

THE CHURCH IN THE POST-PANDEMIC WORLD (SHORT VERSION)

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This pandemic is "forcing" us to rethink many things. There is much uncertainty and few assurances. More questions than answers.

The world has changed, maybe definitely

The sooner we understand it, the better we will adapt to the post-pandemic world. Actually, we still don't know what this post-pandemic world will be like.

Presbyterian Pastor Ricardo Agreste from Brazil, in a digital dissertation stated: *The world as we knew it no longer exists.*

What would have happened in the next three years, happened in three weeks. Our churches represent the organizations most resistant to change, because its leadership does not know how to differentiate between essence and form.

He concludes with this statement: *This pandemic should produce a Sabbath in us. A halt for deep reflection... The church can come back from this pandemic not only bigger but better.*

The words of the prophet Jeremiah seem pertinent to me:

"This is what the Lord says: "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, 'We will not walk in it.'"
(Jeremiah 6.16)

Ministerial discernment for these days

These are days of quietness, of reflection, of prayer, of hearing God; especially those of us who are the pastors. We need to open our minds and hearts, and, in the face of these new circumstances, open ourselves to the changes that God, through His Word, wants us to make in our ministerial strategy.

For this we need discernment.

- Between what is absolute and what is relative
- Between what is immutable and what is variable
- Between what is indispensable and what is expendable
- Between what is essential and what is secondary
- Between what is permanent and what is circumstantial

Within those things that are relative and secondary, there are undoubtedly good, useful and pleasant things, but they are not indispensable, and others that we continue

practicing as a custom or tradition. We will do well to review them to evaluate their usefulness.

The versatility of the church in history

The Lord's church has proven throughout the centuries to be very versatile. Adaptable to any time and circumstance. The church is all terrain. For long periods the church was persecuted, with a very high number of martyrs and lots of suffering. In those difficult times it was impossible to have a public or congregational meeting. It was the "underground" church, the persecuted church. But that church never abandoned that which is absolute: the Word, prayer, evangelism, teaching, discipleship, love, good works, fellowship ...

The church in its first 300 years never had "temples". It met in homes. And when possible, in public places. It was the church's best time! It would never have occurred to them to call a building "church". They had no pulpits nor altars. They had no stages nor sound equipment. But they had the essentials, the indispensable, what cannot and must not be lacking: the Holy Spirit and the Word of God.

What is being a church?

In most Christians today consider that being a church we need to have a "temple", pulpit, cross, benches, musical instruments, a platform, sound equipment. Both Catholics and Evangelicals make the blunder of calling the halls in which we meet "a church".

Why does the church exist? Why is it on the earth? We must redefine the nature and purpose of the church in light of the New Testament.

Jesus never said to his disciples, "Go and build temples in all nations." Nor did he say: "Go and make meetings ..." But, "*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... and teaching them to keep all the things that I have commanded you ...*" (Matthew 28.19-20).

Jesus tells us today, just like in the beginning: "*Go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature*" (Mark 16.15). The fields are white for the harvest. This is a 'kairos' of God that we cannot squander.

A new sensitivity has emerged in humanity. Not in all, but in many.

There is a new awareness of our human FRAGILITY. And this can be a prelude to humility; a very favorable condition for hearing the gospel.

There is a new awareness of the UNPREDICTABILITY of life. We have no agenda. This can also lead us to humility and a search for assurance, which is only found in God.

Today we are more aware of our IMPOTENCE. Aware that there are forces and factors that we cannot control. Not with money, not with science, not with technology, not with laws. Yet another feeling that can lead us to humility.

Although not openly talked about, there is a new awareness of the closeness of DEATH. This generates fear, anxiety, need to hear a message of hope and salvation.

This new sensitivity in mankind—I reiterate, not in all, but in many—can be a great open door for evangelism and the conversion of millions throughout the world.

"See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut..."

Revelation 3:7-8

The sieve of God

We know and believe that for those who love God all things work together for good (Romans 8.28)

The Lord allowed all this to put us in a sieve. And what a sieve! The purpose of the sieve is to separate the chaff from the wheat. The necessary from the superfluous, the absolute from the relative. There is a lot of straw and stubble in the church today. Paul says that the church should be built with gold, silver, and precious stones. But he warns that some build with wood, hay and stubble. (1 Corinthians 3.11-13).

All of this has served us well in order to evaluate what kind of church we are building. Will what we are building pass the test of fire? The fire terminates everything banal, with its superficiality, religiosity, carnality. Everything that is wood, hay, and stubble burns quickly.

But fire also has another function: it purifies gold, silver and precious stones. We will come out better from all this! At least, this is what God has proposed, what he is "scheming".

I don't want to waste the last years of my life building what the fire will consume. I want to invest in that which will last for eternity. What is it? Win the lost and build them up in the image of Jesus.

What word do we have for nations, and especially for their leaders?

The pandemic forces nations to stop and rethink the path that the world has taken globally in recent centuries on a social, economic and ethical level.

ECONOMY

Mankind needs to rethink the current economic system at the global and national levels. This pandemic has exposed the fragility and structural injustice of the world economic system.

The gap between rich and poor is widening in the vast majority of the nations of the world.

The current economic system is based on individualism and personal ambition. The basis of social coexistence must be the maxim of Jesus: "You will love your neighbor as yourself." And an important aspect of social coexistence is the economy. A new economy based on work and love of neighbor is necessary. The development of a large economic reform based on a social ethic is urgent.

ECOLOGY

We, as mankind, need to assume our responsibility, since we are administrators and caretakers of our common home, the planet earth.

It is insane to continue as we are. It would be like making a big hole in the boat that we are all in. Again the love of money surfaces. Selfish ambition blinds us and drives us insane. What more do we need before we change? We need state policies both at the national and international levels, and education at all levels of society.

HEALTH

Access to good health care cannot be the privilege of those with the highest income. Those who suffer from an illness, those involved in an accident, those who are born with a congenital condition, are not to blame for their misery. Medicine cannot be a lucrative

business but a social service. Thank God that during the current pandemic most nations have prioritized the care of those infected regardless of their economic possibilities. Shouldn't this always be so? All nations must develop "social medicine" projects.

MANKIND (The human being)

Postmodernism has discovered that man is not just a rational animal as modernity maintained. He is a social, affective, emotional, relational, spiritual. Man, in his essence is a spiritual being, and as such, a transcendent and moral being. If we underestimate the spiritual and moral aspects, we are destroying man, and therefore humanity.

THE FAMILY

The attack on marriage and family has been fierce in the past 50 years. There does not exist, according to any point of view, an integration of society wiser and healthier than the "traditional" family: the normal, natural, stable marriage formed by a man and a woman. It is painful to see so many single mothers, and even worse the "inventions" of unnatural marriages, even though in some countries they are legal. To destroy the family and its values is to destroy society. If a change of course is not made, the future social structure will be catastrophic.

WHAT GOD SAYS TO THE NATIONS

Isaiah 24: 1-5

"See, the Lord is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it; he will ruin its face and scatter its inhabitants! [...]The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the heavens languish with the earth. The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws..."

Isaiah 45.21-24

"Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear. They will say of me, 'In the Lord alone are deliverance and strength.'"

WORKSHOP TASKS:

1. Let's make a list of the things that we consider absolute and indispensable in the church, and another list of the relative, variable and dispensable things (**it should be as complete as possible**).
2. What should be the main strategies of the church in the post-pandemic?
3. Aware of our responsibility to be the light of the world, in what ways can we affect our society?