



The Root and Development of Christian Mission: A Historical and Theological Reflection on Its Global and Nigerian Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Christian mission, an important aspect of Christianity grounded in the teachings and ministry of Jesus Christ, has remained a central theme in the global spread of the gospel. This study offers a historical and theological reflection on the evolution of Christian mission, tracing its biblical foundations in the Great Commission and apostolic witness, and analysing its contextual expressions across cultures. Using a qualitative and interpretive approach, the research examines the transition from early apostolic evangelism to modern missionary movements, focusing particularly on the Nigerian experience. Findings reveal that the distinction between evangelical missions and emigrant Christianity is vital to understanding how faith was transmitted and adapted within diverse socio-political environments. The study highlights the nineteenth-century revival of missions in Nigeria, driven by ex-slaves, indigenous evangelists, and foreign societies, as a model of contextual adaptation and indigenous leadership. However, the work identifies ongoing challenges posed by secularism, religious extremism, and globalisation. It concludes that contemporary Christian mission must remain both theologically grounded and socially responsive, integrating historical insights with the realities of pluralism and postcolonial transformation.

Keywords: Christian mission; gospel; Great Commission; missiology; Nigeria; contextual theology

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INTRODUCTION

Christian mission refers to the Church's vocation to communicate the message of salvation in Jesus Christ to all peoples and cultures. Rooted in the Great Commission, where Christ commands his followers to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19, NIV), mission represents both a theological mandate and a historical process of engagement with the world. Historically, this mandate inspired the apostles and early Christians to expand the faith across diverse cultural and linguistic frontiers, setting the foundation for Christianity's global character. It involves not only the proclamation of the gospel but also the embodiment of Christian values that promote transformation, justice, and reconciliation across societies (Aluko, Adeleye & Olakanmi, 2025; Adeleye & Aluko, 2025).

From its apostolic beginnings, the mission of the Church has expanded through various epochs, early apostolic outreach, medieval monastic evangelism, Reformation-era expansion, and modern global missions, each

shaped by its social and theological context. As Andrew Walls (2002) and Lamin Sanneh (2008) have argued, Christianity's translatability across cultures distinguishes it as a faith that both transforms and is transformed by the societies it enters. Yet, this universality has often been entangled with historical forces such as colonialism, migration, and cultural imperialism, leading to what Turaki (1997) termed *emigrant Christianity*. In contrast, authentic evangelical missions prioritise the spiritual message of Christ over cultural dominance, focusing on contextual embodiment rather than cultural export.

In Nigeria, the trajectory of Christian mission reflects these tensions. The early Portuguese Catholic missions of the 15th century were largely unsuccessful due to conflicting cultural, economic, and political interests and a lack of sustained discipleship (Ayandele, 1966; Adeleye, Aluko & Olowoyeye, 2025). However, the 19th century witnessed a significant revival through the collaborative efforts of European/American missionaries and African ex-slaves from Sierra Leone. These missionaries, particularly the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS), the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the various Catholic missions, the Southern American Baptist Convention and the Church of Scotland Mission, were instrumental in establishing and maintaining the Christian religion in the region (Adewale, 1978; Aluko, 2024b). Also, figures such as Samuel Ajayi Crowther demonstrated that indigenous agency and linguistic contextualisation were key to the success of the gospel's transmission (Ajayi, 1965; Adeleye & Aluko, 2024). Theologically, these developments affirm that mission is not an instrument of domination but an act of obedience and partnership within God's redemptive purpose.

Revisiting the roots and development of Christian mission is essential in today's world of pluralism, secularism, and postcolonial re-evaluation. Understanding how early missions negotiated cultural differences offers critical insights for contemporary missiology. This study, therefore, aims to examine the theological foundations, historical evolution, and contextual expressions of Christian mission globally and within Nigeria while reflecting on its enduring relevance for present-day practice.

Theoretical Framework

For this research work, the theological framework is based on the mission of God. God does not only initiate this mission but also humans respond to it in their culture. The methodology of the perspectives of David J. Bosch, Andrew F. Walls, Lamin Sanneh, and Ogbu Kalu is brought together to form a multidimensional view of the mission that is biblical, historical, and contextual.

The theory of Bosch's Transforming Mission can be considered as the central theoretical lens, which describes mission as a dynamic process that transitions through different paradigms across Christian history. Bosch distinguishes between the six major paradigms of mission from the early church through the Enlightenment to the new postmodern context and claims that the authentic mission is marked by incarnation, transformation, and contextual engagement. This study uses Bosch's paradigm as a scaffold to appraise how the Christian mission has been moulded in its relations to various historical and cultural contexts while still being anchored in the gospel's timeless core. His idea that "mission is the participation of the Church in the liberating work of God" is where the study derives the view of missionary activities as being both spiritual and social acts of renewal.

Theories of Walls and Sanneh complement Bosch's paradigm and underline the cross-cultural translatability of Christianity. Walls (2002) advances the notion of the serial expansion of Christianity, arguing that it continues to shift from one cultural centre to another, thereby transforming itself into new forms of expression, yet the core remains unaltered. Likewise, Sanneh (2008) emphasises the translation principle, with the argument that the gospel

is, by nature, a demand for the use of local language and worldview. Theories point out that Christian mission is contextually embodied, thus flourishing, and consequently, it affirms the indigenous cultures as the valid bearers of the divine truth and not merely the passive recipients of Western religiosity. This thought is particularly suitable for the Nigerian situation where linguistic and cultural adaptation was a key factor in the success of the nineteenth-century missions.

Theology of Africa gives Kalu (2007) the basis of the argument that African Christianity is a creative appropriation rather than mere imitation, and thus, it must be understood as such. Kalu's argument places the mission in the larger picture of postcolonial transformation and states that Africa has, through local agency, ritual, and social activism, indigenised the faith. One of the techniques Kalu uses to establish his case is pointing out the role of indigenous evangelists, for instance, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who altered the mission narrative from dependency to partnership. Such a vista not only enriches the narrative of the study's analysis of Nigerian missions but also frames it as a case of theological re-ownership rather than colonial continuity. The first Theological insights of the mission are that together these frameworks are universal and contextual, transcendent but local, and transformative rather than transmissive. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) is the scriptural basis of this theoretical synthesis and the reminder to the Church that the mission is God's redemptive purpose and must be done in and through human cultures that respect their diversity. Thus, the study decides on the transformational-contextual framework that presents Christian missions as a constant conversation between the timeless truth of the gospel and the ever-changing realities of human societies.

The theological, historical, and cultural contexts in which the Nigerian experience of mission takes place can now be viewed through the interpretive lens that this research provides by using Bosch's dynamic paradigmatic model with the contextual translation theories of Walls, Sanneh, and Kalu. The study illustrates that genuine evangelism must simultaneously support and be culturally relevant to biblical orthodoxy, thus making a tripartite assessment possible of the theological basis and historical expressions of Christian mission.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research takes a qualitative interpretive stance and utilises only secondary sources to conduct a historiographical and theological analysis of Christian mission development in the world and Nigeria. The literature consulted consisted of scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and reliable theological commentaries. Bible foundation of mission, evangelical and emigrant expressions, and contextual adaptation in Africa were among the key themes that the literature review aimed for. Thematic analysis was applied to the data to draw out similarities and differences across the literature, which made it easier to critically synthesise views that show the extent to which historical circumstances and theological interpretations have affected today's missiological understanding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Theological Basis of Christian Mission

Theologically, the Christian mission is founded on Jesus Christ's life and ministry. According to Schnabel (2004), Jesus of Nazareth is the source of the Christian mission and sustains it. Jesus's incarnation and ministry lay the groundwork for the mission, as his actions and teachings reveal the essence of God's redemptive intention for humanity. Without Jesus, there would be no Christian faith or mission. As the messianic Son of Man, Jesus launched a spiritual movement that was both socially and culturally transformational.

Jesus' contribution in shaping the Christian message is most evident in his training of the apostles. For three years, the apostles, particularly Peter, observed Jesus' work, understanding the value of preaching the kingdom of God and assisting the underprivileged. This discipleship process was critical to the mission effort that followed. Peter's discourse at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-41) reveals how Jesus' teachings and the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles to become the first missionaries, spreading the gospel across ethnic and cultural borders. As Schnabel (2004) correctly points out, Peter, not Paul, was the first Christian missionary, and his missionary speech laid the groundwork for Christianity's global development.

The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) provides an unambiguous scriptural mandate for the Christian mission. Jesus tells those who follow him to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptising 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" (NIV). This mandate is more than a recommendation; it is a heavenly imperative and the Church's primary responsibility. The commission stresses gospel proclamation and disciple formation, emphasising the breadth of the Christian ministry. Without this mandate, the Christian mission would lack an authoritative foundation. According to Schnabel (2004), the Great Commission is the theological and practical foundation of the Christian mission, based on Jesus' ministry and carried down to his disciples.

In another vein, it would be right to say that the Christian mission is not simply voluntary but an act of obedience to the gospel. Knutson (1976) describes the mission as living by and for the gospel, which means that the mission is deeply intertwined with the believer's response to the call of Christ. The essence of the Christian mission lies in proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ and inviting others to experience the transformative power of the gospel. This proclamation is rooted in obedience to the commands of Christ, particularly in the call to "go and make disciples" (Matthew 28:19).

Mission as obedience emphasises that every Christian, regardless of their status or location, is called to participate in the mission of God. The universality of the Christian mission is significant because it transcends cultural and societal boundaries. Knutson (1976) argues that the gospel cannot be confined to any specific worldview or cultural history; rather, it carries its power and authority. This power of the gospel allows it to break through societal limitations and reach people from all walks of life. The apostolic mission, for instance, transcended Jewish boundaries, reaching Gentiles and various other ethnic groups. In Acts 1:8, Jesus commands his disciples to be his witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (NIV), highlighting the global scope of the Christian mission.

Knutson (1976) also highlights that the gospel must be proclaimed to maintain its integrity, even as it adapts to different cultural contexts. Christian mission is not about imposing a particular culture or societal norm but about faithfully transmitting the message of Jesus Christ. In doing so, Christians must critique their culture and the broader society, ensuring that their mission remains aligned with the values of the gospel. This understanding of mission as obedience calls Christians to a higher level of accountability, ensuring that their mission work is driven by the gospel rather than by cultural or political motives.

One of the key distinctions in the history of Christian missions is the difference between evangelical missions and what has been referred to as "emigrant Christianity." According to Turaki (1997), emigrant Christianity refers to the exportation of European culture, religion, and civilisation during the colonial era, often under the guise of spreading Christianity. This form of Christianity was often more concerned with extending European influence than with the true spiritual conversion and discipleship of individuals. As a result, emigrant Christianity was

frequently entangled with the political and economic interests of European powers, leading to a form of cultural imperialism.

On the other hand, evangelical missions focused on the core message of the gospel, salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and sought to spread this message without imposing foreign cultural practices. Schnabel (2004) argues that evangelical missions were rooted in the biblical mandate to make disciples of all nations, and they sought to respect local customs and traditions while introducing the gospel. This distinction is significant because it highlights the different motivations and approaches that have shaped Christian missions throughout history.

The rise of evangelical missions can also be seen as a response to the failings of establishment Christianity, which had often neglected the Great Commission. As Knutson (1976) notes, missions and missionary movements arose as a critique of the established Church's complacency and failure to engage with the world in a meaningful way. While establishment Christianity was focused on maintaining religious institutions and promoting cultural Christianity, evangelical missions were driven by a desire to fulfil the biblical call to reach the unreached with the message of salvation.

The difference between evangelical missions and emigrant Christianity can also be understood in terms of the focus on discipleship. Evangelical missionaries were committed to not only converting individuals but also disciplining them, ensuring that new converts were grounded in the faith and able to grow spiritually. By contrast, emigrant Christianity often focused on outward conformity to European religious practices without addressing the deeper spiritual needs of individuals. This distinction between the two forms of mission is crucial in understanding the successes and failures of Christian missionary efforts, particularly in places like Nigeria, where both types of missions played a role in the spread of Christianity (Turaki, 1997).

Historical Overview of Christian Mission

The early roots of Christian missionary work trace back to the apostolic era, where the first organised efforts to spread Christianity began immediately following the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The apostles, particularly Peter and Paul, played a central role in establishing Christianity as a global faith. After the Pentecost event, where the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles, they embarked on missionary journeys to spread the gospel, first within the Jewish communities and later to Gentile populations. Peter's early work in Jerusalem and Paul's subsequent travels across Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome represent the earliest missionary activities in Christian history (Schnabel, 2004). Their missionary journeys set the stage for the expansion of Christianity beyond its Jewish roots into a worldwide religion.

The first-century church was highly mission-oriented. As seen in the writings of the New Testament, Paul's epistles often mention the founding of new Christian communities across different regions. His mission to the Gentiles was a key development in the spread of Christianity, particularly as it began to break away from Jewish customs and opened its message to all people. The early church's focus on evangelising non-Jewish populations was crucial to its spread across the Roman Empire and beyond, and by the end of the first century, Christian communities were established throughout parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa (Schnabel, 2004).

Christian missionary work continued into the medieval period, with notable figures such as Augustine of Canterbury, who led missions to convert the Anglo-Saxons in England in the 6th century (Wood, 1994). Missionaries like St. Patrick in Ireland and St. Boniface in Germany also played crucial roles in the Christianisation of Europe during this period (Latourette, 1975). The establishment of monastic communities was central to this mission effort,

as monasteries became hubs for evangelism and learning, sending monks out into surrounding regions to spread Christianity (Binns, 2021).

The Reformation era, beginning in the 16th century (1517), marked a significant shift in Christian mission. Protestant missionaries, especially from countries like Germany and England, began to evangelise in areas outside Europe, particularly in the newly discovered Americas. Figures such as Bartholomé de las Casas advocated for the humane treatment of indigenous peoples while promoting Christian evangelism in the Americas (Brading, 1984). In contrast to earlier missionary movements, the Reformation period saw a divergence in methods and theology between Catholic and Protestant missionaries, though both continued to contribute to the global spread of Christianity (Neill, 1964).

Christian Mission in Africa

Christianity's arrival in Africa dates back to the early apostolic era, when Christian communities were established in North Africa, including regions such as Egypt and Carthage. Figures like St. Mark, who is traditionally believed to have founded the Coptic Church in Egypt, played a key role in the early spread of Christianity across North Africa (Baur, 1994). These early African Christian communities thrived during the first few centuries of the church's existence, with notable theologians like Augustine of Hippo contributing significantly to Christian thought. However, sustained missionary efforts in sub-Saharan Africa did not occur until much later. European missionary involvement in Africa began in earnest in the 15th century, when the Portuguese arrived on the continent. Their initial missionary efforts, as seen in Benin and Warri, were largely unsuccessful due to various factors, including a lack of preparation, cultural barriers, and competing interests such as trade and political alliances (Ayande, 1966). It was not until the 19th century, with the rise of evangelical missionary movements, that Christianity began to gain a stronger foothold in sub-Saharan Africa.

The 19th and early 20th centuries marked a period of intensive Christian missionary activity in Africa, coinciding with the colonial expansion of European powers (Masuku, 2023). Missionaries from Europe and America, including the CMS, WMMS, various Catholic missions like the Holy Ghost Fathers, Society of African Missions (SMA), Baptist Mission, and so on, began evangelising in West Africa, establishing mission stations in places like Sierra Leone, Badagry, and Abeokuta. As Ajayi (1965) points out, these missionaries were instrumental in the spread of Christianity in Nigeria, particularly through the efforts of ex-slaves such as Crowther, who played a crucial role in translating the Bible into Yoruba and other African languages.

While missionaries contributed to the spread of Christianity, their work was also closely tied to the colonial enterprise. Colonialism provided the infrastructure and protection that allowed missionary societies to operate, but it also created tensions between the missionaries' spiritual goals and the political and economic agendas of colonial governments (Okon, 2014). As Neill (1964) notes, the relationship between missionaries and colonial authorities was often complex, as missionaries sought to protect African converts from exploitation while navigating the demands of colonial administrators. This dual role, that is, missionary and colonial agent, has been a source of critique, as some argue that missionaries contributed to the imposition of European cultural values on African societies.

Despite these challenges, Christian missions continued to expand in Africa throughout the colonial period. By the early 20th century, Christianity had become firmly established in many parts of West and Southern Africa, though it faced resistance in regions with strong Islamic influence, such as Northern Nigeria (Adewale, 1978). As

Ayandele (1966) observes, the success of Christian missions in Nigeria was largely due to the collaboration between European missionaries and African evangelists, who adapted the gospel message to local cultures and languages. This partnership was crucial in ensuring the long-term success of the Christian mission in Africa.

The Inception of Christian Missions in Nigeria

The first recorded attempt to introduce Christianity into Nigeria occurred in the 15th century, spearheaded by the Portuguese Catholic mission. Between 1472 and 1484, the Portuguese made notable efforts to plant Christianity in the West African region, including present-day Nigeria (Ajayi, 1965). In 1472, missionaries arrived in Warri at the invitation of the King of Benin. By 1484, the Portuguese had also attempted to evangelise the Benin Kingdom (Ayandele, 1966). However, these early efforts faced numerous challenges and were ultimately unsuccessful. One significant reason for the failure of these early missionary efforts was the divided interest of both the evangelists and the Nigerian traditional rulers. For instance, while the Portuguese missionaries intended to spread Christianity, the King of Benin was primarily interested in securing Portuguese military assistance rather than converting to the new faith (Ajayi, 1965; Adewale, 1978). This misalignment of priorities contributed to the breakdown of the missionary project

Another major factor was the lack of adequate discipleship and foundational training for the new converts. Onwubiko (1985) notes that the early missionaries did not provide sufficient instruction before baptising the local people, and as a result, many converts quickly lapsed back into their traditional religious practices. Furthermore, the scarcity of priests, hostile climatic conditions, and a lack of proper planning undermined the sustainability of the mission. Ayandele (1966) describes these early efforts as “futile, feeble, and spasmodic,” highlighting the challenges that hindered the Portuguese from making any lasting impact on Nigerian society during the 15th century.

The failure of the Portuguese Catholic mission did not mark the end of attempts to spread Christianity in Nigeria. In the 19th century, a renewed effort began, largely driven by ex-slaves from Freetown (Sierra Leone), who collaborated with European missionaries to evangelise the Nigerian population. This period saw the rise of evangelical missions that were much more organised and effective than the earlier Catholic attempts (Ajayi, 1965). The collaboration between ex-slaves and missionaries, particularly the Europeans and Americans, was instrumental in the success of these 19th-century missions. Many of the ex-slaves were Yoruba people who had been resettled in Freetown after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. These individuals had been exposed to Christianity in Sierra Leone and were eager to bring the faith back to their homeland. Figures such as Crowther, a former slave who became the first African bishop of the Church Missionary Society, were key to the spread of Christianity in Nigeria (Ajayi, 1965). Crowther’s translation of the Bible into Yoruba was particularly important in making Christianity accessible to the local population (Adeleye & Aluko, 2024).

In the Yoruba region, the missionary enterprise benefited from both spiritual and cultural receptivity. The Ifa oracle, a revered institution of Yoruba divination, had foretold the arrival of teachers who would bring a new faith, a prophecy that facilitated openness to Christian preaching (Adewale, 1978). This intersection between indigenous spirituality and Christian proclamation illustrates what Walls (2002) later described as the translation principle in action: the gospel entering a new culture not by rejection but by reinterpretation. The cooperation of local rulers, especially in Abeokuta and Badagry, provided political stability and legitimacy for missionary operations. By the late nineteenth century, Christianity had taken firm root in the southern regions of Nigeria through a combination of education, healthcare, and the translation of Scripture.

As already noted, several prominent missionary societies played a vital role in the spread of Christianity across Nigeria during the 19th century. The WMMS arrived in Badagry in 1842, followed by the CMS, which established its first mission in Badagry in 1845 and later in Abeokuta in 1864 (Ayandele, 1966). The Church of Scotland Mission arrived in Calabar in 1846, contributing to the spread of Christianity in the southeastern part of Nigeria. The Baptist Mission, represented by Thomas Jefferson Bowen from America, began its work in Yorubaland in 1850, and by 1853, it had established its first church in Ijaye. By 1875, the Baptist Mission had become a strong presence in Nigeria (Ajayi, 1965; Ayandele, 1966; Ajani, 2004; Aluko, 2024b).

Apropos, it will not be out of order to say that the 19th-century missionary efforts were markedly more successful than the earlier Portuguese attempts, thanks to better organisation, local collaboration, and the use of indigenous languages in evangelism. This period laid the foundation for the growth of Christianity in Nigeria, particularly in the southern regions. By the end of the century, Christianity had become deeply rooted in many parts of the country, with mission stations established across various regions, and the rise of many indigenous missionaries (Adeleye, Aluko & Olowoyeye, 2025).

Theologically, the Nigerian experience of mission embodies the transition from colonial imposition to contextual participation. Crowther and other indigenous leaders redefined the missionary enterprise as a partnership rather than a hierarchy, demonstrating that effective evangelism must respect local agency and culture. This early Nigerian mission thus stands as a model of *contextual adaptation*, anticipating the later rise of indigenous churches and African-led theological reflection. What began as an externally driven project gradually evolved into a locally owned movement, affirming that the gospel's universality is best realised through cultural embodiment rather than cultural dominance.

Factors Contributing to the Success of Christian Mission in Nigeria

One of the major factors that contributed to the success of Christian missions in Nigeria was the partnership between foreign missionaries and ex-slaves. European evangelists brought with them the resources, organisational skills, and zeal necessary to push the mission forward, while ex-slaves played a vital role in translating the faith into the local context. A notable figure in this regard was Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a former slave ordained as the CMS's first African bishop. Crowther's work as a linguist, translator, and evangelist was pivotal in spreading Christianity, particularly in his native Yorubaland.

Crowther's translation of the Bible into Yoruba in 1851 was a key turning point in making Christianity accessible to the Yoruba people (Ajayi, 1965; Adeleye & Aluko, 2024). His efforts were instrumental in bridging the cultural gap between European missionaries and the indigenous population, making the Christian message more relatable. Crowther and other ex-slaves had a deep understanding of local customs and languages, which allowed them to communicate the gospel in ways that resonated with the people. In many cases, they were more effective than their European counterparts in overcoming local resistance to the new faith. As Walls (2002) and Sanneh (2008) affirm, the vernacularisation of Christianity represents the highest form of contextual theology, allowing local communities to encounter Christ within their own worldview. Crowther's approach demonstrated that evangelisation must be both faithful to Scripture and responsive to culture, thereby reinforcing the theological integrity of the mission.

In addition to Crowther, other ex-slaves who had been resettled in Freetown after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade played important roles in the spread of Christianity in Nigeria. Many of these ex-slaves,

particularly Yoruba repatriates, returned to their homeland as agents of Christian evangelism, working alongside foreign missionaries to establish mission stations in various parts of Nigeria (Ajani, 2004). This collaboration between the foreign missionaries and ex-slaves helped to create a more sustainable foundation for Christian mission work in the region.

The abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in the 19th century and the rise of philanthropic movements in Europe also played a significant role in the success of Christian missions in Nigeria. The end of the slave trade provided a more stable and peaceful environment in which missionaries could operate, as they no longer had to contend with the violence and disruption caused by the trade in human beings. European abolitionists, such as William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect, were instrumental in advocating for the end of the slave trade, and many of them also supported Christian mission work as a means of promoting moral and social reform in Africa (Onwubiko, 1985).

Their financial and institutional support enabled missionary societies to establish churches, schools, and hospitals, which became platforms for both evangelism and social transformation (Onwubiko, 1985). These institutions not only advanced literacy and education but also served as channels for ethical teaching, community development, and cross-cultural understanding. The linkage between education and evangelisation proved decisive in embedding Christianity within the social fabric of Nigerian communities.

Philanthropic movements in Europe, driven by a desire to improve the social and moral conditions of African societies, provided financial and material support for missionary activities. Many missionary societies, such as the CMS, WMMS, the Baptist Mission and the various Catholic missions, were funded by donations from individuals and organisations in Europe and America who believed in the transformative power of the gospel. These resources allowed missionaries to establish schools, churches, and medical facilities, which not only spread the Christian faith but also improved the living conditions of the local population (Adewale, 1978). No doubt, this abolitionist and philanthropic zeal of the 19th century helped to create a more favourable environment for Christian missions in Nigeria.

Missionaries were able to work in partnership with local rulers and communities, many of whom were open to the social and economic benefits that Christianity brought, in addition to its spiritual message. Another critical factor in the success of Christian missions in Nigeria was the accommodation of foreigners by local communities, especially in Yorubaland, and the indigenous acceptance of the Christian faith. As earlier noted, the acceptance of Christianity was partly facilitated by the Ifa oracle, which had predicted the arrival of foreign religious leaders (Adewale, 1978). This form of religious continuity exemplifies what Bosch (1991) describes as *incarnational mission*, the meeting of divine revelation with human culture. Local rulers such as the Baale Sodeke of Egbaland granted missionaries permission to settle, build schools, and preach, providing a sociopolitical foundation for evangelistic work.

The willingness of missionaries to accommodate indigenous customs and to translate the gospel into local idioms further enhanced their acceptance. This approach contrasted sharply with the earlier Portuguese model, which had failed to appreciate the spiritual and cultural complexity of Nigerian society. However, despite the supposed cooperation, this is not to say that some of the indigenous religious worshippers were not intolerant of the Christians. They burnt down the churches that had been built and waged war against them. Not minding these, the Christians still waxed stronger in their quest for the Christianisation of the whole country.

Moreover, the use of indigenous languages and customs in the preaching of the gospel helped to make Christianity more appealing to the local population. Missionaries such as Crowther understood the importance of contextualising the Christian message and adapting it to local cultural practices. By doing so, they overcame some resistance that earlier missionaries, such as the Portuguese in the 15th century, had encountered (Onwubiko, 1985). This contextualisation of the gospel was essential in ensuring the long-term success of Christian missions in Nigeria. Finally, the integration of Christian ethics with social reform enhanced the appeal of the gospel. Missionaries and indigenous converts presented Christianity as a force for peace, justice, and human dignity, particularly in contrast to the exploitative practices associated with the slave trade. The social witness of the Church thus complemented its evangelistic mandate, aligning with Bosch's (1991) view of mission as participation in God's transformative work in the world. In this way, the Nigerian mission succeeded not merely as a religious enterprise but as a holistic engagement with the moral and cultural needs of society.

Challenges Facing Christian Mission Today

One of the most significant challenges facing the Christian mission today is the growing prevalence of socio-political and religious violence. Ethnic conflicts and religious extremism, especially in regions like Nigeria, pose a serious threat to the propagation of the gospel. In areas where Christians and Muslims co-exist, for example, tensions often escalate into violent confrontations, with the Christian community facing persecution and attacks from extremist groups such as Boko Haram (Aluko, 2024a; Aluko & Adeleye, 2024). This environment makes it difficult for missionaries and local Christians to carry out their mission effectively. Religious violence has led to the displacement of Christian communities, the destruction of churches, and the weakening of Christian presence in volatile regions (Onwubiko, 1985; Aluko, 2024a). Theologically, this situation underscores the need for a mission theology grounded in reconciliation and social justice, what Bosch (1991) calls a *transforming mission*, where the gospel addresses both spiritual and structural forms of evil.

A second major challenge is the rise of secularism and moral relativism, particularly in urban and educated societies. Secular ideologies that elevate human autonomy and material success often marginalise faith-based worldviews. In many parts of the world, Christianity is portrayed as outdated or restrictive, leading to declining church attendance and waning moral influence. As Ayandele (1966) and Onwubiko (1985) observed in earlier contexts, cultural shifts often reshape religious engagement, and the contemporary secular climate is no exception. In Nigeria, the use of social media has brought about a cultural shift whereby people are now calling out religious personae who they perceive to have erred in one way or the other.

Many prominent men of God have been called out, among them, Pastor Enoch Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (called out for the issue of tithing, contribution of money in billions and so on), Pastor William Kumuyi of the Deeper Christian Life Ministry (called out on the recent changes in the church doctrine), and more recently, Apostle Femi Lazarus of the Light Nation Church (called out on his outburst on women and anger issue during menstrual period). Mission, therefore, must evolve from traditional proselytising to critical engagement with the intellectual and ethical questions shaping modern life. The Church must demonstrate that Christian faith is not anti-intellectual but offers a coherent moral vision capable of addressing issues such as injustice, inequality, and the loss of communal values.

The third challenge arises from globalisation and cultural pluralism. While globalisation facilitates communication and the spread of ideas, it also promotes cultural homogenisation and consumerism, which can dilute

local Christian identities. In Nigeria, the influence of global media and economic structures has led to the commercialisation of religion, where prosperity messages often overshadow the gospel's call to discipleship and service. This trend reflects what Walls (2002) describes as the tension between the indigenising and pilgrim principles of the gospel, the need to be rooted in one's culture while remaining open to transformation by divine truth. The Church's task is to maintain this balance by fostering contextual expressions of faith that resist materialism and affirm the moral and communal dimensions of Christian life.

Another contemporary issue is the challenge of religious pluralism and interfaith relations. In societies marked by diverse religious traditions, Christian mission must navigate the fine line between faithful proclamation and respectful dialogue. The exclusivist approaches of earlier missionary eras are increasingly viewed as insensitive in pluralistic contexts. Modern missiology, therefore, calls for a dialogical posture that acknowledges the dignity of other faiths while affirming the uniqueness of Christ's message. This shift aligns with Kalu's (2007) argument that African Christianity must serve as a bridge between competing worldviews, embodying the gospel through lived ethics rather than confrontation.

Lastly, internal challenges within the Church, such as leadership crises, doctrinal fragmentation, and the proliferation of independent movements (Aluko, 2024b; Umunakwe & Okereke, 2025; Omosor & Erutere, 2025), pose serious threats to mission coherence. The diversification of Christian expression, while reflecting vitality, can also weaken collective witness if not guided by theological unity and ethical accountability. As Bosch (1991) cautions, a mission divorced from theological depth risks becoming a sociological enterprise rather than a divine calling.

The Role of the Church in Addressing Modern Social Issues

In the face of today's complex moral, social, and political realities, the Church's missionary task must extend beyond proclamation to active engagement with the pressing issues that shape contemporary life. Mission in the modern world requires a holistic approach, one that integrates evangelism with advocacy, compassion with justice, and faith with responsible citizenship. The Church must position itself not only as a spiritual authority but also as a moral conscience and transformative agent within society. Engaging intellectuals and religious movements is a necessary step toward reclaiming Christian influence in society. This includes fostering dialogue with secular thinkers, addressing misconceptions about the faith, and demonstrating how Christian teachings can contribute to modern-day solutions for social and ethical issues.

One of the Church's foremost responsibilities is to confront violence, conflict, and injustice. Nigeria's recurring episodes of ethnic and religious violence highlight the urgent need for faith-based peacebuilding and reconciliation. Christian mission in this context must embody Christ's message of forgiveness and restoration, offering alternatives to cycles of revenge and division. As Ajayi (1965), Aluko (2024a) and Adeleye, Aluko, Peter & Olowoyeye (2024) note, genuine mission work cannot remain indifferent to human suffering; it must address the systemic conditions, such as poverty, corruption, and marginalisation, that fuel unrest. This aligns with Bosch's (1991) vision of transforming mission, in which the Church participates in God's redemptive work by promoting both spiritual renewal and social justice.

Equally significant is the Church's engagement with moral and ethical issues, including fratricide, infanticide and the erosion of family values. These practices challenge the sanctity of human life and the biblical understanding of human dignity. The Church must respond not only through moral teaching but through practical

support systems, such as counselling, social care, and educational initiatives, that affirm life and offer alternatives to destructive choices. Knutson (1976) emphasises that the gospel compels believers to act for life and justice, making the defence of human dignity a central aspect of missionary obedience. Thus, Christian mission involves both proclamation and protection, the preaching of salvation and the safeguarding of the vulnerable.

Another key dimension of the Church's role is the pursuit of social and economic justice. In contexts marked by inequality and exploitation, the Church must act as a prophetic voice, calling for integrity in governance, equitable distribution of resources, and compassion for the poor (Aluko, Adeleye & Olakanmi, 2025; Aluko et al., 2025). Through community development initiatives, education, and healthcare, the Church demonstrates that the gospel addresses not only spiritual needs but also the material conditions that shape human flourishing. This practical witness reinforces the credibility of Christian mission, showing that faith is relevant to everyday life and societal well-being (Ajani, 2004).

The Church also has a crucial role in engaging intellectual and cultural discourse. In an age of secularism and globalisation, Christianity must articulate its theological vision in dialogue with science, politics, and philosophy. As Walls (2002) observes, the future of mission depends on the Church's ability to communicate the gospel in intellectually coherent and culturally resonant ways. The Church must therefore nurture scholarship, creative arts, and public theology that demonstrate how Christian thought contributes meaningfully to the world's moral and existential questions. Also, it must be very wary of the things being said on the pulpit to avoid unnecessary backlash from the Internet world.

Finally, the Church must model unity, accountability, and moral leadership. Fragmentation within the Christian community weakens its witness to the world as it has done in the earliest times. The Church's capacity to address social issues depends on its internal integrity and collective commitment to the gospel's ethical demands. When believers embody the values they proclaim, that is, love, humility, service, and justice, they render mission not merely a programme but a way of life.

CONCLUSION

Christian mission, rooted in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, embodies the Church's enduring commitment to the Great Commission and the transformation of society through the gospel. This study has shown that while early missionary efforts in Nigeria, such as those of the Portuguese, faltered due to inadequate contextual understanding, the 19th-century revival succeeded through indigenous leadership, translation, and collaboration between Africans and Europeans. Figures like Samuel Ajayi Crowther illustrated that authentic mission requires both theological faithfulness and cultural sensitivity. In the modern era, challenges such as secularism, religious extremism, and globalisation continue to test the Church's relevance, yet they also offer opportunities for renewal. True Christian mission must therefore integrate faith with justice, proclamation with compassion, and theology with social engagement, ensuring that the gospel remains both transformative and contextually meaningful.

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