

# Prosperity pastors and private jets

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The life of a pastor, or better put, a disciple of God, and that of a banker is like a public service: You can't have everything; you have to make some choices and make them carefully. If you fail to do so, you may become your own hubris, your own private enemy. But the mission of the two, that of the disciple of God and the banker, is, remarkably distinct.

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The former's mission is much more nobler and higher in the spiritual realm. It is primarily an altar call, and the reward is measured beyond cash and sequinned suits that stand a banker out. Forget that today, many Pastors are looking even more dandy and dapper than many bank executives.

Very few men of God in Nigeria possess that gift of presence, that aura to inspire people to act, to be active participants in the things concerning God's word, as Pastor Enoch A. Adeboye, General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), and Bishop David Oyedepo of the Living Faith Word Outreach (aka Winners' Chapel). They are without doubt, not in the same class as one of their former colleagues (now deceased), Bishop Gabriel Oduyemi of the Bethel Ministries, Inc. Oduyemi, while alive, preached more about the vanishing things of life. like how to wear a perfume and a bow-tie than how to gain salvation through Jesus Christ.

Indeed, many who had watched or listened to the preachings of either Pastor Adeboye or Oyedepo, confessed, they came out feeling like the two preachers were talking to them personally. That's what in Christian circles, is called the "power of anointing." Their crusades, many have also testified, command gigantic audiences, larger than a football match involving our national team.

Over the years, both Adeboye and Oyedepo continue to use their gift as apostles of Christ as critical tools in reaching the hearts and minds of millions of people in Nigeria and beyond. I had been at Adeboye's "Holy Ghost" Night sometime in 1999 as a reporter detailed to see what makes that monthly event special. I was inspired by what I heard; by what I experienced. He moved me by his humility, his simplicity, spirituality and the love of God. I came out of that event drenched in the early morning rain, but strong. The experience that still remains fresh with me is this question: what actually is moving thousands of people to come willingly on the invitation of just one man? Adeboye simply exuded so much warmth that rarefied night. I haven't had the privilege of experiencing Bishop Oyedepo live, but as editor of Sunday Champion for over five years, he wrote for my paper on Faith every Sunday. Many readers who wrote in said their lives were "touched" positively by many of the things he writes.

Today, he shepherds arguably one of the largest and fastest growing churches in Africa. I know he has built a 50,000 seater auditorium, christened Faith Cathedral (I supposed, named after his wife, Faith). He currently runs a private university known as Covenant University, same as Pastor Adeboye. Both are Pro-chancellors of their universities. I am sure that the recognition of international newsmagazine, Newsweek to put Adeboye on its list of the "50 most Influential People" in the world, is a rewarding honour for his (Adeboye) accomplishments, especially in soul-winning which is the most demanding and priceless requirement of a Christian. This is one area that another influential man of God, Pastor Christ Oyakhilome of the Christ Embassy calls, "each one, reach one."

But lately, I have noticed something somewhat not really fine in my own thinking, with Pastor Adeboye and Bishop Oyedepo. It is in their rush to acquire private jets and yachts. They are beginning to behave like some CEOs of banks, who despite plummeting value in their equities in the capital market and general global financial crunch, have bought private jets for themselves at astonishing cost. I will come back to that soon, but let's go back to Adeboye and Oyedepo.

According to ThisDay, Tuesday, March 10, the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) has acquired a new aircraft at a staggering cost of N4 billion (about \$28 million) for their revered Pastor. The aircraft, ThisDay says, is a Gulfstream AXP, with number 707EA. The aircraft is said to have arrived Lagos nine days ago, from the Bahamas. Gulfstream, aviation experts say, is a transatlantic aircraft that has the capacity of about 15 passengers only. It is for the topmost class in society. The report remarked that the RCCG acquired the aircraft years after Bishop Oyedepo acquired his own, a challenger aircraft, with number D6640, which was parked a few metres away from Adeboye's Gulfstream at the General Aviation Terminal (GAT), Lagos.

ThisDay also claims that Oyedepo "has ordered for another aircraft bigger than the one acquired by Adeboye." What's the interpretation of ThisDay report? Simple answer: that there is a rat-race on luxury items between these two men of God. This, it can be insinuated, could incite the faithful of both preachers. Beyond any innuendo that can be imputed in the news report, the likely insidious effect may be more far reaching than the leadership of the two churches can imagine.

But it makes some moral sense to ask: of what lasting benefit is such an aircraft which parts, aeronautical engineers say, are changed after every 12 or 15 months? Whose money is it any way, that of the church or the personal wealth of the preachers? These are the questions that were repeatedly asked few years ago, when three former governors – Peter Odili, James Ibori and Attahiru Bafarawa, were reported to have bought private jets. The same questions were also asked in cold anger by concerned public when recently, five commercial banks in the country were said to have bought private jets for their MDs/CEOs.

Well, I know that the two churches involved – RCCG and Living Faith – are bound to put up a defence that the private jets will leverage the spread of the gospel by their pastors. It makes sense, but it doesn't make much sense.

First, I know for sure that good life is part of human desire. I also know that the supporters of both Adeboye and Oyedepo will argue, indeed, must insist that 'nothing is too much for our Papa (as they fondly called them), I maintain, as Billy Graham, one of the foremost evangelists once wrote that life is temporary and fleeting, we are here for just a short time. Therefore we shouldn't waste our resources on ephemery things. Buying a private jet at a whopping N4 billion does less to the spiritual life.

On this, I have been reminded to quickly look at the seven-point vision of Bishop Oyedepo which includes the desire to possess "wings passing across nations". This has been variously interpreted to mean an airplane carrying the gospel. Those who support this view, say that since Bishop Oyedepo, for instance, has realized six of his seven-point vision, among them, the "liberation of the world from oppression, "to expand the ministry of God beyond the shores of Nigeria, "to build a tent that can contain 50,000 people and to "telecast the gospel across the nation," what else remains, if not to cruise on a swanky private jet carrying the gospel? Before I am misunderstood, let me restate that I am not against a pleasurable life, I clearly endorse it through the most legitimate and decent ways.

I don't mind it for bank CEOs if every other fundamentals of their books and the economy are right, but junketing across the globe in private jets when you are in dire straits is equivalent to the story of the man whose house is on fire and he embarks on a rat expedition. In the case of an apostle of God, the matter of pleasurable lifestyle needs even a much more delicate balancing.

It should be weighed against other exigencies that God demands of you and your obligation to the flock in your care. For me, a private jet, either for a bank executive or a preacher of God's word makes little sense except the false sense of ego that it gives. I have heard Bishop Oyedepo say that everything he owns, including perhaps the private jets, belong to God, " I am only holding them in trust to God and for the benefit of mankind." Yes, it may rhyme, but it doesn't quite wash. Truly, the most valuable things on earth are neither exotic cars nor airplanes, it's human beings. And not all things that are legal are acceptable: Common somebody.

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