

## ***Church Proprietorship in Nigeria: A Factor for a Shift from the Paradigm, 1980-2015***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Abstract— Christianity as a religion came with the foundational teachings, practices and beliefs of the early Christian Church. The constituents of the paradigm were established by Jesus Christ and the apostles. The corpus teachings revolved on monotheism (through trinity), salvation, spiritual growth, fellowship, community and love. The religion was introduced to Nigeria, first to Benin City in the present day, Edo State in 1486, and second, to other parts of Nigeria in the 19th century with these core teachings, practices and beliefs. This study is a strict interrogation of how church of Christ subsisted under proprietorship in Nigeria. It observed the distortions that were inherent in proliferation of churches under private ownership and control. The division of the Christendom, and the subsequent proliferation of Churches in the world that transcended to Nigeria depicted continuous sprouting of churches at any slightest excuse. It is therefore, discovered that absence of visible and instant punishment for emotional, selfish and inaccurate interpretation of the scriptures to suit and satisfy one's desire and interest results in increasing and uncontrollable sprouting of Churches. Investigation further revealed that privatization and commercialization of the gospel, prioritization of church-growth over spiritual growth, and a shift from servant-leadership to authoritarian leadership, and self-actualization resulted in compromise on biblical teachings for popularity and profit-making. Of course, the effort for financial and material gains remains principal in proprietorship. Primary and secondary sources were relied on while its data were analyzed qualitatively, using content analysis and thematic approaches.*

**Keywords:** Church; Proprietorship; Factor; Shift and Paradigm.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Christian mural in Nigeria has passed through significant changes since independence, with the proliferation of Churches and denominations. The background of this development in the Christendom lies the alarming inclination: Church Proprietorship (Freston, 2008). The prodigy is captured as the tendency where church leaders treat their churches as personal enterprises in the garb of the house of God. In this circumstance, personal interest was often prioritized over the gospel of Christ and spiritual goals (Takamine, 2013).

Church proprietorship has defiantly remained a permeating situation in the country, ridiculing the original paradigm of Christianity. No doubt, this shift possesses severe and ruining effects on the credibility, integrity and effectiveness of the church. The fact is that it has led to among other things, commercialization of the gospel, compromise on biblical teachings, emphasis on numerical growth over spiritual advancement, lack of transparency and accountability and self-actualization leadership. In this regard, attention here is on the concept of church proprietorship in Nigeria, considering its causes, and consequences on the Christian tenet up to 2015. The possibility of reversing the trend and returning to the original standard of the church of Christ is considered. In doing this, the work explored the basis of the scripture on church leadership, governance and stewardship.

## **THE CONCEPT OF CHURCH PROPRIETORSHIP IN NIGERIA**

The concept of church proprietorship could be seen as the condition in which a church is owned and managed either by a private person, group or organization mainly for financial gains (Hall, 2006). The church in this circumstance, is considered as the means of production and distribution of goods and services. So, it is an enterprise, hence the owner or owners are referred to as the proprietor, proprietress or business partners. Church proprietorship drives Christianity from the religious and social spheres of life to the religio-economic sphere.

The concept in Nigeria refers to a practice where Nigerian church leaders, founders and owners manage the churches and control their wealth, decision-making processes, and operations prioritizing personal interests, and self-actualization over spiritual growth, and integrity of gospel of Christ. The concept repudiates the scriptural (biblical) principle of the church as a body of believers belonging to Christ. Scholars, such as O. O Ojo (2015), sees church proprietorship as a pervasion of the biblical concept of Church leadership. He believes that managing churches as private enterprise is a clear departure from the scriptural standard of church leadership. So, it is a total failure on the side of the leaders, not the led. Adeyemi and Onwuejeogwu declare support on the position of Ojo (2015) by submitting that church proprietorship undermines the integrity and credibility of the church, and a factor contributing to the commercialization of Christianity in Nigeria (Adeyemi, 2016), respectively.

Remarkably, the scholars are unanimous on the fact that there is need to reverse the recent phenomenon and return to the original and biblical standard of the faith. The

implications of the deviation according to them, are enormous and ruinous to the credibility and integrity of Christianity in Nigeria. So, the trend has remained effectual to the spread and development of Christianity in the country. It further, shaped the focus of Christianity in Nigeria up to 2015.

### **ORIGINAL PARADIGM OF CHRISTIANITY**

The foundational principles, practices, and beliefs of the early Christian churches which were established by Jesus Christ and His apostles form the original paradigm. It constitutes monotheism, Christocentricity, biblical authority, salvation by faith, community and fellowship, discipleship and spiritual growth (Onwuejeogwu, 2017). These were practiced through worship (prayer, singing and communion), preaching and teaching, sacrament of faith and unity, evangelism, mission and community service.

Christianity is one of the religions whose members share belief in the existence of one all-powerful (Omni important), all-knowing (Omni science), and all-present (Omni present) God. Christians believe that God is a supreme being whose position cannot be changed. Their belief in trinity implies that God is the father, God is the son and God is the Holy Spirit. So, whoever that is at peace with the Holy Spirit is at peace with Jesus Christ (the son) and God (the Father). This depicts Christ's relationship with the Father, son and Holy Spirit (Lietzmann, 1937).

The primary figure in Christianity is Jesus Christ. Its standard practices emphasizes on His supremacy, authority, relevance in all aspects of faith, life, and doctrine. Christians believe that Christ sacrificed and redeemed man from sins. By this belief, any one that believes in Christ is redeemed indeed. His resurrection marked victory over death. After His resurrection, He first demonstrated His supremacy through rising to the father and leaving His apostles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. To the people, Christ rose to heaven after the third day and the Holy Spirit took over. The fact is that Holy Spirit is Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is God. The return of Jesus Christ for final judgment reveals that God will appear in human form again (Mackintosh, 1924).

It is further believed that Bible is the inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word of God, serving as the ultimate source of truth and guidance for Christian faith and practice (Richmond, 2014). So, the bible remains preeminent and sufficient for Christian faith and practice. Salvation by faith depict that faith in Jesus Christ is the sole means of salvation from sin and its consequences, resulting in eternal life with God. This demonstrates that faith in Christ brings grace, redemption and justification.

Discipleship in the standard of practice implies that believers should be following Christ, learning from Him, and becoming like Him (Sanders, 2017). This involves conversion (turning to Christ), transformation (becoming like Jesus), and following Christ's teaching in obedience. Emphasizing on the spiritual growth as a part of the principle, the believers in Christ are expected to ensure progressive development of faith, character, and relationship with God. This could be achieved through separation from sin and dedication to God.

In the standard equally, a group of believers must be united by a common purpose, values, and beliefs, often sharing a geographic connection, and spiritual growth (Sanders, 2017). This is charged to succeed through close relationship and companionship among the believers, characterized by mutual love, support, and shared experiences. These principles and practices as maintained during the time of the apostles for example, led to the promise of Ananias and his wife which he eventually failed.

### **FACTORS FOR THE SHIFT FROM THE PARADIGM**

Maintaining the terms of the paradigm connotes holding strictly to the Word of God (Bible). Any inducement leading to deviation from the biblical standard is against the faith and belief. So, emphasis of the study is on the extent to which church proprietorship has led to the drastic shift from the original standard of Christianity. Bearing in mind that the major aim of venturing into any enterprise in a capitalist society is to maximize profits; establishing, and managing churches by an individual, group or organization, sacrificing spiritual growth at the altar of personal interests, self-actualization, and material gains should have been a clear shift from the original paradigm.

It is incontrovertible that most church proprietors vitiate the terms of the bible when preaching or teaching. Rather than preaching the gospel of Christ and spiritual growth of believers, each portion of the bible read at any point was interpreted to suit the interest of the teacher, preacher and proprietor at that moment. Inasmuch as they tried to convince people that they were called by Christ to preach the gospel, they could not wholly shield their personal and material desires from the said-Church of Christ. The following factors were responsible for the shift;

Firstly, excessive desire for material things among the church proprietors and leaders in Nigeria was a factor for a shift from the original standard of Christianity (Agazue, 2013). To achieve their personal gain of wealth acquisition through the church, some church owners and leaders became idolatry. Since they established and managed churches as their businesses, many of them did some funny things to attract members to the church. This is a character of polytheism rather than monotheism which Christianity projects. It further contradicts the standard of prioritization of spiritual growth over church growth. Their efforts to increasing members of the church lured many to introduction of manipulative powers in church management.

It was that similar excessive desire for material things that lured the Christians into introducing buying and selling activities to the church in Jerusalem. When Jesus entered the temple court, He saw the transactions and got infuriated. He started driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. He did not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. As He taught them, He said, "Is it not written: My house will be called the house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it a den of robbers" (Evans, 1997). This practice that was condemned by Jesus Christ remained

strongly rooted and attached to churches in Nigeria as a result of church proprietorship. Before 2015, church owners introduced their books other than bible, can and sachet water, candles, creams, perfumes, garments, among others, which some church workers were assigned to be selling them to members during church services. Members were baited into selling and buying the items with the terms like *miracle products*. This is a sheer demonstration and prioritization of material acquisition and growth over spiritual growth.

Infiltration of corrupt practices into the church of Christ resulted in the shift from the original principles and practices of spiritual growth, separation from sin, consecration, among others (Marshall, 2019). The church ceased from being a place where people with integrity were found. Before 2015, virtually all members of churches constitute fear for people. Indeed, it is evident that many fraudsters succeeded to perfect their crimes by parading themselves as church leaders who were not strictly monitored because they were earlier understood to be sanctified and consecrated people in the society.

Church proprietors and leaders faked miracles, testimonies, and thanksgivings. For example, some church owners hired people for testimonies, arranged with people to come and sow seeds of faith, pay huge tithe, and do thanksgiving with expensive materials, such as cars, houses, and gift of plots of land. Such were done to hoodwink their targets into following suit. Their victims were not always aware of the scripts played by each of the actors to ensure that their material urge was satisfied. In this circumstance, the real wealth made in the church remained the seeds of faith, tithe, and others made by their targets and victims. Other items that were used to deceive others into such practices were usually returned to the owners.

Cases of misappropriation of fund, lack of transparency and accountability resulted in among other things, splitting of churches (Tetteh, 2021). Church proprietors and their family members that often served as the trustees projected their eagle and investigative eyes on the finances and their sources in the church more than the spiritual growth of the church. Any close marking to deter their allies in the enterprise from embezzling the church fund could be enough for the affected member to leave, raise a banner, and fliers bearing his/her picture and other inscriptions notifying people on establishment of new churches or miracle centres. Once that was done, they recruited their staff, sought power at all cost, and become miracle working prophets, faking healing, and multiple things. The fact is that many church stakeholders knew that integrity and honesty were no more rooted in the church.

Unemployment and poverty were serious factors to the shift from the original standard of the church (Stanić, 2015). A repertoire of Nigerian church proprietors has not been able to clear the people on whether God called them or they called God. It is famous among people that no one that volunteered to follow Christ was accepted by Christ for the mission. They often declared "God called me". I decided to run from the call, but God declared punishment on me as he did to Jonah. If such people were investigated very well, it would be discovered that unemployment and poverty called

them, not God. They saw churches as the easiest way to attract people's attention and financial contributions for their personal businesses and gains.<sup>14</sup> So, church establishment and control became their jobs through which wealth (light) appeared for darkness (poverty) to disappear.

In furtherance, poor biblical literacy and ignorance is a factor to blame. Many Nigerian believers lack full knowledge of the bible (Adamo, 2001). That is why they were easily brainwashed by the church proprietors and leaders to accepting their positions and interpretations of any portion of the bible. Sometimes, the members of the church remained stiff in their ignorance with their claim *Daddy General oversee said this or that*. They resorted to believing the position and interpretation the said-G.O more than the true position of the scripture. Undoubtedly, the church suffered poor literacy and ignorance as a result of the ill-doctrination and ill-orientation of the members and believers by the church proprietors with their ulterior interest. Numerous among them, gave the church inadequate and perverted biblical teachings. For example, some of these churches give way for any dress and dressing style to attract youths and people who are addicted to mundane lifestyle, instead of life of sanctity and consecration. The strategy could not be far from encouraging numerical growth over spiritual growth of the church.

#### **EFFECTS OF THE SHIFT FROM THE PARADIGM ON CHRISTIAN FAITH**

Aberration of the original model of Christianity was not without enormous consequences. It eroded spiritual discipline among Christians and church leaders (Waggoner, 2008). This was observable as emphasis was more on means of recording increasing members of the church rather than promoting spiritual growth and advancement. Spiritual accountability and integrity were ridiculed in most Nigerian private churches. Dedication and commitment to prayer and worship were adversely affected in the area. Essence of spiritual growth and worship was significantly neglected, thereby giving way for excessive materialistic approaches to Christian activities and programmes.<sup>16</sup> This projects personal knowledge and experiences over scripture. The knowledge and experiences of most church proprietors was galvanized towards rejecting grand narratives, objective truth and universal values of Christianity in Nigeria. The prevailing individual perspectives about Christianity further jettisoned truth, morality, and values of the scriptures. This was done through skillful teaching and preaching where key actors in the pursuit were already prepared for their assigned job with expectation of wages and salaries on the daily and monthly bases, respectively.

Increased emphasis on self-actualization by the church proprietors shaped Christianity into church enterprise. The proprietors considered churches as their enterprises. So, all business skills toward acquisition of wealth were not unexpected in management of the churches. It is evident that most general overseers of the churches and church-miracle centres used their pictures and those of their wives rather than Jesus Christ as their logos. This practice projects self-actualization rather than spreading of undiluted gospel of Christ and spiritual growth of Christians. It further entails

human and personal factors rule in the church more than spiritual influence. To attract and retain members, especially those that were ignorant of the ulterior motives; the church owners linked all their functions and programmes to Christ.

Community and fellowship as part of the original paradigm suffered abuses in the hands of church proprietors (Shupe, 2010). Of course, fellowship that is characterized by mutual love, support, and shared experiences was not only played down, but abused. The group of people that are united by a common purpose, values, and beliefs, often sharing spiritual connection as Christians, were brainwashed to contribute their mental, physical and material wealth together for building of churches whose proceeds were appropriated by the church proprietors and trustees only. Voluntary contributions and offerings were made by believers to secure access to food and other items. Those items were commonly used and shared for satisfaction of members in a fellowship. The proceeds were never left to be appropriated wholly by the church priests, and their family members. The proprietors however, saw the proceeds of church services and programmes as their wealth.

Church workers, such as Philip in the times of Peter and other apostles ensured that the wealth and proceeds of the church were commonly shared and enjoyed by believers (Meeks, 2003). On the part of Nigerian churches since 1980s, church owners recruited staff. The staff served according to the directives of their employers. Members of churches were made to understand that proceeds from programmes and services were meant for the management. In all, the proprietors remained the real owners that appropriated the proceeds. Remarkably, between 1980 and 2015, church proprietors, such as David Oyedepo of Living Faith Church Worldwide (1981), E. A Adeboye of Redeemed Christian Church of God (1981), Late T. B Joshua of Synagogue Church of all Nations (1986), Chris Oyakhilome of Christ Embassy (1987), Poju Oyemade of Covenant Christian Centre (1987), D. K. Olukoya of Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (1989), Emmanuel Omale of Divine Grace of God Church (1992), Paul Adefarasin of House on the Rock Church (1994), Tony Rapu of This Present House (1994), Sam Adeyemi of Daystar Christian Centre (1995), Paul Eneche of Dunamis International Gospel Centre (1996), David Ibiyeomie of Salvation Ministries (1997), and Johnson Suleman of Omega Fire Ministries (2004) were among the wealthiest people in the country. Many of them invested savings from church enterprises in other businesses to diversify their sources of income. Oyedepo for example, has one of the most expensive universities in Nigeria.

The people gave voluntary services and unceasing supports to the growth of churches. Yet, the church proprietors laid skillful and excessive emphasis on the blessings attached to donations for building of churches, sowing of seeds, among others. Knowledgeable, not spiritual interpretation of tithe and tithing became predominant in the churches (Blanton, 1992). Before 2015, many Christians were already made to believe that one who did not pay tithe was under curse. The statements emanated from misrepresentation of the scripture to encourage increasing donations, gifts, offerings, and payment of tithes by members of churches. Other strategies include

introduction of miracle and healing oil, publications, water, candles, and stickers; provision for compulsory testimonies and thanksgiving; family, children, individual and group harvest offerings, among others.

Indeed, God does not bless any one because the person sowed seed, paid tithe or other offerings. God owns man, and what any man has. He is not moved by material things. He needs the heart of man, not his wealth. Wealth is made as a product of planning and taking risk in businesses and emerging successful through the grace of God. The most vulnerable people to the prosperity and materialistic gospels of numerous church owners in Nigeria were the needy, the sickness-stricken, the childless, and miracle seekers (Ijaola, 2018). All resulted in manipulative healing services and deliverances, and false prophesy for material gains.

This circumstance further caused adoption of coercive and deceptive tactics for membership retention. Strategies were designed to suppress dissenting voices as there existed unaccountable decision-making in the churches. Many proprietors told captivating lies on pulpits, and arranged people for testimonies, and donations. All these served as baits and motivating factors to their targets who stood and offered irretrievable donations, and offerings. No doubt, those used to fake testimonies and donations retrieved them behind doors. The real donations and offerings that were appropriated by the church proprietors were those from their targeted persons (Wood, 2006). By implication, church proprietorship caused progressive decline of among other things, integrity, transparency, fidelity, and morality in Christianity.

## **FOCUS OF NIGERIAN CHRISTIANITY**

Nigerian Christianity amidst church proprietorship focuses on emerging trends. A part of the spotlight captures introduction of modern music and arts to the churches. The modern music and arts became integral to contemporary church management and control among entrepreneurial church leaders in Nigeria (Serres, 2023). They are useful for enhancing worship experiences and attracting diverse congregations. This trend is meant to attract younger generations, create vibrant atmosphere, raise emotional connections, and expand community outreach which were primarily to increase the numerical strength of the church (Sider., et al., 2022).

Church leadership and control before 2015 became characterized by personalities and influence of the church proprietors (Ojewole & Ehioghae, 2018). New fashion, and prosperity gospel developed into churches that sprouted within the period under review. The standard for church establishment continued to reduce. Such that church enterprise became one of the businesses which people ventured in with little capital since 1980. Once the prospective church planters learnt to preach in English, they declared themselves prophets and people called by God. They therefore, designed reasons to establish their own churches.

The much more emphasis that was placed on wealth and status became corrosive to the credibility and integrity of the church in the period under discussion. This implies that personal gains, rather than community were prioritized by the proprietors.

They maintained the community of members in such a manner that enabled retention of members at all costs. This was because the members served as their products in their church businesses. The focus of the church was holistic on business-like approach. This approach gave rise to unhealthy competition among church proprietors on one side and intra-church squabbles on another.

## CONCLUSION

Church proprietorship in Nigeria served as a deformity to the original standard of Christianity that revolved on monotheism through trinity, community and fellowship, and spiritual growth. It would be difficult to realize the reality and stance of Christianity in the country where churches are speedily running into the hands of proprietors. So, prioritizing spiritual growth and monotheism (believing in one God) over church growth would be unrealistic. The reason for this is because a church proprietor could not be different from other proprietors whose major objective is to maximize profits. Inasmuch as churches are owned and controlled by private person(s), self-actualization and influence would always be fundamental in their pursuits. Preaching the gospel of Christ would often appear as an instrument to hoodwink people into accepting to remain in the church. To retain and attract more members, a church proprietor could engage manipulative forces, thereby violating the principle of monotheism in an attempt to maximize gains in church business.

It is therefore, recommended that believers with spiritual gifts should rightly know that they paid nothing to receive the gifts from God. So, they should expect nothing from any beneficiary from the gifts. Church leaders should use them (the gifts) freely to enhance fellowship, and spiritual growth of the church, instead of using them as a reason for establishing a private church. This would strengthen the credibility and integrity of Christianity among other religious leaders in Nigeria and beyond.

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