

Jorge Himitian

The Church in the post-pandemic world

It is incredible that a virus as small as COVID-19 has put every nation in the world in check. The most dramatic thing is that this pandemic in a short time has produced a very high number of infected people as well as many deaths with these numbers increasing. To date, Covid-19 has been placed among the 15 deadliest pandemics in the history of humanity *. This sub-microscopic virus has paralyzed factories, schools, commerce, tourism, cultural and sports activities, congresses, and even church gatherings. It has locked us up in our homes. It has emptied the streets, the restaurants, the shopping malls, the airports, the hotels. And it is "forcing" us to rethink many things. There is much uncertainty and few assurances. More questions than answers.

For us who have a biblical Christian faith, it is impossible to imagine that God is oblivious to this situation. We can affirm that he is not only omniscient but also LORD, and as such, He has full control of the universe and the nations of the world.

[* As of May 17, there have been 4,700,000 people infected and 320,000 deaths.

APPENDIX 4]

The world has changed, maybe definitely

Abruptly there has been a change in humanity. And this change is global. 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. Historians will speak of the year 2020 as the year that began and never ended. A new "normality" will emerge.*

He poses the following question: *...Is Covid-19 the primary cause or the accelerator of change? The changes were already taking place. 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.*

Will the post-Covid-19 world be better or worse? There are opinions on both sides of the issue. The previously cited pastor says: *Our role as Christians is not to be optimistic or pessimistic. As a church, we do not have the power to choose the enemy or the scenario. We have to understand how to better develop our mission in the new setting.*

He concludes with this statement: *This pandemic should produce a Sabbath in us. A halt for deep reflection... We had become used to the fact that the church consists of holding events. Nothing could be further from what God says about the church. 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 shepherds of the Lord’s flock. 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, as servants of the Lord, we need discernment.

We need to discern:

- 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.

[WORK FOR WORKSHOPS BY GROUPS: APPENDIX 5.

Make a list in the left column of the things that we consider absolute and indispensable in the church, and in the right column a list of the relative, variable and dispensable things. The two lists should be as complete as possible.]

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.

In China most of the churches cannot meet in "temples" or large halls. It functions in homes. They number in the millions, and they are growing, much more than in the West, where we have large "temples" with all modern equipment. In the last few years, they have only been allowed to meet in homes, in groups of no more than twenty people. They knew how to discern between the absolute and the relative.

As most know, although I have lived in Argentina since I was 7 years old, I am Armenian. I was born in Palestine, today Israel. Armenia was one of the republics of the Soviet Union until December 1991 when the USSR was dissolved. The Pentecostal church in Armenia, banned and fiercely persecuted during 25 years under the Soviet regime, had grown from 100 to about 3,000 people until 1988, until the earthquake in which about 30,000 people died. When several pastors from Argentina went to Armenia in 1993, during the five years previous to that visit, the number of believers had increased from 3,000 to 50,000. Without temples, without buildings of their own. Only clinging to that which is essential: take up the cross, bear witness to Christ, meet at home, pray intensely and teach the Bible. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and the consequent manifestation of gifts and miracles. Practicing brotherly love and fellowship with one other. And all that in the midst of extreme poverty and suffering.

What is being a church?

In most Christians today there is an underlying idea that being a church is basically about having meetings. We consider that being a church we need to have a "temple" (whether ancient or modern), a pulpit, a cross, benches, an organ. Today, modern musical instruments, a platform, sound equipment, lights, a musical group, a good preacher, and a ceremony, whether traditional or renewed. Both Catholics and Evangelicals make the blunder of calling the halls in which we meet "a church".

To answer our question in a practical way, and not get lost in theoretical statements, let's ask ourselves: 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.

A few weeks ago, Pr. Hugo Márquez, president of the Convention of the Baptist Churches of Argentina, wrote a letter to all the pastors of the country, saying: *"The pandemic does not nullify nor stop our mission. The church is not here to worship, but to announce the gospel."*

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).

This time of contraction has been very useful, locked in our homes, to dedicate ourselves more intensely to personal prayer and the study of the Word. This time of quiet, without traveling and without frenetic activism, is helping us to rethink many things in order to improve our mission.

The limitations that the church suffers today with this pandemic, compared to what the church has had to go through in other times, is but an inkling. We regret the thousands of deaths in each country. The saddest thing is that many have died without having heard the gospel.

But, as the saying goes: "it's no use crying over spilled milk". Let us do our best for the world's inhabitants who are alive.

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. In the area of health, economy, work, and others. And this awareness of fragility 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. How long will all this last? How many will die? When will we return to normal? 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, spiritual need, thirst to hear a message of hope and salvation.

There is a new awareness of the value of the spiritual, the value of faith, of friendship, of friends, of work, of the work routine of which we complained so much.

Frank Snowden, perhaps the greatest expert on the history of the epidemics that have devastated humanity, in an interview recently conducted by a journalist from Argentina, said: "Epidemics allow us to understand humanity and history. They pose questions about life or death and our attitude towards both. They question us about our ethics. Imminent death asks us the following question: what is the most valuable thing in our lives?"

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.

“These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.”

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 end with a phrase that some years ago our dear brother Pierre Truschel from France—pastor and apostle, and co-founder of AFI—shared with us in the Lord. He told us: "For 30 years, as a Pentecostal pastor, I worked like a dog for God, until in a hospital bed I understood that the issue was not working for God, but working with God."

If we humble ourselves before the Lord and seek his face, he will speak to us. And we will come out of all this better. We will focus on what is important, on what is transcendent: on the Word and prayer. 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**. The rest, as we say in Argentina, is "empty chatter", i.e. vain wordiness.

May God help us. Amen.

Jorge Himittian

APPENDIX 1

What do we need to function as a church today?

Pastor Ricardo Agreste, whom I quoted at the beginning, says some interesting things:

- *Today we must build for the future taking into account the new reality.*
- *Online and face-to-face meetings will coexist simultaneously. Not all face-to-face meetings are necessary. We must discern limits, benefits and harms of digital implementation.*
- *We Christians were not made to conform to the world but to be transformed by the renewal of our understanding.*

What do we need to be a church today?

- *We must plant new churches with fewer financial resources. The model of buying land, building a temple, and setting up a “church” is a slow and excessively expensive process.*
- *We have to think about opening house churches. We must be much more creative.*
- *We must encourage bi-vocational ministries.*
- *Everything involved in this pandemic is showing us that much of what we believed essential to be a church was not such. It is forcing us to find easier ways to be the church today.*

We need to rethink the church and its function. Obviously, this will depend on each country. And even within the same country, it will depend on each city and each neighborhood. We need to be open-minded. The Holy Spirit is very free and creative. We tend to be very tied to schemes that we are used to. We need freedom regarding forms and strategies, always under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Firm in the absolute and open-minded in the relative.

APPENDIX 2

Our priorities

The most important is, when all this has passed and we return to the "new normal", that we have learned the lessons that God wanted to teach us through it all. I will point out some simple but basic aspects:

1. Let us prioritize our daily prayer time in secret. Our personal fellowship with God must be the foundation of our life and ministry, just as Jesus taught us.
2. Let's prioritize the family. We cannot build the church upon the ruins of our family. Let's dedicate time to our marriage, to talk, to improve our mutual treatment. Let's take time to pray together and read the Word. As parents let us assume our responsibility in the spiritual and biblical formation of our children. Let's have time to be with them, to become friends, to know them deeply. Our first disciples must be our children. We cannot "outsource" their formation to Sunday School teachers.
3. Let us never again call our meeting places "church". We are the church. We do not go to church, we are the church, 24 hours a day and seven days a week. We long for the day when we can meet again with all the brothers in the congregation. But let us be clear that although the church congregates, the church is not a congregation. The church is a family, it is the family of God.
4. Let's prioritize personal relationships above group meetings. Jesus said: The good shepherd knows his sheep, and he calls each one by name. We need to build a firm and permanent relationship with some, as Jesus did. Those who will constitute our first circle of disciples. We must focus on them, know them, disciple them, train them, so that each one, in turn, has his own circle of disciples. And so on, until all the members are connected by the supporting ligaments. The church is a body, and in a body there are no disconnected members.
5. Let us prioritize the teaching and preaching of the word of God. In the Greek this is expressed in the following words: *didaké* and *kerygma*. The word *didaké* is translated *doctrine* or *teaching*, and *kerygma* is *preaching*. The *didaké* is the sum of the commandments of Jesus and the apostles, like those we have in the Sermon on the Mount. The *kerygma* is the totality of the truths that reveal the person and work of Christ. His work for us, in us, among us and through us. This is summed up in four words: Redemption, Holy Spirit, Church and Mission. Let's stop entertaining people with human speeches. What builds and forms lives is the word of God.

6. Let's prioritize evangelization. This is a kairos of God. Spiritual thirst has increased in people. It is a new day. This is our time. The fields are white for harvest. There is a new openness to spiritual things. It is time to go out to sea and throw the nets.

7. Each of us must make a list, not a very long list, of some things that God has shown us during this time. We must write them down so as not to forget them, to put them into practice and persist in them. And when all this has passed, with God's help, we will be better for it.

APPENDIX 3

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

Pandemic means an epidemic on a global level. This forces nations, mainly their rulers and leaders, 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 frailty 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 technological revolution of the XX and XXI centuries, instead of producing the well-being of all, has increased social injustice.

The current economic system is based on individualism and personal ambition. The Bible says that love of money is the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6.10). 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.

The external and internal debt that almost all the nations of the world have is unpayable. Especially for the so-called "emerging countries". Some world leaders are already talking about a world jubilee in which unpayable debts must be forgiven. This current system can't go on.

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.

Frank Snowden, quoted above, said: *"The health system that was built in Western Europe after World War II was built largely on the basis of its known history of tuberculosis, and laid the foundation for social medicine by stating that, to adequately treat a patient, the society in which they move must also be addressed: their home, their salary, their neighborhood, their medical coverage."*

It is evident that these issues that I am pointing out are all interrelated. Medicine, economics, care of the environment, and others.

MANKIND (The human being)

Postmodernism has discovered that man is not just a rational animal as modernity maintained. The human being is much more than that. He is a social, affective, emotional, relational, spiritual, rational being and much more. 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.

An integral part of man's well-being is that he be healthy in his spirit, in his inner being. And to achieve this, it is essential that he be instructed to do good, to love his neighbor as well as respect him. It is important that he know how to respect his neighbor's life, his neighbor's property and his neighbor's wife. It is essential that he learn to be fair, honest, kind, humble, upright, generous, supportive, hardworking. That he learn to fulfill his responsibilities from childhood to be responsible in adult life. Man needs to know that he is a transcendent being, that he has a purpose and a mission in life. Character building should be a mandatory subject in all schools and colleges in every nation.

If all this is true for all the men and women of the world, how much more for the rulers and leaders of the nations.

THE FAMILY

The attack on marriage and family has been fierce in the past 50 years in many western nations. 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. All this is causing a greater number of lonely and isolated people, with the consequent psychological and emotional damages. The family constitutes the primal cell of the social fabric. 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

“¹See, the Lord is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it; he will ruin its face and scatter its inhabitants! ... ⁴The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the heavens languish with the earth. ⁵The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant... ¹⁰The ruined city lies desolate; the entrance to every house is barred. ¹¹In the streets they cry out for wine; all joy turns to gloom, all joyful sounds are banished from the earth.”

Isaiah 45.21-24

“Declare what is to be, present it— let them take counsel together. Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the Lord? And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me. “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.’” All who have raged against him will come to him and be put to shame.”

Philippians 2.10-11

“...at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

APPENDIX 4

THE MOST LETHAL PANDEMIES OF MANKIND

		PERIOD	DEATHS	ZONE	
1.	The Black Death	1347-1351	200 million	Europe	from 30 to 50% of the population
2.	Smallpox	1520	56 million	America by the Spanish	90% of the American Indians
3.	Spanish Flu	1918-1919	40-50 million	Worldwide	500 million infected cases
4.	Justinian Plague	541-542	30-50 million	Eastern Roman Empire	
5.	HIV AIDS	1981-Today	25-35 million	Worldwide	
6.	The Third Plague	1855	12 million	China, India, Worldwide	Bubonic plague
7.	Antonine Plague	165-180	5 million	Roman Empire	
8.	The Great Plague	1665-1666	3 million	England, Worldwide	Bubonic plague
9.	Asian Flu	1957-1958	1.1 million	China, Singapore, Hong Kong, USA	
10.	Russian Flu	1889-1890	1 million	Russia	
11.	Hong Kong Flu	1968-1970	1 million	Hong Kong -> Vietnam, Singapore	
12.	Cholera	1817-1923	1 million	Asia	
13.	Japanese Smallpox	735-737	1 million	Japan	1/3 of the population died
14.	Great Plague	18 th Century	600,000	Russia and various other places	various plagues together
15.	COVID-19	2020	320.000*	China -> World	4,700,000* infected cases
16.	Swine Flu	2009-2010	200,000	Mexico -> World	
17.	Yellow Fever	End of 1800s	100,000 – 150,000	Africa, Europa, America	
18.	Ebola	2014-2016	11,300	Guinea -> Libia, Sierra Leon	
19.	MERS	2012-Today	850	Saudi Arabia -> Middle East	
20.	SARS	2002-2003	770	China -> Hong Kong -> Others	

* As of May 17, 2020

APPENDIX 5

Workshop Task

That which is absolute, immutable, indispensable, essential, permanent	That which is relative, variable, expendable, secondary, circumstantial

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