki Rẹ Jé-sù ni - kan ni mo ni ni Bà -

bá

4. Oro ti mo bara ye so (Prayer works where the counsels of men has failed me)

Ọ-rọ̀ ti mo b'á - rá-yé sọ t'ó nýí bí-ri, t'ó nýí bí-ri Ọ-rọ̀ ti mo bé -

ní - yàn sọ tó nýè gè - rẹ tó nýè gè - rẹ Ma kún - lẹ ma gbà - dú - rà ma

b'E - lẹ - dà mi sọ - rọ̀ pọ̀

5. Baba f'agbara Re han! (Father show forth your power for the world to see)

Bà-bá f'a-gbá - ra Rẹ hán Bà-bá f'a-gbá - ra Rẹ hán

Kí gbo-gbo a-rá-yé lẹ mò dá - jú wí-pé Jé - sù ni - kan l'Ọ-ba l'ó - ri a -

yé gbo - gbo Bà - bá f'a-gbá - ra Rẹ hán

6. Eni ba m'ore Jesu (If you can acknowledge the help of Jesus, join in praise to God)

E - ni bá mo-re Jé-sù kó bá mi gbe ga E - ni bá mo-re Jé-sù
 kó bá mi gbe ga Ò-gbì-gbà ti ngbaè-lẹ̀-sẹ̀ mo jù-bà Rẹ̀ Lá-yò, lá-yò l'e-mi
 o wo - lẹ̀ fún Ọ̀ Ọ̀-ba ti kò jẹ̀ kii-jì a - yẹ gbé mi lọ

7. Gb' alanu dide si mi o Baba (Raise helpers for me wherever I go O Lord)

Gb'á-lá - nu dì - de ò Gb'á-lá - nú dì - de sí mi
 ò wo wá-jú n ró lo - re wẹ-yin wò kí n ró ló - re À-
 tọ-tún à-tò - si kí lá - pà-dé gb'á-lá - nú dì - de fún mi ò

8. Eru re mba mi (I am in awe of God, whatever he decides to do no one can stop it).

È - rù Rẹ̀ m̀ bà mí è - rù Rẹ̀ m̀ bà mí Ọ̀-ba tó fí dí a-yẹ sọ -
 lẹ̀ È - rù Rẹ̀ m̀ bà mí

9. Jesu seun fun mi (Jesus has done for me, what no man can do)

