

Contemporary Gospel Music Debate: Transformative (Conservatives) or Confirmative (Liberals) Perspective

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Abstract –Music has been for long time perceived to be powerful and its impact on human beings cannot be doubted. However, Christians argue on the way gospel music is being packaged. The conservatives have held the view that gospel music should stick to the biblical standards without emulating what secular music portrays. On the contrary, the liberals feel that emulating what secular music portrays gives room to reach the people for purposes of transformation. The Purpose of this paper is to discuss the two perspectives concerning gospel music which have been a point of debate of late. To achieve this, the paper reviews the existing literature on the subject matter.

Keywords: Contemporary Gospel Music, Transformative, Conservatives, Confirmative, Liberal, Christianity

I. INTRODUCTION

Evolution has been a topic that has since been controversial in the church in the sense that purely devoted Christians deny its authenticity and reality. As a matter of fact, it is deemed to be a theory and most imperative with little or less evidence attached. However, the church has indirectly accepted that evolution in some other areas has and is affecting its endeavors. Christianity has undergone evolution in the name of accepting the changes that the world brings on the table so as to accommodate everyone. The gospel traditionalists established, propagated and passed across the fundamentals of pure Christianity. The fundamentals ensured that there is a clear distinction between what is sacred and what is secular, spiritual and carnal, so that worldliness and profanity would not find roots growing deeper into the church (Ellen, 1972). However, the truth of the matter remains that, like the devastation of a flood, truth, principles, traditions and moral ethics have been eroded and swept away and the process has not stopped (Krista, 2010).

Music is a very sweet thing that has the power to change and make an individual different all together. Categorized into two, secular and gospel, music has existed for a very long time as history may show (Wallin, Steven and Merker, 2001). Beginning in a way deemed to be primitive, music has developed into different genres depending on the cultural and geographical settings and preferences (Kilmer, 1976). Biblically, an account of music can be traced from the time Jacob was engaged in a form of interview with Laban (Genesis 31:27), and later when Moses and the children of Israel had victoriously crossed the Red Sea where they sung the song of deliverance (Exodus 15). However, the period that marked serious engagement of Hebrew music was the time of

Samuel, Saul, David and Solomon who were the kings of the Israelites. The temple build during the reign of King Solomon served partly as a center for training Hebrews in music that was mastered with various musical instruments (2 Sam. 6:5; 1 Chr. 15:16; 23:5; 25:1–6).

Since then until now, music has been part of Christianity and applied for various purposes. In the traditional Christian society, songs were sung for purposes of praise, victory, mourning and psalms. In the contemporary society, music has taken another turn and, defining its role and purpose is as easy as saying the word “entertainment”.

II. WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Most scholars have expressed their views concerning the aspect of contemporary gospel music, however, most of them agree that gospel music has evolved because of three major reasons: to grow the flock, link everybody to commune with God and to reach the lost flock: all these achieved through accommodating all the genres of music and dance styles in the music, both recorded and pulpit music. The intention behind all these reasons is good and those who are for it perceive it as the only way to keep a balance within Christianity in that everybody should have a home in it. On the contrary, those who still hold the traditional view of Christianity opine that the aforementioned reasons are promoting more evil than good in Christianity. Furthermore, they argue that the hidden agenda behind contemporary gospel music has compromised the standards of Christianity than never before (Lauritsen, 2011).

Therefore, the debate on which kind of music should be played on a given Christian platform has of late taken the center stage. With most of the people in contemporary Christianity accepting the fact that the aspect of dynamism in music is good, the traditionalist point has been proved that the harm caused by contemporary gospel music is greater than the good. The two positions on gospel music are based on the argument that gospel music should be transformative in the view of traditionalists while those who advocate for dynamism say it should be confirmative. The question in context therefore is; should gospel music take a transformative or confirmative approach? This paper therefore analyses the two perspectives causing the debate in validation of the arguments.

III. TRANSFORMATIVE AND CONFIRMATIVE PERSPECTIVES OF GOSPEL MUSIC

Transformative perspective to music is a sort of conservative approach that holds that gospel music is meant to transform an individual from worldliness to a Godliness state (Krista, 2010). Since the nature of humankind is sinful, an individual needs transformative nourishment from time to time, and good gospel music should be able to do so. As mentioned earlier, the power of music cannot be underestimated, whether secular or gospel. This is because music has power to transform an individual from one state to another. The contemporary society has experienced a rise and dynamism in the music industry to an extent that one needs to carefully listen to the content of music to categorize it as secular or gospel (Vega, 2012). Basing on this, the transformative approach to gospel music defines such a state as a failure in this matter since any gospel song should move an individual closer to God. The basis of argument on this perspective is the bible passage in Romans 12:2, NKJV which says.

“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

Transformative perspective of gospel music holds that incorporating worldly styles in music is conforming to the patterns of the world, an aspect that the bible clearly warns against, as indicated in the verse above. As expanded by the verse, another anchor point is that, the mind of an individual leads to transformation when renewed and by doing so, an individual is able to prove what is good and acceptable and perfect will of God. This perspective is held mostly by conservatives who look at the gospel from the sacred point of view as initiated from the beginning. In order to achieve the transformative intention, singing needs to be done with the understanding of what God wants, as guided by the scriptures and the Holy Spirit (Atiemo, 2006).

Transformative perspective adherents tend to emphasize on content of music and carefully consider the weight laid in lyrics. In this case, the lyrics must be able to link and pass a clear and concise message to the listeners. By doing so, the spiritual effect is realized as an individual meditates upon the song in context. Generally, the instrumentals are considered secondary after lyrics but also the instrumentals should reflect the content. Videography for gospel music should be done to reflect the theme of the song without exaggeration of any type in terms of dance and dress code (Adedeji, 2007). Furthermore, they emphasize the biblical context in John 17:14 where Jesus prayed to the father saying *“I have given them your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world (NKJV).”*

Contrary to the transformative perspective of gospel music, the confirmative perspective is of a more liberal approach and therefore liked by most people especially the

youth. In this case the term confirmative is perceived to imply that the music played conforms to the trends of the world where dressing code, dancing styles, lyrics and instrumentals are fused in different ways to suit the audience (Etcetera, 2014). In this case, the focus of such music which has got the better part in the society today is to reach the audience in any possible way and captivate it. Additionally, the artists perceive this as the way to gain popularity and promote their music to another mileage.

The confirmative perspective of gospel music approaches the outside appearance first which most of the time, the artists in context believe in, appeals to the audience before getting the content in the song. Given the fact that emphasis is mostly put on the end product, artists in this category argue that they cannot win the world if they do not understand what they want first, causing them to embrace novelty. Additionally, the notion that one cannot run away from the world and expect to win those in it has driven gospel music beyond the walls of Christianity. Subjectively, most artists who subscribe to this idea believe that conforming to reflect their idea is important before selling it to transform them, implying that transformation comes after conformation (Bonner, 2014). The background of their confirmative perspective is defended by the fact what Apostle Paul expresses in 1 Corinthians 9:22 saying:

“to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men that I might by all means save some.”

IV. THE BONE OF CONTENTION

Music industry has been unfolding and culminating in a way that the worldly or secular music has gained a mileage over the gospel music. In the turn of events, the secular social class seems to be taking control and dominion over the sacred. In such circumstances the sacred and secular expectations pull and push to the advantage that the one with most prolific power manipulates the subjects of the lesser, depending on what the audience prefers. In such a scenario where there is a push and pull, conflict of interests erupts prompting a debate on who is right and who is wrong (Krista, 2010).

In the first place, the fact that different genres of music have found their way into Christianity has been a point of disagreement between those who hold the conservative and the liberal views. Sometimes back, music genres like rock, hip hop and mainly rap musicians were associated with controversial lifestyles of sexual immorality, violence, drug abuse among other vices. Nowadays, such genres have penetrated into Christianity and preachers are encouraging their congregants to do such music with an aim of attracting the youth to the church. Even though some are not sung in the church, the impact has been felt on the media where they have been promoted as the songs leading the gospel charts. Conservatives argue that promoting such music in the church and any other platform that professes Christianity is

blasphemy, a sin that God hates most. However, such genres have given the artists popularity, fame and wealth and attracted more youth and middle aged people to the churches and other Christian platforms. Sadly, for conservatives who are mostly old aged people, criticizing such genres of music has caused a massive exodus of youth and middle aged people from some churches in the name of embracing civilized churches.

Moreover, the dressing code of the secular musicians is totally amusing when rated on the biblical scale. In order to be accepted as claimed by the confirmative gospel music supporters, an artist is forced dress in accordance to the trending dressing style. In so doing, conservatives find it very disturbing that praising and worshipping God can get to a level where humankind no longer respects Him with their dressing code. Conservatives find it difficult to come to acceptance with the fact that putting on indecent attire, piercing the entire body, tattooing the body, dying the hair among other related things glorifies God. Conservatives instead, argue that such doings only expose the artists' greed for fame and pleasing the people to attract them to themselves rather than to God. Most of the of time, the artists who are affected with such are heard in interviews saying that, God considers the heart but man judges from outward appearance, hence, justifying why they have to appeal to men in order to preach the gospel through their music.

Another significant factor for debate in modern gospel music is the aspect of dance styles. Just as the gospel artists have emulated the secular artists in dressing code, so have they when it comes to dance styles. Day after day, new dance styles evolve which and not only do the secular artists promote the dance moves, but also the gospel ones. Consequently, this has not always gone well with the conservatives who feel that exaggerated dancing is a way of expressing ungodliness in an individual and exalting the devil. Stories have been told of the dance styles that originate from the kingdom of darkness only to be embraced in Christianity. Concerning the same, conservatives argue that dance styles are meant to cause competition among those claiming to be dancing for the Lord.

In so doing, rancor crops among artists who always compete for acceptance by the audience. Presence of rancor implies that confusion is prevailing. However, the liberals claim that the man after God's heart, King David, is an inspiration to their dancing styles. Defending themselves, they point to 2nd Sam 6:17-22 where King David danced and when Saul's daughter tried to criticize him, he shuttered her.

Additionally, the bone of contention from the conservatives and the liberals arises from the fact that gospel music has been used for trade or business. More often, conservatives have been heard trying to question why gospel music is being used for business ventures than serving the purpose of glorifying God and edifying the church. Most of the time, musical concerts have been organized not with the purpose of reaching souls but with the purpose of getting

money from them. In such occasions, gospel artists have been noticed taking advantage through asking a lot of money from the organizers (Reid, 2004). Captioned with attractive titles, the concerts are organized mostly at night and people who come in barely come for the purposes of spiritual nourishment but rather entertainment where entry fee is charged among other things that are sold therein (Secret, 2009). However, the artists, the organizers and those who attend the concerts are always justifying themselves, claiming that the gospel is expensive and therefore people are supposed to sacrifice for the same if they want the best experience. Furthermore, Bonner questions the fact that some Christians have criticized gospel artists who perform for income and embrace other professionals who work for income through their jobs like drivers, doctors, teachers among others (Bonner, 2014).

V. DIVERSITY IN CHURCHES

The conservative and liberal perspectives are much lively in churches today, but distinguished with the type of church and the congregants' age. Mainstream churches and new charismatic churches have had a different bite of what it means to have music in the church for praise and worship purposes. In comparison, mainstream churches have housed more elderly individuals than new charismatic ones who have more youth and middle aged people. Among the effects that mainstream churches have suffered is losing most youth and some of the middle aged individuals to the new charismatic churches. Among the factors leading to this scenario is the fact that music in mainstream churches does not meet the expectations of the youth (Kahenya, 2010). Similarly the youth who still attend mainstream churches are working hard to see that the nature of music changes to fit their desire. This has been a worrying situation in some churches in that they are caught in a limbo. Choosing on which direction to take has proved to be an issue of concern. In this case, there are two positions that are nagging their heads. First, allowing the youth to take over with their style of music in the church would imply that the traditional way of worship which the elderly are used to will diminish. However, the second position is the worry that failure to allow the youth exercise whatever they feel is right for them would increase the rate of exodus of youth from the church, thus affecting the future of the church.

Often, mainstream churches have their own way of doing music which most of the time is characterized with singing hymns, composing music that have simple lyrics that are straight to the point. Mostly the cappella music has been embraced and even though musical instruments have sometimes been used, its pitch is always friendly. Contrary to this, the youth have always expressed their quest for louder music, defined with complexity of instruments and freedom of both lyrics and dance (Vega, 2014). Among other factors, this has prompted some of the churches to give the youth time for their separate service in order to strike a balance between the two groups.

Capitalizing on the aspect that mainstream churches have not fully gone for what the youth and some middle aged people want, the new charismatic churches have gone for music that is characterized with the popular music culture. Most of the new charismatic churches have heavily invested in musical instruments which they ensure they have used to the maximum so as to reach a greater diameter within their area of operation. In such settings, free dancing styles, dressing codes, music genres are allowed. This has greatly promoted the liberal view of Christianity even in music so as to accommodate everybody (Giselbach, 2018). Most of the preachers promote this as a strategy to market their churches since the number of adherents and their prosperity is proportionally related (Lauterbach, 2016).

VI. SUMMATION

As discussed in this paper, the biggest concern and the main grievance is that, those who hold the liberal view on contemporary gospel music emulate and imitate of secular music culture which represents the world. The fear here is that contemporary gospel music is encouraging Christians to shift from the fundamentals of the Christian way of praise and worship to the aspect of the popular culture of the world. The dances that are in the clubs and streets, the complicated lyrics, unpleasing dressing code, the business aspect and even the worldly genres have all found way in the church and other platforms where Christianity is. In their view, gospel music is meant to transform people from the world in to Christianity without compromising with the patterns. Conforming to the worldly patterns has more negative effects than the positives. In retaliation, the liberals, who hold the confirmative approach and are the majority in the contemporary society, opine that human beings have to be understood and each one of them handled in a manner that is satisfying. The fact that human beings have a diversity of characteristics gives them a mileage to understand the needs of everybody even in terms of music preferences. Music being an art, they perceive it as an ever changing phenomenon, a fact that should not be questioned. Understanding the culture of people is integral in winning people, therefore, they conform first to transform.

Conclusively, Christian music as known by many as gospel music should touch hearts and change an individual's state first. Agreeably, music is a medium of entertainment but this is not the main purpose as to why Christians should listen to it and play it. The most important aspect should be that the music being played whether in church or other Christian platforms has an ability to help an individual have communion with God through praise and worship. Putting God as the center of focus, the singer should portray the image of God and sing with understanding. Striking the balance, the old and the young generation, the conservatives and the liberals should understand that Christian music is not about what they want but rather what God wants from them. Debating with the defense of scriptures cannot help but rather deepen the rift but when both parties come to the truth, then

pleasing God and Him alone becomes the center focus of anything done behind Gospel music.

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