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**Dele Olowu****WHAT IS GOD SAYING TO THE CHURCH BY THE PANDEMIA****A PASTORAL APPROACH**

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*"...and there shall be famines, pestilences and earthquakes in diverse places. All these are the beginning of sorrows..."*

Mathews 24.7-8

*"But ye shall receive power after the Holy Ghost has come upon you after that the Holy Ghost has come upon you, and ye shall be witnesses to me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria and unto the uttermost part of the earth "*

Acts 1. 8

**INTRODUCTION**

We serve a God who speaks to His people. Unfortunately, it is not everyone that can hear what He is saying because He is a Spirit and anyone who would hear Him must learn to worship and approach Him in spirit and in truth (Jn. 4. 24). It is also the case that no one has a monopoly of hearing from God. Strangely the Bible gives us examples when God used a donkey or plant to speak to renowned prophets (Numbers 23: 28-31; Jonah 4: 6-11).

Since the Lord can use anyone to speak to His people, permit me to thank the organizers of this online platform for the honor of speaking to this august gathering on this topic at this time when the life of the global economy and society seem to hang in the balance.

I plan to set forth the facts concerning COVID briefly. Then proceed to highlight what I believe the Lord is saying to the church and the wider world through the church. Our prayer is that we would become more effective in being the voice of the One who has called us to build His Kingdom in our world.

**1) FACTS**

- a) As at the present time, no consensus exists among the scientific community on the origins, nature, evolution or cure of COVID-19 virus. Yet, politicians, business people, even medical doctors and ordinary citizens in practically all nations have deferred until now to these 'experts' or scientists to tell us what

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to do to patients, non-patients, the economy as well as the whole of society to respond to the virus. It is also become clear that new players have entered the global policy debates and several options are on the table. In the meanwhile, the established pressure groups resist these new comers...e.g. some doctors claiming that chloroquine with some other drug works and a country like Madagascar announcing validity of its cure etc.

- b) It is also becoming clear that COVID-19 policy as with all policies is not just about facts but also about values and opinions of some embedded politicians, health practitioners and ambitious entrepreneurs who might like to profit from the pandemic. Moreover, even within the scientific community there are choices to be made that require values which reflect societal consensus on moral choices that transcend facts or science. For instance if people must die from this virus, should society make a choice between older persons with prevailing conditions or the young and able through economic collapse? It is also emerging that more of the older people are dying not from the virus but from media hype that focuses on deaths (over 300,000 globally) and not on the possible more positive news of the larger number of persons who are surviving the virus out of the 5million persons infected and why they survive? In fact, there are now two schools of thought on the future of this virus. One that predicts several waves of the virus and another suggesting that the virus has run its course and many more people have actually been infected (than was supposed, because they were never tested) and that our bodies had developed natural immunity or antibodies to the virus. This is the famous division between the Imperial College and Oxford University schools of thought. The latter is gaining more traction as we speak in the policy arenas of most countries.
- c) Contrary to the expectations of the Owner and Founder of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Christian community has been overly quiet and reticent in entering into these discussions as it has done generally to other issues in the public arena in most nations of the world. This absence of the voice of the Christian community has tended to lead to the relegation of Christian norms and policy options. It is clear that God expects the voice of the church to be much stronger on both COVID-19 and our respective social, economic and political spaces. It is another reason we appreciate AFI for convening this consultation.
- d) Earlier this week (May 19), the World Health Assembly, which oversees the work of WHO voted in favor of an independent investigation into the handling of the current pandemic by the global agency. WHO had reversed itself on several issues relating to COVID—as to its source, spread, whether to wear or not wear masks etc. It remains to be seen how the resolution would be implemented in the face of strong interests contesting the issues and highly polarized secular media that seems to care less for truth than the

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representation of their political/economic sponsors. One thing that is already becoming clearer by the day is that this virus has exposed underlying forces of global contestation for power, influence and hegemonic dominance between and among key nations in the eastern and western hemispheres as well as key actors in the private and public spheres.

- e) In the meantime, the economic and social impacts of COVID -19 have been massive in all countries. Prospering economies have gone into recession and as noted above altogether some 5 million persons have been infected by the disease with over 300, 000 dead. Nations have thrown huge stimulus funds at the problem to relieve their citizens but if this virus is not such a great killer than has had been thought. There is therefore a strong push everywhere to reopen their national economies that have been devastated by the fears of the virus. In fact, a lot of psychological factors—domestic violence, negative aspects of isolation, fear mongering by the media etc—have become injurious to citizens in many countries. The worst hit have been citizens from countries of the global south where the governments are begging for international aid to help their own citizens and where the recipient governments have remained opaque, corrupt and mismanaged such assistance.

## **2) WHAT GOD HAS SAID AND IS SAYING TO THE CHURCH AND OUR WORLD**

On the eve of the New Year the Lord spoke through Pastor Enoch Adeboye, the General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) when he released his prophecy for Year 2020. He specifically announced that on the international stage the new year would be like “a child undergoing convulsion”—with several earthquakes, fires, floods etc. The reason for this is sin, which has become more brazen in recent times in all nations. However, he noted that if we would pray, the Lord would mitigate this.

He has not been alone, in fact another African gospel Minister from Zimbabwe prophesied four years before that a global pandemic would come out from China that would ravage the whole world. He included in his prophecy that an old curative (chloroquine) would be found to be effective against the virus.

As we noted at the beginning of this paper, the Lord Jesus Christ was perhaps the first to give such prophetic insights to His disciples who were disappointed that the Kingdom they expected the Messiah to inaugurate was not coming during His first coming. He gave them detailed signs of His return first to take His own away in a rapture and subsequently as the King of Kings to judge and reign in this world from Jerusalem. Mt. 24. 7-8. This is consistent with the prophecies delivered by the major and minor prophets (Is. 9.6-7, Dan. 2. 44, 11: 32, 12: 3, Zech. 14: 1-4, 8-9).

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The above also resonate well with the Lord's response to King Solomon's prayer at the great temple dedication that if His people went astray to serve other gods, He would punish them with natural disasters: *draught, locusts and pestilence*. However, if the people, called by His name would HUMBLE themselves, PRAY, SEEK His FACE, and TURN FROM THEIR WICKED WAYS, He would hear from heaven, FORGIVE THEIR SIN and HEAL THEIR LAND. 2 Ch. 7. 13-14. This statement has three important implications. First, those who matter to the healing of any nation experiencing pestilence such as this one are the people of God. Second, if these ones would take some specific prescribed actions, then their land or nation would be healed by God. Thirdly, the healing of the land would not just be from physical or economic disasters but also from the spiritual and moral decline that led to these disasters in the first place. If indeed, it is the case that the eating of blood of animals in wet markets led to the transmission of the virus from animal to humans is it out of place for the church to alert the rest of the world that the eating of blood was condemned by God in the old and new testaments? (Lev. 17:10-12, Acts 15: 28-29).

Similarly, in the Old Testament times, when God's people (Judah) experienced the plague of locusts prophet Joel spoke of the need for repentance by God's people—leaders as well as followers so there can be restoration (Joel 2: 15-29). The major prevention for this virus seems to be life-style changes e.g. what we eat, how we live (with or without exercise), practicing social distance, self-isolation, hand washing etc. Is this not saying the same things to modern man what Joel said to the people of Judah of his time?

In other words, this pandemic is a wake-up call first and foremost to the church towards speaking to herself through a return to the word (revival) and secondarily towards the repositioning of the church in society for greater influence and impact by believing and speaking what the Lord has said and is saying. It means we as leaders repent and speak first to ourselves on the state of God's church. This means a clear message of repentance and humility and turning from our wicked ways before addressing the society.

### **3) THE CHURCH'S INFLUENCE AND IMPACT ON SOCIETY**

The new testament suggests from what we read for instance in Mark 5: 1-20, Acts 8: 5-8 that a church should be assessed by two key indicators, namely INFLUENCE and IMPACT. On both counts, it would seem as if the norms of the non—Christian world have influenced and impacted more heavily on the church than the other way round. The church has been eager to twist her values and norms to fit her environment on for instance such social issues as abortion, homosexuality (with homosexual bishops), transgender rights, lax sexuality, universalism and flamboyant display of wealth at the expense of ministry to support the needy and poor. The message of the Lord to His Church is to repent and do her original works as He spoke to the church in Ephesus to return to her first works, or else her candlestick would be removed (Rev. 2: 4-5). If Ephesus is a part of today's modern-day Turkey, it seems that this warning was not heeded. We shall revisit the Lord's messages to another church in the book of Revelations.

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The question must therefore be raised as to why has the church abandoned her role as a witness for the Lord and become passive, unable to meet her mandate to be a spokesperson for God (Is. 43.10, Acts 1.8)? The church performed this role admirably in the past with definite improvements and progress around in global economy and politics. Even unbelievers around the world commended these in their writings (Weber 1958, Freston 2009). This reticence of the church as argued above has limited her influence and impact in the society generally but especially in the public policy arena. God is indeed using this pandemic to call the church both to repent so she can be His voice again.

There would of course be diverse explanations to the question of why the church lost her voice which was once persuasive. One reason canvassed in this presentation is the loss of focus and therefore of purity and power. The Lord Jesus Christ knew that the church must be holy to exercise power. The route to these two is via a strong commitment to His word—which He made clear was all about Him, the Word. (Jn 5. 39, 1.1-4). He therefore commanded the disciples to wait in Jerusalem after His departure until they received power from on high (Acts 1: 5-8). The power is fuelled by holiness or obedience to the Lord (Acts 5.32, Heb. 1.9). As His return draws near, the Lord seems to be using the present pandemic to remind the church to seek again His Power and Presence, which only purity of heart in single-minded obedience makes possible (Heb.12 14). These two make the church relevant and impactful if we do not lose our focus. The power and gifts of the Holy Spirit and fruit usually go together. The Lord Jesus expects the church to return to these as His second coming draws near. His predictions on His second coming was closely followed by the parable of the Ten Virgins (Mt. 25: 1-13). This parable teaches that up to one half of Christians who profess to be expecting His return would be disappointed. And this because they lacked the extra oil which would become essential for survival in the last days—as the forces of evil coalesce and grow stronger by the day (2 Tim. 3:1-5; 4: 1-5). The story of the Redeemed Christian Church of God may provide some insights to the above depositions.

#### **4) SIX DECADES OF RCCG**

Most of my listeners are likely to have heard that the RCCG was started in 1952 by a semi-illiterate man with whom the Lord gave three assignments. First, he was to start a church which would be patterned on His word. Second, this church would be in all parts of the world before His Son returns to earth. Thirdly, this church must be a model church that is filled with His power based on the covenantal blessings. Hence the motto of the church became: Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever. Heb. 13.8. It is important to point out that this man had been in the established churches of his time before the Lord called him to a life of holiness and teaching of holy living.

It is widely recognized that against all odds this church passed the first two stages. The founder succeeded in starting the denomination focused on the word of God with strong aspirations to purity and power. But this denomination could not move outside of the southwestern part of the founding country, Nigeria. The quality of the leadership

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and followership was high in terms of single-minded devotion to the word and the demonstration of God's power. In the second phase, the successor to the founder, who is the current leader has taken the denomination to over 197 countries of the world. The denomination is now poised to move into the third and final phase of her ministry, to prepare the denominational members and the world around them for the soon coming of the Savior. The focus on the word still exists but there is a widespread understanding that this denomination would require a fresh touch of God's fire especially in reaching out to the younger and new generation with the message of purity and power. In the meantime, the single-handed devotion of the church to evangelism, fasting and prayers etc have borne great fruit with huge increases in the numbers of the rank and file. Many lives have been transformed spiritually, morally, economically and politically. Several of the church leaders are in high positions in the country. Even non-members who wish to run for the highest offices flock to the church for blessings by the leadership. Other denominations have also proliferated in the country and all over Africa the renewing influence of the Holy Spirit is felt. However, the challenge remains on how to transform this spiritual power to leverage positive social and economic change.

## 5) PROSPERITY RISKS

As with ancient Israel, historically, success in financial, economic status of the churches have led to the abandonment of deeper spirituality. This might explain the weakness of the collective or universal church today: undermined by underlying weaknesses such as —disunity, apostasy, flamboyance and distractions of money etc The latter is particularly pernicious because the Lord made clear that mammon constituted the only viable alternative idol. Moreover, the Lord promised and to make available to His church all that is needed to prosecute the work of ministry if focus on the word, purity and power is sustained (Lk. 10: 4-9)..Moreover, the Lord's message to the last church addressed in Revelation, Laodecia rested heavily on this matter (Rev. 2: 14-19). It is significant that this church has all the trappings of the modern church today:

- It has lost her fire and is now lukewarm—neither hot nor cold.
- It has been economically successful and believes herself to be rich.to have arrived, having need of nothing
- Christ's counsel to her is to buy gold refined in the fire...that is the real wealth which is the freshness of God's Spirit and power. The Old and New Testaments have demonstrated that the superiority of spiritual over and above anything material (2 Kgs 5. 15-16, Acts 3: 6-7).

The above may explain why the voice of the global church is weak today. The Lord then calls on the church (not unbelievers) to open the doors of our hearts to Him so we can experience the power of His spirit as revealed in the gifts and fruit (1 Cor. 12. 7-12, Eph. 4. 7-11, Gal. 5: 22-23). The Apostle Paul asserts that these are the marks of those who carry spiritual authority in the Lord's church. (2 Cor. 12.12).

## 6) CONCLUSION

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In conclusion, through this global pandemic, the Lord has given us in the global community, an opportunity to rethink our relationships to one another. For us in the church, the Lord is asking us to revisit our commitments towards the following:

- 1) We must change our Message and emphasis first to the church and then to the world.
- 2) Our message to the Church should seek to:
  - a) Prepare God's people for the imminent coming of His Son. - when the people (true & genuine Christians) are conscious of the imminence of the coming of Jesus, it will propel them to live right, & to take evangelism & soul winning sin God's power seriously.
  - b) Church leaders need to be encouraged to move from 'Survival' to 'Revival' mode. In Survival mode, they do all in order to service their ministries, their expensive, lavish, flamboyant life-styles! They are subtly using God to achieve these (but they forget that the All-knowing, All-seeing God wants us to prioritize building His kingdom and then He would add to us all that is needed for effective and abundant ministry!
  - c) The Pandemic has also highlighted the significance of the church to know more about natural and spiritual immunity available to God's people –through nature, the blood of the Lamb and the power of God that destroys yokes. (Rev. 12.11, Lk. 1: 40-41; 16.17).
  - d) The Pandemic quarantined Church Leaders so we can hear from the Lord and change the manner in which we conduct His business –to fit the imperatives of the new 21<sup>st</sup> century world—e.g. digital communications and online delivery of sermons and ministrations.
  - e) Leaders who refuse to hear what the Spirit of the Lord is saying would be ready to be replaced by many "Joshuas-in-waiting"! (See also Heb 12:5-12); Rom 14:12; Rev 10:10-12).

The World needs to hear the voice of the church again in three important areas:

1. **Through our acts of Charity:** Christianity triumphs where it is able to provide help to suffering people everywhere irrespective of their nationality, race or creed. The success of Christian missionaries globally attests to this...their work especially in the fields of health and education gave them the necessary entrance to all parts of the world. This is one area where we should be able to partner to provide an alternative voice to the government and the secular world, with a focus on the message of redemption and condemnation of sin in all its forms.
2. **Charisma:** The Demonstrations of God's power and fruits of His Holy Spirit especially in the face of the diseases that ravage the lives of the people in every country. We have now seen that sickness is real everywhere. And science does not

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always have all the answers. In fact, it is the answers from the word of God which we have not taught that the world needs to hear.

3. ***Providing leadership in the seven mountains of culture:*** The most crucial being in governance. As events in the United States has shown this would never happen except, we are ready to put our differences behind us and work together across our denominational barriers as God's people. The seven mountains are: RELIGION, FAMILY, EDUCATION, GOVERNMENT, MEDIA, ARTS, BUSINESS.

A particular opportunity that exists for the church of Jesus is to provide the alternative positive news –on COVID-19 --who are those surviving and why? This positive news is a void that the church of God must fill to bring hope to the hopeless, devoid of the partisan intrigues.

It would be interesting to get participants address the above-mentioned issues in responding to the challenge of what the Lord is saying to His church at this point in time.

REFERENCES (To Be provided).

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