

Ecclesiological Response to Covid-19 and the Question of Meaning in Context

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Abstract

In the bible, Luke 12:56 talks about the need to interpret the “signs of the times” which herald and represent a new age. This idea can benefit from an intertextual reading of this text with Romans 8:18–23, which gives the understanding that the creation does signal the end times through its groaning. If this perspective is taken in the current historical paradigm it can be telling because the turn into the new millennium, the 21st century, has proved very challenging for the church. This era, together with the advent of the novel Coronavirus disease (Covid-19), which was declared a global pandemic in March 2020, has seen the call for a different approach of doing ecclesiology in order to maintain and enhance its relevancy. In this globalised environment that has been influenced by post-modern values, there has arisen a fresh emphasis on a missional and fluid church. This is seen to be part of the “post-Christendom” ecclesial experience. It is against such an observation that this article will proceed from a conviction that the emergence and effects of the Covid-19 pandemic can be understood to be part of the “signs of the times” which the church must understand. The lessons it has posed for the church are thus relevant for the church as it continues to sail the uncharted waters of post-modernity. In the article, a pastoral cycle methodology will be employed for its interdisciplinary nature. Such questions will be explored as to the “what” of the church and Covid-19 context, and the “why” (hermeneutics of Luke 12:56), that is, the theological meaning and the strategic framework that must proffer the way forward for the church in the 21st century and beyond. The focus of the article is on the church in Southern Africa although the lessons are applicable in many contexts especially in other areas.

Keywords: post-Christendom; ecclesial; post-modernity; hermeneutics



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Context of the Church – Riddled with Covid-19

Context of Mission

The advent of the novel Coronavirus disease (Covid-19), which was declared a global pandemic in March 2020, has resulted in several changes in the terrain of ministry and doing mission. According to the ITUC (2020, 1):

the Covid-19 (coronavirus) outbreak started in China in December 2019, and the World Health Organisation has now declared it a global pandemic. As at 29 March 2020, there were total of 634,835 confirmed cases, 29,891 confirmed deaths in 2020 affected countries, areas or territories. ... As of 14 May 2020, about 4,7 million people had been infected with 1,56 million people recovering and 29,800 people confirmed dead. The pandemic is a serious challenge of great proportions. Measures of containment range from lockdown of different countries, practice of hygiene, banning of gatherings, screening, testing, isolation, quarantine, and contact tracing. (https://www.google.com/search?q=latest+figures+of+corona+virus+worldwide&rlz=1C1CHBF_enZW744ZW744&oq)

These changes underscore the fact that in the the context of ministry and doing mission, the church has been and is in uncharted waters. Baron and Pali (2021) argue that this is because Covid-19 is a novel virus pandemic. The negative impact of Covid-19 has been huge in the world as it has exposed the gross inequalities and socio-economic crisis. The social lives of people have been curtailed by the banning of social gatherings and international migration, which has meant that even Christians may not gather in churches. As a result, churches have turned to social media to produce a virtual ministry which is not always accessible to all people. Schools have been closed, with some institutions turning to e-learning which again is not accessible to all people especially in Zimbabwe which has been experiencing an economic slump for some time.

Many statutory instruments have been gazetted by the governments of countries with the parliaments giving the executive extraordinary powers to deal with the pandemic. For example, this can be seen in the statutory instruments passed on the ban of gatherings in Zimbabwe (see Veritas Zimbabwe 2020). The statutory instrument orders the wearing of masks in all public places. According to Baron and Pali (2021, 2), Covid-19 calls for a deeper missiological reflection and that it necessitates a change in the understanding of ministry and doing mission.

The United Nations (UN 2020, 11) talks about the empirical results of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic:

In an era characterised by extreme inequality, the Covid-19 pandemic is a fundamentally dis-equalizing event. Its effects are expected to be most damaging for children in the poorest countries, and on girls within poorest households. This poses a monumental challenge to the principle underpinning the Sustainable Goals to leave no one behind.

The world's poorest children already face a precarious existence and disproportionate effects of the pandemic.

These results relate to the short-term impact of the pandemic on children. The UN further says that in the long term, the impact will be determined by how long the pandemic will last. The possibility in all consideration of the reality is that children will be affected in their schooling, health and security (UN 2020, 12), as some will be orphaned, while others will have parents who lost their jobs due to the pandemic.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is multi-faceted as it touches every sphere of human life and society. In most countries the frustration caused by the financial situation, the lockdown and many other related causes has contributed to the rise in gender-based violence (GBV) and domestic violence in general. Zimbabwe is no exception. This is evident in the interview with Precious Taru, Project Director of Musasa, a non-governmental organisation that looks at issues of gender justice, in *The Herald* newspaper:

She said that between March 30 when the lockdown began and April 9, her organisation received 764 gender based vioent cases across all its platforms. She said, "This is a spike in terms of GBV cases ... in a month Musasa normally receives 500 to 600 cases. But so far, we have recorded more numbers in a short space of 11 days than we normally do in a month." (Sachiti 2020)

In order for the government to solve the preesing problem of GBV, there is a need to involve all the social partners which relate with the family, and the church is one of them. Broken families lead to broken communities which, in turn, lead to broken nations. Values of respect for human rights and dignity as well as tolerance must be inculcated in such a society. These values must be part of the culture that the church inculcates in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the realities of post-modernity.

Context of Post-modernism

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected and, at the time of writing, is still affecting the whole world. The current article seeks to understand the pandemic in the light of the values of post-modernism within a globalised environment. Since the article has a specific focus on Southern Africa, the question arises as to whether countries in Africa and Southern Africa are post-modern or not. Akuul (2010, 1) in his conceptualisation of post-modernism, says amongst other things, that it is the:

Acceptance of a mass media dominated society in which there is no originality but only copies of what has been done before ... Globalisation, a culturally pluralistic and profoundly interconnected global society lacking any single dominant centre of political power ... instead the world is moving towards decentralization in all types of global processes.

These tenets of post-modernism are a reality in most African and Southern African urban communities. It is arguably true from an African perspective that the world is following the globalisation arrangement of political economy, and that culture is now relative as a result of the proliferation of information and migration. Consequently, absolutes are being eroded by multifaceted ideals and beliefs, and there is now a tendency of upholding isolated notions instead of institutions. The institution of the church is giving space to some isolated and fluid “churches” which prefer to be known as ministries. This is characteristic of the context in terms of the reality of religion and culture in the 21st century to which the countries in Southern Africa are not immune. Africa may be lagging behind in terms of capitalistic development and decolonisation but aspects of post-modernism are a reality in the contemporary society.

Kealotswe (2014, 238) implies that it is no longer a question of whether countries in Africa, such as Zimbabwe, are post-modern or not. This is now a reality of the times. He says:

The countries that form Southern Africa such as South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Zimbabwe are modern or postmodern countries. The sociological definitions of modernity and postmodernity do vary in accordance with the arguments of various sociologists ... modernity simply refers to the modern period where there is fast change due to technology and the increase in scientific knowledge ... Postmodernity is the other argument by sociologists that the present world is a postmodern world which does not have values and is constant[ly] changing,

The marks of the post-modern religious society are many, including the use of technology in churches as is championed by the current Pentecostal charismatic churches in Southern Africa. Their membership tends to be moving between churches as people are freer to adopt another movement rather than stick to one institution. For example, according to a report by NewsDay (2015), “Prophetic Healing and Deliverance (PHD) Ministries founder Walter Magaya says his movement is not a church, but a ministry”; hence, it may be followed by adherents of other churches.

This fluidity is influenced by the modern perspective of life that there are no universal truths which find expression in a liberal philosophy of life. The other evident historical development is that of an emerging church. This manifests itself in the growth in market place Christianity and home churches that are gaining preference and more acceptance than institutional churches.

It can thus be argued with reasons from many progressive scholars that humanity is living in a post-modern environment. Covid-19 may not escape such scrutiny as it belongs to the “signs of the times” argument. This argument may be strengthened by the various theories explaining the pandemic, such as its association with the coming of the mark of the beast, an accidental laboratory experiment and warfare as well as other theories (Douglas 2021, 271). When these theories are analysed, they have an indirect

and at times a direct link with the current age. It is in this line of thinking that Mamzer (2020, 13) writes:

events such as the SARS-COV-2 pandemic are a lens which suddenly enlarges the phenomena and features of the perceived world. Placing such a magnifier on it becomes an excuse to look at the surroundings from a completely different perspective. Features and phenomena not yet seen are revealed.

“Signs of the Times”: According to Luke 12:56

Luke 12:56 says: “You fools! You know how to interpret the weather signs of the sky, but you don’t know how to interpret the present times.” This verse can be read in parallel with Matthew 16:1–3 and the Gospel of Thomas (Fitzmyer 1985, 999). This context implies that the community of Luke, Matthew and Thomas (followers of Jesus) must find it easy to understand the “signs of the times” just as they can understand the signs of changing weather patterns. The term “fools” implies that genuine followers of Jesus must have the passion to understand the times and must not ignore its signs (Tannehill 1996, 215).

In *Gaudium et Spes* 4, the Roman Catholic Church conceivably has the correct interpretation of Luke 12:56 when it argues as follows on the aspect of church’s mission and its relevance in the context of different times and generations:

To discharge this duty [namely, with the guidance of the Paraclete, to continue the work of Christ who came into the world to give witness to the truth, to save and not to judge, to serve and not to be served], **the Church has the duty in every age of examining the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the gospel**, so that it can offer in a manner appropriate **to each generation** replies to the human questionings on the meaning of this **life and the life to come**, and how they are related (author’s emphasis). (Tanner 1990)

Arguing from the understanding of the “signs of the times” from *Gaudium et Spes* 4 (Tanner 1990), the relationship of mission in every age and the “signs of the times” can be seen. These are presented to the church so that the church of every age can then be able to interpret the thrust of mission that is needed. The “signs of the times” also provide an explanation that links the present realities with the life to come (eschatology). It is from this understanding that, judging by the effect and impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on life, it could be seen to be one of the “signs of the times”.

For the current article, the post-modern age is a sign that can be interpreted to point to the frailty of life despite scientific advancement – it can point to the common humanity of all despite their race, gender, colour and creed. It can also point to the possibility of the collapse of all that is called world civilisation. Yes, it can point to the responsibility that humans have towards one another and it has been said that Covid-19 has taught that nobody is ever safe until everyone else is safe as has been argued by the United Nations

Children's Fund (UNICEF 2021). For Christians it can even point to a need for a deeper spirituality that connects individuals to God and their families.

Ice (2009, 4) understands the “signs of the times” as heralding a new present era. They also herald the second coming of Jesus and Ice uses the word “rapture” for the events that will take place at that time. He concludes by saying that

while no signs of the times specifically relate to rapture, this does not mean that there are no signs relating to God's overall prophetic plan ... I am excited when I survey the current events that indicate that our Lord is setting the state for the tribulation and his return. This means that the singleness event of the rapture of the church is likely near. Maranatha! (Ice 2009, 4)

It is from such an understanding that the conspiracy theories concerning the connection between the Covid-19 pandemic and the eschaton, as well as the Covid-19 vaccines, are being linked with the mark of the beast. Though it is not the purpose of the current article to prove this theory, it is an attempt to interpret the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic as one of the “signs of the times” within a post-modern context.

Covid-19 as a Sign: A Pauline Eschatological Perspective

There are different persuasions of theological explanations of Covid-19. I prefer the view of Pauline theology, particularly concerning nature, as Paul explains it in Romans 8:18–23:

¹⁸I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

This passage provides the first ever reference to “creation” in Paul's writings as seen in Romans 8:19; however, this is consistent with Pauline eschatology in his other epistles. The departure in Paul's theology may be argued to be the fall of Adam and the justification in Christ, as can be seen in scriptures such as Romans 5:18–21, 2 Corinthians 11:3, 1 Corinthians 15:22 and Romans 5:12. According to Romans 8:18–23, the present state of creation is one of suffering (*pathemata*). It is arguable that this suffering/groaning of creation provides the context for the Covid-19 pandemic. For Paul, these sufferings or labour pains are heralding the future of glory where the sons of God will be manifested and where creation will be liberated from the bondage of decay that resulted from human sin.

It is in this line of thinking that Kasemann (1982, 232) argues that in Pauline eschatology, the present is a moment of destiny that precedes the revelation of future glory. It is within this theological reasoning that the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic must then be located. It is also from this theology that Covid-19 could be understood as part of the signs of the times in this post-modern age. In other words, Covid-19 is part of the labour pains that signal the possibility of the eschatological future of glory.

21st Century Ecclesiological and Covid-19 Contextual Reformation

Many people have been grappling with the meaning of the church in the context of the pain, death, isolation and fears caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. What exacerbated the issue is that it came at a time when there were tensions in the church caused by the shift from institutionalism to less institutionality which are things characteristic of the post-Christendom era. Olson (2020) argues that Christendom is fast disappearing. Under Christendom, Christianity was a centre of the society and states. It was the glue that bound the society. Now Christianity is being relegated by culture to the fringes of the society. This is the meaning I espouse in the article.

There may have been changes in different denominational structures to suit the demands of the 21st century. Yet, these would be futile if the thinking of ministers, theologians and the generality had not shifted from the old system of doing church. Dreyer (2013, 5) learns from (Niemandt 2007, 52) and puts it this way:

The reformation of the church which is needed in the 21st century, leaves nothing untouched and requires changes at the deepest levels of the church. Adaptive change begins with a new understanding of what it means to be a church. Adaptive change is about changing the hearts and minds of individual congregants as well as the church collectively.

The thinking and reflection in the church must involve how the church can be in the present and the hereafter context. Herein there is no room for going back to Christendom. The understanding of the church as a missional church suits the current context because the present realities call for the priesthood of all believers to do works of ministry wherever they are instead of relying on the official offices to perform the ministry function when the church is gathered.

The ecumenical marks (*notae ecclesiae*) of the church are its oneness, holiness, apostolicity and catholicity (Duncan 2011, 1). For the Reformed churches, the signs of the church are the preaching of the pure gospel, where the sacraments are rightly administered, and for the neo-Calvinists, it is discipline. Any analysis of these marks will reveal that these fundamentals of ecclesiology were born in the context of physical worship. These ecclesiological foundations, especially those espoused by the Reformed churches, relate to a physical gathering than a virtual worship experience. The Covid-19 context and the realities of the post-modern environment necessitate a more liberal

understanding of the church where virtual celebrations of the sacraments and virtual gatherings are a possibility.

The virtual worship practice must be in place together with physical gatherings even once the Covid-19 era has passed. A new ecclesiology that is relevant to the post-modern era and the context posed by the pandemic must be developed. These ecclesiological ideas have been present for a long time albeit in an un-synthesised form. For example, as far back as the 16th century, Calvin reasoned as follows when he commented on Matthew 8:5–10: he argued that the centurion believed that Jesus was God, in other words, if he were not, to just speak the word without going to the person would be superstitious. No one has the power to create other than God, thus any such a demonstration would be superstitious (Torrance and Torrance 1994, 335).

The context posed by Covid-19 is such that ministers are now using the electronic and social media platform to communicate the gospel and lead Sunday worship services. Since believers are prevented by the context to go to the physical church, how does the pastor administer sacraments other than by using electronic and social media? It is just as in the case of the centurion, where Jesus just had to say the word without entering into the home and touching the sick person.

The idea of an emerging church, and other contextual phenomena as the virtual reality, must be embraced. There must be a way in which the institution of the church dialogues with the emerging reality. The current studies of theology and the practice of the church must become more liberal, without absolutes, always seeking to answer to the context. However, caution must be exercised because overdoing this liberalising may end up negating the cosmological and ontological realities of being a church. There must not be any tension between the understanding of a missional church in the 21st century and the nature of church as implied by Dreyer (2016).

In Dreyer's (2016) analysis of Karl Barth, he argues that being less of an institution, is actually being more of a church. According to Dreyer, the gospel must be free from the culture and politics of the day, since in this way the church becomes powerful by the Holy Spirit who is the reason behind the reality of the church. That is to say, in as much as the current contextual climate is a challenge to the church, she must not lose the essentials of being a church as an ordained ministry because the church is an activity of God and not man. In his commentary on the book of Psalms, Calvin (cf. Anderson 1845, 23) implies that the church must always seek to resist the temptation of being carried away by anything, she must always come to a place of conversation where listening to God can take place and where discerning the will of God that will inspire any polity must take place. This calls for churches, especially those in the Reformed tradition, to maintain some conservatism with orthodoxy in every age for the sake of the true nature and calling of the church.

Conclusion

The ecclesial context in Africa is characterised by tensions between the institution as in the Christendom era and the kind of liberal (fluid) tendencies that are typical of a globalised society that is highly influenced by the values of post-modern culture. These have been exacerbated by the emergence of the deadly Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has changed the way people perceive reality and their way of doing church. People are still living under the shadow and threat of the pandemic. In the article, I have argued that the Covid-19 pandemic has been understood by some quarters of the faith community as part of the “signs of the times” that come with post-modernism. This thesis found backing from the Pauline eschatological views in Romans 8:18–23. This context is seen to pose imperatives for a new understanding of the church in the present times and the hereinafter. Virtual worship must be characteristic of the new ecclesial experience going into the future. The traditional foundations of ecclesiology, such as the ecumenical marks and those confessed by the Reformed churches, must be reformed if a relevant ecclesiology is to be realised. The interrelatedness of pastoral care and missional response must be explored going into the future. The missional context demands a ministry that is built around the priesthood of all believers rather than the traditional formal offices of ministry.

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