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ETHICS OF LEADERSHIP IN NIGERIAN CHURCHES: INTEGRITY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND ABUSE OF POWER – A THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL INQUIRY

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Abstract

Leadership ethics within the Nigerian Church has become a significant concern in contemporary theological and socio-ecclesial discourse. Although the Church has contributed immensely to education, healthcare, moral formation, and national development, its leadership structures are increasingly challenged by issues of integrity, accountability, and misuse of spiritual authority. This article examines the ethical dimensions of church leadership in Nigeria, focusing on how these three concerns shape the credibility and effectiveness of Christian ministry. It argues that the crisis of leadership ethics is both theological and structural, arising from weak institutional oversight, personality-driven ministries, prosperity-oriented teachings, and inadequate leadership formation. Drawing from biblical teachings, particularly the servant leadership model of Jesus Christ (Mark 10:42–45), and insights from African theologians such as John S. Mbiti, Kwame Bediako, and Byang Kato, the study establishes that Christian leadership is fundamentally moral, communal, and accountable. The article further analyzes how the absence of accountability systems and the concentration of power in individual leaders have contributed to financial mismanagement, doctrinal distortions, and spiritual manipulation in some Nigerian churches. Using a qualitative theological-ethical approach, the study engages Scripture, African Christian theology, and contemporary ecclesiastical realities. It concludes that restoring ethical leadership in Nigerian churches requires intentional reform in theological training, institutional transparency, and governance structures. Ultimately, Christian leadership must reflect Christ-like humility, moral integrity, and responsible stewardship to restore trust and strengthen the mission of the Church in Nigeria.

Keywords: Leadership ethics, integrity, accountability, abuse of power, Nigerian Church, servant leadership

INTRODUCTION

The Church in Nigeria is one of Africa's most influential religious institutions, shaping morality, education, politics, and social development. Churches such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Deeper Life Bible Church, Winners' Chapel, and Christ Embassy have millions of members and global influence. However, this expansion has not been matched by ethical leadership. Cases of financial misconduct, sexual abuse, authoritarianism, and misuse of spiritual power have created a serious crisis of ecclesial credibility. Although Christian leadership is meant to reflect Christ's humility, accountability, and service, contemporary realities in Nigeria often contradict this biblical ideal¹. This crisis is not only institutional but theological. When church leaders enrich themselves through poor congregants, evade accountability, and use divine authority to silence criticism, they betray the Gospel they claim to serve. Such failures harm victims, weaken the Church's witness, and damage the credibility of Christianity itself². This study focuses on three major ethical issues: integrity in leadership practice, accountability in church governance, and abuse of spiritual power. It argues that without urgent ethical reform, the Church risks losing its moral authority and prophetic voice in Nigerian society³.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative theological-ethical approach, integrating biblical interpretation with descriptive analysis of contemporary church practices to construct an ethical framework for Nigerian church leadership. Primary data sources include biblical exegesis of Old and New Testament passages on leadership, authority, and accountability (e.g., Ezekiel 34:1–10; Mark 10:42–45; Acts 6; 1 Timothy 3:1–13) using historical-grammatical methods contextualized within African traditions. African theological reflections engage Mbiti (1969)⁴ on communitarian ethics, Bediako (1995)⁵ on contextual fidelity, Kato (1975)⁶ on moral purity, and Adeyemo (2006)⁷ on biblical leadership norms. Secondary literature draws from global⁸ and African-specific studies⁹ on Pentecostal governance, prosperity theology, and institutional accountability, supplemented by contextual analysis of documented misconduct in major Nigerian ministries¹⁰. Proceeding dialectically, the study uses biblical norms to evaluate Nigerian church realities against Christ-like servanthood, shared authority, and communal responsibility. Limitations regarding reliance on secondary data are mitigated through scholarly cross-verification and transparent hermeneutics¹¹.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly discussions on African church leadership ethics highlight deep concerns regarding moral accountability, theological fidelity, and ministerial authority. However, significant gaps remain in addressing the interconnected crises of integrity, accountability, and power abuse within Nigerian ecclesiastical contexts. John S. Mbiti (1969) establishes a foundational communal ontology ("I am because we are") where leadership is an extension of corporate moral responsibility, critiquing self-serving models and affirming biblical shepherd motifs.¹² Kwame Bediako (1995) advocates for "theological translation," urging leaders to maintain scriptural fidelity by embodying Christ-like servanthood rather than pursuing institutional empire-building.¹³ Byang Kato (1975) warns against syncretism and moral laxity, insisting that doctrinal purity is necessary to prevent unchecked charismatic authority from eroding pastoral humility.¹⁴

More recent scholarship shifts toward governance challenges within proliferating Pentecostal churches. Tokunboh Adeyemo (2006)

advocates for New Testament models of shared discernment to counter ethical failures.¹⁵ Ogbu Kalu (2008) links highly centralized, personality-centered governance to economic instability and weak regulatory environments.¹⁶ Afe Adogame (2013) documents how financial opacity and exploitative "seed faith" economies facilitate abuse.¹⁷ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (2005) critiques the prosperity gospel's validation of pastoral extravagance.¹⁸ Ukah (2008) provides empirical evidence of structural vulnerabilities perpetuating unaccountability in denominations like the RCCG.¹⁹ Despite this robust literature, few studies integrate integrity, governance accountability, and abuse of power as a unified ethical crisis within Nigerian church structures.²⁰ While Western theorists like Hauerwas (1981) and Volf (1998) offer valuable normative resources, they lack necessary African contextualization.²¹ This study bridges that gap by synthesizing biblical servant models, African communitarian ethics, and structural analysis to propose an integrated framework for leadership renewal.²²

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP ETHICS

Christian leadership ethics are rooted in Jesus Christ, who radically reorients authority from domination to self-emptying service. Enriched by apostolic practice and African theology, these normative foundations expose the theological contradictions of authoritarianism, financial opacity, and spiritual exploitation²³

Christological Model of Leadership

In Matthew 20:25–28, Jesus contrasts secular domination with an inverted kingdom ethic: true greatness requires becoming a servant (*doulos*). Grounded in Christ's mission, this model participates in His redemptive *kenosis* (Philippians 2:5–11), where divine authority voluntarily gives its life as a ransom²⁴. This is concretely embodied in the foot-washing narrative (John 13:1–17), where the Master performs the task of a lowly household slave. Jesus establishes humility not as an optional virtue but as an ethical mandate and Christological necessity. This directly challenges contemporary Nigerian pastoral patterns of ostentatious wealth, unapproachable "anointed" status, and demands for unquestioned deference²⁵.

Apostolic Model of Shared Accountability

The New Testament church operationalizes servanthood through delegation, transparency, and communal discernment. Acts 6:1–7 demonstrates responsive accountability by delegating material administration to seven Spirit-qualified men, modeling shared oversight and financial transparency.²⁶ The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1–35) illustrates collegial decision-making, where theological consensus emerges communally rather than through a single dominant leader.²⁷ The Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9) mandate a plurality of elders and prioritize moral character over power.²⁸ Paul's defense of his ministry (2 Corinthians 1–9) further emphasizes financial transparency, directly indicting the modern concentration of unchecked authority in singular church founders.²⁹

African Theological Contributions

African theologians contextualize these biblical norms through communitarian ethics. Mbiti (1969) highlights a corporate ontology where exploitation is ontologically incoherent because it fractures the community.³⁰ Bediako (1995) advocates for "theological translation," urging leaders to reject "big man" patronage in favor of incarnating Christ's kenotic humility.³¹ Kato (1975) warns against moral syncretism, insisting on financial integrity to counter transactional prosperity theology.³² Adeyemo (2006) asserts that

holistic salvation demands ethical leadership, aligning the African tradition of abundant life with Christ's servant ethic.³³ These contributions reinforce that leadership is a sacred trust (*oikonomia*), accountable to Christ and the community, prophetically challenging commodified ministry in Nigeria's context of rapid growth and economic precarity.³⁴

Biblical Understanding

Scripture uncompromisingly demands integrity as a prerequisite for leadership. The pastoral epistles specify elders as "above reproach" (*anepilēptos*; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6–7)—not sinless perfection, but unimpeachable consistency under scrutiny. Qualifications cascade characterologically: "self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money" (1 Timothy 3:2–3). Jesus models integrity in the Johannine foot-washing (John 13:1–17) and Pauline *kenosis* (Philippians 2:5–11). Leaders are "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Corinthians 4:1), accountable in "little and much" (Luke 16:10). Hypocrisy and avarice disqualify, as in Jesus's indictment of scribes devouring widows' houses (Mark 12:40).³⁶

Contemporary Challenges

Nigerian church leadership faces acute integrity crises, exacerbated by exponential growth from 10 million Christians in 1960 to over 100 million today (Pew Research Center, 2010) amid economic volatility.³⁷ Key manifestations include:

- **Commercialization of ministry:** "Anointed oil," "miracle water," and paid prophetic consultations transform spiritual authority into merchandise, inverting grace (Romans 3:24) into transaction.³⁸
- **Prosperity message dominance:** Sermons equating wealth with blessing legitimize pastoral opulence while impoverishing congregants via "seed faith" coercion, distorting Pauline "sowing and reaping" (2 Corinthians 9:6) into exploitative economies.³⁹
- **Personality-centered leadership:** "Apostles" and "prophets" cultivate cultic deference, invoking "touch not my anointed" (Psalm 105:15) to evade critique.⁴⁰
- **Financial opacity:** Absent audits enable embezzlement; tithes fund lavish lifestyles while social ministries lag.⁴¹

Theological and African Ethical Implications

Compromised integrity vitiates the Church's moral authority and prophetic voice. Hauerwas (1981) contends that ecclesial character constitutes primary witness; hypocrisy nullifies proclamation (Matthew 23:3).⁴² In Nigeria, integrity failure fuels cynicism, aids secularism, and hinders nation-building, echoing Ezekiel 34's failed shepherds who scattered the flock.

African theology amplifies biblical demands through communitarian paradigms. Mbiti (1969) posits leaders as moral custodians whose breaches fracture communal ontology: integrity sustains *ubuntu*; its absence invokes social disintegration.⁴⁴ Bediako (1995) critiques "big man" syncretism, urging scriptural fidelity to contextualize servanthood authentically.⁴⁵ Kato (1975) decries ethical-doctrinal compromise as syncretistic peril.⁴⁶ Adeyemo (2006) views integrity as the holistic outworking of salvation—spiritual, moral, and communal.⁴⁷ African lenses thus render integrity breaches doubly grievous: personal failure compounds communal rupture, demanding both repentance and structural reform.⁴⁸

Accountability is the structural and moral obligation of leaders to remain answerable to God, community, and institutional oversight as an indispensable dimension of ethical church governance. It is not a secular imposition on sacred authority but a theological necessity rooted in the conviction that all human leadership is delegated and subject to divine and communal scrutiny. In Nigeria's ecclesiastical landscape, the systematic absence of such structures represents one of the most consequential governance failures confronting contemporary Christianity.⁴⁹

Biblical Framework of Accountability

The New Testament establishes three interlocking accountability models. *Communal stewardship* finds vivid expression in Acts 4:32–35, where the Jerusalem community's radical resource-sharing is maintained through apostolic oversight and transparent distribution. This is immediately followed by the cautionary narrative of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11), whose deceptive withholding elicits catastrophic divine judgment—establishing that financial transparency is a Spirit-governed necessity.⁵⁰

Collective decision-making is paradigmatically illustrated in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1–35), where a structured conciliar process—testimony, scriptural interpretation, deliberation, and consensual decision—results in the declaration "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (v. 28). This model establishes inclusion of multiple leadership voices, congregational representation, scriptural grounding, and the subordination of individual authority to communal discernment.⁵¹

Apostolic oversight institutionalizes accountability through elder plurality (Titus 1:5), financial propriety in benevolence distribution (2 Corinthians 8:19–21), and mutual congregational accountability (Matthew 18:15–17; Galatians 6:1–2). Paul's own practice models financial transparency: he refuses personal financial benefit and insists on witnessed oversight of significant distributions (2 Corinthians 8:20–21).⁵²

Structural Weaknesses in Nigerian Church Governance

Contemporary Nigerian church organizations exhibit pervasive structural accountability deficits shaped by identifiable historical, economic, and cultural conditions.⁵³

Centralized leadership authority constitutes the most fundamental vulnerability. Ukah's (2008) detailed analysis of the RCCG demonstrates how nominally inclusive governance bodies function practically as extensions of the general overseer's authority, since board members are appointed by, personally loyal to, and financially dependent upon the leader they ostensibly oversee—creating the appearance of accountability without its substance.⁵⁴

Weak financial auditing systems compound the centralization problem. Despite extraordinary financial resources flowing through major Nigerian church organizations, most are not subject to independent external auditing, and results are not disclosed to congregations.⁵⁵ The theological framing of financial giving as a sacred transaction creates a spiritual disincentive for scrutiny: members requesting financial transparency risk being characterized as spiritually deficient or rebellious.

Absence of genuine governing councils means that collegial leadership structures consistently commended by the New Testament are structurally absent from many Nigerian church organizations. Where councils exist formally, their composition

undermines independence, with founding leaders frequently appointing family members and financial beneficiaries creating what Kalu (2008) aptly describes as institutionalized loyalty rather than genuine accountability.⁵⁷

Limited congregational participation reflects both a theological conviction about pastoral authority and a structural arrangement minimizing accountability pressure. Acts 6's model of congregational selection ("select from among yourselves," v. 3) and Acts 15's inclusion of "the whole church" (v. 22) establishes a very different ecclesiological norm in which the gathered community participates meaningfully in decisions affecting its common life.⁵

Theological Evaluation and Reform Proposals

Theologically, the concentration of uncheckable authority in a single leader represents what Volf (1998) identifies as a pneumatological error: if the Spirit distributes gifts among the whole people of God (1 Corinthians 12:4–11), governance structures concentrating authority in one individual deny the Spirit's communal work.⁵⁹ Bediako (1995) warns that authoritarian leadership violates both African communal values and biblical ecclesiology simultaneously.⁶⁰ Hauerwas (1981) adds that a community failing in internal accountability forfeits its capacity for external moral witness.⁶¹

Concrete structural reforms are therefore required. *Independent financial audits* by external parties, with findings disclosed annually to congregations, are non-negotiable for churches of significant institutional scale (2 Corinthians 8:21).⁶² *Genuine leadership boards* with real constitutional authority including powers to appoint, review, and remove senior leadership, approve significant financial transactions, and independently investigate misconduct must replace functionally loyal governance bodies.⁶³ *Transparent reporting systems* encompassing regular congregational financial reporting normalize rather than pathologize scrutiny, grounded in apostolic practice (Acts 4:34–35; 2 Corinthians 8–9).⁶⁴ *Rotational leadership structures and term limits* reduce conditions enabling personality cults, honoring both the Spirit's distributed gifting (1 Corinthians 12) and African traditions of collegial elder governance.⁶⁵ Together, these reforms reconstitute accountability as theological obedience the structural expression of the conviction that all leadership is stewardship before God.⁶⁶

ABUSE OF SPIRITUAL POWER

Abuse of spiritual power represents one of the most theologically serious ethical failures in contemporary Nigerian Christianity. Unlike ordinary leadership failure, spiritual power abuse weaponizes sacred authority itself converting pastoral office from a commission of service into an instrument of exploitation. It constitutes a double transgression: the violation of human dignity and the desecration of sacred trust simultaneously.⁶⁷

Forms of Abuse

Spiritual power abuse manifests across five interrelated forms. *Financial exploitation* operates through theological coercion, mobilizing prophetic authority and scriptural language to extract resources from economically vulnerable congregants. Prosperity gospel frameworks position pastors as mediators of divine financial favor, compelling "seed faith" giving whose promised returns are attributed to congregants' insufficient faith when unfulfilled foreclosing complaint while sustaining extraction.⁶⁸ The commercialization of spiritual commodities converts grace into

transaction, contradicting Paul's declaration that salvation is received, not purchased (Romans 3:24).⁶⁹

Emotional manipulation systematically cultivates psychological dependency, directing congregants' marriage, career, and financial decisions through "prophetic revelation" that cannot be questioned without spiritual consequence.⁷⁰ *Fear-based teaching* deploys spiritual threats divine punishment, demonic attack, loss of blessing to enforce compliance and suppress questioning. The systematic misapplication of "touch not my anointed" (Psalm 105:15) to insulate pastors from congregational accountability represents a strategic hermeneutical distortion serving institutional self-protection.⁷¹

Silencing of dissent eliminates the accountability function that legitimate criticism performs in healthy communities. Members raising concerns are publicly rebuked, spiritually threatened, or expelled destroying institutional capacity for self-correction and transforming whistleblowers into apostates.⁷² *Leadership inheritance struggles* expose the structural consequences of personality-centered ministry at succession, with churches built around singular charismatic founders frequently dissolving into factional power contests.⁷³

Theological Contradiction and Sociological Impact

These patterns stand in irreconcilable contradiction with Christ's explicit teaching. Jesus's declaration in Matthew 20:26 "It shall not be so among you" is not advisory but constitutively definitive: lordship and domination are categorically excluded from the Kingdom community. The emphatic Greek negation (*ouch houtōse staien hymin*) establishes servant leadership as a structural description of what the Church essentially is.⁷⁴ Volf (1998) reinforces this: the Spirit's distribution of gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4–11) means unilateral leadership suppresses the Spirit's communal work.⁷⁵ Bediako (1995) identifies "big man" pastoral models as theological apostasy substituting culturally familiar patronage patterns for the Gospel's radically countercultural servanthood.⁷⁶ Mbiti's (1969) communitarian ontology compounds the indictment: leaders constituted by and accountable to community cannot coherently exploit the community from which their identity derives.⁷⁷

The sociological consequences are equally severe. The Pew Research Center (2010) documents declining confidence in religious institutions across sub-Saharan Africa, with Nigerian church scandals significantly contributing.⁷⁸ Spiritual disillusionment produces profound faith crises: when pastoral authority claimed as divine mediation is exposed as exploitative, the implicit question "Was God present at all?" proves spiritually devastating, driving deconversion and long-term spiritual disaffiliation.⁷⁹ Falola (1998) observes that the Church's prophetic credibility against national corruption is contingent on its own internal moral integrity.⁸⁰ Hauerwas (1981) states the principle plainly: the Church's primary political task is to embody in its communal life the values it proclaims to the world spiritual power abuse destroys this embodiment, reducing witness to performance and proclamation to hypocrisy.⁸¹

NIGERIAN CONTEXT

ECCLESIASTICAL

Nigeria presents a unique ecclesiastical environment shaped by four major factors: rapid church growth, deep economic inequality, strong religious enthusiasm, and weak institutional regulation.⁸² Rapid church growth has expanded Christian influence through

Pentecostal and independent ministries, but has also produced leadership structures that often grow faster than systems of accountability.⁸³ Economic inequality has made many worshippers vulnerable to exploitative religious promises; in contexts of poverty and unemployment, prosperity-oriented preaching easily becomes attractive, and church leaders may assume exaggerated power as mediators of hope.⁸⁴ Strong religious enthusiasm gives pastors enormous social influence, but in some cases has encouraged personality-centered ministry that makes criticism difficult.⁸⁵ Weak institutional regulation means many churches, especially independent ministries, function with minimal external oversight, with authority concentrated in one individual or family and limited financial auditing.⁸⁶

Taken together, these realities make the Nigerian church both vibrant and vulnerable. The challenge is not growth itself, but growth without ethical and institutional safeguards.⁸⁷

TOWARDS ETHICAL RENEWAL IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

A sustainable response to the ethical crisis in Nigerian church leadership requires holistic reform that is theological, institutional, educational, cultural, and prophetic.⁸⁸

Theological Reform: The first task is to re-center leadership on Christ's servant model. Jesus presents leadership as service, humility, and self-giving, not domination (Matthew 20:26–28; John 13:1–17). Nigerian churches must recover this Christ-centered vision if leadership is to remain faithful to the Gospel.⁸⁹

Institutional Reform: Churches must strengthen governance structures through independent financial audits, functioning leadership boards, transparent reporting systems, and greater congregational participation. Accountability must become structural, not merely personal or assumed.⁹⁰

Educational Reform: Seminaries and Bible colleges must give serious attention to ministerial ethics not only doctrine, preaching, and church growth. Future leaders should be trained in accountability, financial stewardship, pastoral responsibility, and abuse prevention.⁹¹

Cultural Reorientation: Ethical renewal requires challenging materialism and success-based theology. Leadership must no longer be measured by wealth, popularity, or visible influence, but by faithfulness, character, and service especially important in a society where social prestige is often linked to material display.⁹²

Prophetic Responsibility: Finally, the Church must practice prophetic self-critique. It cannot condemn corruption in society while tolerating corruption within its own structures. Ecclesial renewal begins when the Church becomes willing to expose, confront, and correct its own failures with honesty and courage.⁹³

CONCLUSION

Leadership ethics in Nigerian churches is a critical issue affecting the credibility and mission of the Church. Integrity, accountability, and the proper use of spiritual authority are essential for sustaining Christian witness in society. The study concludes that the crisis is not merely structural but deeply theological: a return to Christ-centered leadership marked by humility, transparency, and stewardship is essential for restoring trust in the Nigerian Church.⁹⁴ Without such renewal, the Church risks losing both its prophetic voice and its moral authority in one of Africa's most religiously significant nations.⁹⁵

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