

2024

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### Recommended Citation

Althouse, P., & McCormick, A. (2024). Pentecostal hope in the age of COVID-19. *Salubritas*, 3, 79-94.  
<https://doi.org/10.31380/2771-1242.1039>

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# PENTECOSTAL HOPE IN THE AGE OF COVID-19<sup>1</sup>

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*Salubritas* 3 (2024) 79–94  
<https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/salubritas/>  
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**Keywords** *pandemic, COVID-19, coronavirus, eschatology, hope, grief, trauma, healing*

## Abstract

This research sought to identify how Pentecostals and charismatics responded to the Coronavirus pandemic. Specifically, what role did eschatology play in provoking hope, and how did theologies on healing influence responses? Data revealed that Pentecostals were generally not casting their responses to the pandemic as a millennial expectation of a better future but were grieving their losses and seeking to provoke hope amidst suffering. While minimal miraculous healings were reported, healing was cast primarily as the ongoing presence of defiant hope amidst trauma, grief and suffering. We propose that grief and grieving is an eschatological response to loss and death.

## Introduction

On the eve of 2020, the world was about to change. An unknown, virulent coronavirus was in the air and would quickly spread throughout the world. COVID-19 was a harbinger of the death of countless lives, would overrun hospitals, disrupt economic livelihood, educational settings, and social structures such as families and churches. What was expected to be a short-term situation that would end as quickly as it started is still ravaging

the world. As of this writing, more than 5 million deaths have been reported worldwide (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021), with over 807,000 deaths in the United States (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). Despite the fact that we now have vaccines, the first half of 2021 reported more deaths from COVID-19 than all of 2020 (Kamp et al., 2021). The untold costs to the survivors of COVID-19 have yet to be reported. Many survivors have experienced long-term health effects, families have buried their loved ones, and people have lost their livelihood, not to mention the mental and physical deterioration of those who remain behind.

Churches in the United States and abroad have been hit hard by COVID-19. Stay-at-home orders and quarantines have forced churches to close their sanctuaries or to significantly curtail the number of people allowed to congregate. Congregants have become sick, and some have died. In some instances, ministers have contracted the disease and passed away. Many churches have struggled with a loss of revenue. Churches have experimented with digital technology to offer media-based services and liturgies with varying degrees of success. What is lost, however, is the relational interaction that is so important for what it means to gather as a body of believers. This is true of Pentecostal-charismatic churches as well. But what theological resources and practices have Pentecostal-charismatic churches drawn on, or developed, to help them navigate through the pandemic?

This research is guided by the following questions: What theological resources, if any, do Pentecostals and charismatics employ to support their responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic? Does eschatological hope play any part in the Pentecostal and charismatic responses to the pandemic? If so, what mode of discourse is used? How is the Pentecostal-charismatic theology of healing related to its response(s) to the pandemic? Rather than presupposing a speculative Pentecostal response that is then applied to how the Pentecostal church should respond, we conducted a document analysis of selected Pentecostal denominational websites and official publications to determine how Pentecostal churches responded to the pandemic. We examined websites and online content dealing with the pandemic as well

as official statements, documents, and publications either in digital or print form. The period of examination ran from January 2020 to August 2021. The organizations sampled included historic Pentecostal denominations such as The Church of God in Christ (COGIC), The Assemblies of God (AG), Church of God, Cleveland (CG), and The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC). We also sampled network churches such as Bethel Church, Redding, CA (Bethel), The International House of Prayer (IHOP), and Hillsong Church. Although many of these organizations were located in the United States, we included Pentecostal-charismatic churches from English-speaking countries such as Canada and Australia. What we found was unexpected. As will become evident, both eschatological and healing theologies were either muted or absent, and the focus was on the personal and social grief Pentecostals and charismatics were experiencing as they dealt with the effects of COVID-19. It should be noted that our findings are illustrative in nature rather than representative.

### **Hope in the Face of Despair**

Fundamental to eschatology is Christian hope. While the details of eschatology can differ substantially, Christian hope is at the root of faith in the ultimate coming of Christ. With the exception of IHOP, which cast its discussion in dispensational millenarian terms, the discussion of eschatology in relation to the pandemic was rather muted, except for references to hope in the face of despair, fear, and anxiety. PAOC writer George Werner (2020) stated, “People’s hearts are more open than ever before as they are searching for hope in the face of disaster” (p. 29). The editor of *Testimony* referred to the situation as “deferred hopes” in the face of COVID-19, politics, national disaster, and gross injustice (in reference to the George Floyd murder). She says, “what we are experiencing during COVID-19 resembles the discomfort—even despair—that people in the margins have been enduring. . . loss of freedom. The lack of structure. The heightened sense of despair. The hovering threat of illness. Insecurity about what will happen tomorrow” (McKenzie, 2020, p. 3). As one writer for the *Testimony* claimed, “We have all experienced the overwhelming feelings of chaos in life through illness, loss, pain, and our own choices”

(Quigley, 2021, p. 6). “Unpredictable friendships. Loneliness. Strife. The pure loss of opportunity” (McKenzie, 2020, p. 3). Bethel Church (2020) advocated for faith for healing but also encouraged wisdom by following the health protocols implemented by city officials. Bethel Church (2020) also advocated for hope, “. . . [w]e do not partner with fear, but choose to lean into faith and hope, as well as practice wisdom and safety” (para. 1). For Hillsong (2020), holding onto hope was a way to cope with the pandemic as the church encouraged people to live in gratitude and rely on Jesus to gain strength in times of pain. The most overtly eschatological millenarian position was offered by IHOP (2020), which saw the pandemic as a “sign of the times” of the Lord’s return, provoking eschatological hope and an urgency to prepare for greater tribulations to come.

While an overt eschatology is mostly muted, an implicit eschatology threads the discussion of the pandemic through a discussion of hope and despair. At this point, it is germane to state that eschatology is a term first coined in seventeenth-century Protestantism. However, its meaning has never been clear. On the one hand, eschatology points to the belief in the future and afterlife. On the other, it refers more specifically to an older theology of the *eschatia* (Greek) or *de novissimus* (Latin) of the last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. The nineteenth century witnessed a new and controversial development by adding an historical millennium or chiliastic component that was more in tune with popular Protestant piety than theology proper (Mühling, 2015). And yet, eschatology is not just about the future, but it is about present hope as well. The whole of theology is perceived from the perspective of hope, a hope that has transformative implications for the present (Moltmann, 1967). In the midst of despair, suffering, and grief, the hope is for a new beginning and new life (Moltmann, 2004). That being said, the last things remain still a constituent part of eschatology. “What happens when I die?” is an existential question that probes one’s personal eschatology, but one can also talk about the consolation of grief that lingers in the orb of death as the penultimate to death. Moreover, death is not, strictly speaking, solely an individual matter, but takes on social, historical, and cultural forms in the context of the pandemic so that one can speak about the death of the way things used to be, and the new reality in the middle of a pandemic (and hopefully post-pandemic) world.

Scholars of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity have highlighted the importance of eschatology in the ethos of the movement. Cox (1995) argues that the genius of Pentecostalism is its recovery of primal spirituality, in which primal hope is a constituent aspect. For Cox, Pentecostal hope is rooted in Pentecostalism's millennial expectation for a better future. Land (2010) locates Pentecostal eschatology in its spirituality and eschews a dispensational fundamentalism for an anticipatory millennial hope of the not yet. However, in the context of the pandemic, Pentecostals appeared to hope for a better future, but this hope was not placed in a dispensational millenarian framework. What does it mean, though, to expect a better future in the throes of a global pandemic when millions have died and those who remain are left to pick up the pieces? Thompson (2005) convincingly argues that Pentecostal eschatology is not about predicting the future, but about explaining the present using eschatological and apocalyptic symbolism. Eschatological imagery were ways in which people were able to make sense of the world in which they lived. Bialecki (2017) makes a cogent point in his analysis of the Vineyard, but applicable in this context:

On the one hand both past and future are only available in the present, but likewise the present encompasses both a “becoming future” and a “becoming past.” This is because the past is never past, and the future does not [yet] exist. For either the past or the future to have effects, they must be active in the present despite the fact that the present is always splitting into past and future. (p. 75)

In other words, anticipatory hope is focused on present realities. Our data revealed that Pentecostals were generally not casting their responses to the pandemic as a millennial expectation of a better future. The data revealed that Pentecostals were grieving their losses to the pandemic. Death was at the forefront, and those who remained were trying to cope with the trauma—loss of loved ones, loss of safety and security, loss of job and economic well-being, loss of familial and religious networks that sustain and comfort in times of grief. Yet, hope remained despite trauma and grief.

## Grieving Losses

Throughout our analysis of official documents, the expression of grief and the desire for relief from despair was constantly in the background. Jones (2021), for instance, wrote on the place of lament in the pandemic. He asked, “Is it OK not to be OK at your church?” (p. 30). Jones cautioned about using church worship, or shallow forms of compassion and empathy, to make people feel better. Citing Ed Stetzer positively, Jones encouraged the church to “. . . allow space for people to lament—to wonder why, to ask questions, and to work through grief” (p. 31). He proposed that lament leads to “deep transformation in our perceptions of suffering,” and “engenders healing and intimacy,” because “community is built on real-life joy and pain” (p. 31). Lament, argued Jones, was critical support to raising awareness of mental health.

Church of God in Christ (COGIC) Bishop Anthony Gilyard joined other COGIC leaders to discuss how church life has shifted during the pandemic. Gilyard (2021) stated that he lost four members of his church to COVID-19 and twenty-six individuals in his jurisdiction. He said, “There was so much death, disease, and hospitalizations that people of faith became weary and tired. They didn’t want church or even worship music because they were too depressed from the season” (50:32). The bishop talked about how he found it necessary to rebuild the people by simply reading scripture over them for up to thirty minutes at a time in an effort to bolster them without any programs or expectations. After doing this for some time, some of the worship leaders felt encouraged enough to ask to start leading musically again, but he explained how this was a slow process of grieving that needed to occur before rushing onward in the work of ministry.

Similarly, Allen Hood (2020) of the International House of Prayer admonished the leaders and members to take time to grieve, saying that any other response could reveal a disconnected, untouched heart. He said, “God’s desire in times like these is that the eyes would cry before the mouth would speak. Hollow words from faces that shed no tears bring no true change” (para. 18). He encouraged people to embrace the pain, let it touch the heart, and avoid “false comfort and false bravado.”

The acceptance of pain was quickly partnered with hope and purpose. He wrote:

We must use this crisis to prepare the way of the Lord. We have a mighty calling to be in this world yet not of it. We must do more than alleviate the shock of the moment with quick public statements, sermons, and prophecies. We must let this crisis touch us to the core, embrace the fear of the Lord, repent, and bear fruit!” (para. 21)

Grief is a human response to irretrievable loss that consists of various feelings, both transitory and enduring. Grief is complex in that it is constructed from a multiplicity of other emotions such as sorrow, disbelief, numbness, fear, shame, and relief, to name a few. Grief can range between weak and strong intensity, the former including unsettled feelings, sadness, regret, and anxiety, and the latter provoking mental and physical distress that disrupts and destabilizes (Garmaz & Milligan, 2006, pp. 517-519). Grief is known to pass through different stages, including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969; Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). However, these stages are seldom linear but ebb and flow, weaving forward and backward and turning in on themselves. Although grief is most often associated with death and dying, grief can also be a response to other losses such as the loss of employment, security, living quarters, childlessness, or friendships. What appears to be the case with Pentecostal and charismatic responses to the pandemic is that people are grieving real physical, social, cultural, and symbolic death and loss. The Assemblies of God produced an article that focuses on the multi-faceted layers of grief within churches during the pandemic (Castleberry, 2020). In analyzing the choice of some leaders to meet in large gatherings during the pandemic despite public health orders to refrain from doing so, the author speculates this could be a form of denial. He says, “What seemed like bold faith turned out to be denial and presumption. Even the most cursory reading of the Bible makes it clear that our faith doesn’t make us immune to suffering. Yet denial in grief can cloud our thinking and trump rationality” (Castleberry, 2020, para. 2). The article gives tips for how to deal with each stage of grief at both the personal and corporate levels. The author



emphasizes the importance of leaders and churches in processing grief because it is when one successfully maneuvers through these dark waters of grief that a sort of rebirth of hope can occur.

Grief and despair are intricately related to eschatological hope; however, Moltmann (2004) argues that hope is rooted in love, but love is only possible at the risk of vulnerability. People experience loss and grief because they have loved and because they have hope. Even the spiritually strong can be overwhelmed by the pain of death and the grief and despair this event produces. “Often, the pain comes over grieving in waves. If this is so, the ability to weep is better than dumb frozen calm. Even to lose consciousness can be a blessing in the pain of mourning” (p. 124; see also Althouse, 2006). To downplay or reject the reality and effects of the pandemic, or to eschew the use of medical intervention and technologies to treat the virus, points to a deep denial in people who are experiencing overwhelming grief. To turn back to the question of eschatology, we propose that grief and grieving is an eschatological response to loss and death, whether personal, familial, physical, or symbolic in nature.

### **Trauma and Hope**

According to Jones (2019), an event is considered traumatic when persons perceive that they or others are threatened by annihilation from an external force that they cannot resist and are overwhelmed to the point of being unable to cope. Trauma must also be differentiated from stressful or disturbing events (p. 13). An event is considered traumatic when a person perceives it as such. Trauma is an injury to the body, mind, and/or emotions. However, while a bodily injury is evident, psychological and emotional injuries, which may include a range of psychological ailments, are more difficult to ascertain). The experience of the pandemic is not only death but can at times be experienced as traumatic death. This death is not just personal death, or death in the context of families, but a death that is social and global in scope. Trauma, and the grief it elicits, presents a challenge to those who are left to make sense of the senselessness of death. We cannot simply return to a normal course of life, but we must persist in life as we now know it.

The Assemblies of God was more explicit in identifying the link between grief and trauma. *Influence*, one of the denomination's official publications, published several articles that connected the pandemic to trauma. Grant (2021), for instance, bluntly stated, "Like everyone else, Christians are facing the raw uncertainties of life, the loss of loved ones, family tensions, and unemployment. People everywhere are dealing with overwhelming challenges, fear, and trauma" (p. 40). This statement was framed in the context of the pandemic, racial tension, political chaos, and natural disasters. Similarly, Kim (2021) discussed the role of lament during the pandemic, and writes, "Within every congregation, there is grief, physical pain, emotional trauma, stress, depression, anxiety, and even suicidal thinking" (p. 49). Later, he concluded, "Pain comes in waves. Chances are many if your people are experiencing a tsunami of trauma" (p. 54). In response to this tsunami of trauma, the AG placed a special emphasis on bolstering counseling services for ministry leaders. In one article, Robert C. Crosby, the president of Emerge Counseling Ministries, was quoted saying, "The fallout from the pandemic is emotional trauma. The intensity of this season is more multi-faceted and challenging than the Great Recession of a decade ago" (as cited in Kennedy, 2020, line 7). He also speculates that COVID-19 will result in a myriad of post-traumatic stress disorder diagnoses. The grief is overwhelming, ". . . [families] have lost loved ones during the coronavirus and couldn't say goodbye face to face" (as cited in Kennedy, 2020, line 23). According to Crosby, the COVID-19 therapeutic fallout is yet to come.

The theological relationship between death and trauma is addressed by Rambo (2010) in *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*. According to Rambo, "Trauma is described as an encounter with death. This encounter is not, however, a literal death but a way of describing a radical event or events that shatter all that one knows about the world and all the familiar ways of operating within it" (p. 4). Trauma is not just personal but includes multiple levels of historical trauma, institutional trauma, and global trauma. Rambo focuses on the middle ground between death and life. In this middle ground, trauma is that which exceeds categories of

comprehension in the human capacity in taking in and processing the external world. Trauma grapples with the relationship between death and life. Life and death are not opposites, and therefore theology must account for what remains of death in life. To cast this insight into theological terms, there is no linear path between death and resurrection, but one must remain in the in-between of Holy Saturday. Triumphant predictions of life's victory over death fails to account for the traumatic suffering of those who remain. This remainder or middle ground is the locale of trauma. There is a difference, however, between suffering and trauma. Suffering is eventually integrated into one's understanding of the world, while trauma remains as a disintegrated and open wound.

Note that the trauma of death is not focused on those who have died. Trauma is experienced by those who perceive an event, or series of events, as traumatic. But trauma is experienced by those who witness the event as well (Jones, 2019). The trauma of death is focused on those who remain in their grief and grieving. "The dynamics of traumatic experience press Christian discourse beyond the site of the cross to think about what it means to live in the aftermath of death" (Rambo, 2010, p. 7). Rambo's (2010) theological focus is on the followers and disciples of Jesus who remained after his crucifixion, the time in between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Those who remain alive yet in a stupor regarding death—neither alive nor death but death in life—experience the trauma: a mother's loss, a disciple's despondency, a follower's confusion. ". . . [D]eath pervades life: it entails attesting to the temporal distortions, and epistemological ruptures of an experience that exceeds a radical ending yet has no pure beginning" (p. 15). In this way, trauma has a double structure in both the occurrence of the violent event(s) and the later awakening to the event. "Trauma is not solely located in the actual event but, instead, encompasses the return of the event, the way in which the event has not been concluded" (p. 7).

Returning to Robert Crosby, "Even when we are able to breathe a sigh of relief as the pandemic abates, we still need to be vigilant regarding emotional, spiritual, and mental health needs" (as cited in Kennedy, 2020, line 26). He recalls spending several days counseling pastors

who had lived through the decimation of West Florida with Hurricane Michael in 2018, and many of them were not ready to discuss the matter until sixteen months afterward. This comment gives perspective to the way trauma traps us between the loss of the way it was and an inability to imagine the future.

Jones (2019) suggests but does not propose a potential eschatological response to the crisis of trauma. The vision of the world to come told through stories and images insists that the Christian lives in the tension between this world of pain and the utopian expectation of a world without tears. However, she proposes a different theological path aimed at reconstructing the collective imagination through creative storytelling in order to reconstruct the world that we inhabit. The problem is that those who suffer trauma are no longer able to tell their stories. However, scripture is a critical resource for imaginative storytelling that can speak to trauma as we find our life stories reconstrued within the grand story of the Christian faith. Through story, the imaginative crafting and recrafting of the world has the potential to heal the rupture and disorder of trauma. This is what Jones calls the “healing imagination” (pp. 19-20). Rambo (2010) concurs. Christian hope that is founded in the Spirit of resurrection is the promise of new beginnings that has a forward pull. However, when hope is filtered through the perspective of trauma, it requires an emphasis on the imagination.

The Assemblies of God looks to have been deliberate in emphasizing hope in stories of healing and community outreach. The COVID-19 website for AG (2020) includes 257 short stories telling of healings from COVID-19, provision, outreach, acts of kindness, and highlighting good deeds. This effort to help people to process their trauma was a way of moving people toward a path of healing while admitting it would be a long process. Many of the stories emphasized the importance of prayer and holding onto hope for healing despite bad reports and dismal circumstances. One story in particular tells of a woman, Sharon McClennan, who was rushed to the hospital by ambulance after collapsing in the middle of the night. Upon arrival at the hospital, X-rays revealed she had “COVID-19 pneumonia” in both lungs. She was transferred to the ICU with the expectation of a long,

critical road to recovery. The McClennan family began to pray and declare scripture over the hopeless situation. To the surprise of medical staff, a new set of x-rays revealed no trace of COVID-19 or pneumonia (Van Veen, 2020). The story encouraged prayer despite bad reports. However, this report was the exception. Other stories described longer paths of healing but emphasized the importance of faith, prayer, and worship through a severe illness. One missionary described how the Holy Spirit urged her to praise God through the night while she sensed a spirit of death lingering in her room during the peak of her illness. While praising God, she sensed strength enter her body, and she described the victory over COVID-19 that was gained through spiritual warfare and praise (Ennis, 2020). Each story of healing is unique, but each carries the common thread of defiant hope in the face of bad reports and a looming sense of death. Also, it must be noted that only three of the 257 stories included descriptions of “supernatural healing.” Most reports emphasized hope, care, outreach, and acts of kindness amidst grief and suffering. Similarly, Bethel Church (2020) focused on provoking hope in the midst of suffering by encouraging people to “partner with heaven’s perspective” and to “stand on the promises of God” amidst suffering.

To be clear, healing in the context of traumatic grief is not a shallow homage to the supernatural and unexplained. Nor is healing, strictly speaking, a therapeutic response though the therapeutic is a part of the response. Healing is hope in the face of loss and despair. The documents only peripherally mentioned healing, and when it was mentioned, healing was not linked to the instantaneous, physical cessation of the disease (known as the divine cure) but to the slow process of recovery as the body through the aid of medical science regained health. Healing was also associated with recovery through the process of grieving. The healing hinted at in the documents is more akin to what MacNutt (1988) defines as inner or emotional healing. Space is afforded to allow people to “be okay that they are not okay.” The pandemic and its effects have traumatized the world. The question that remains is how a healing imagination might allow people to tell their stories of grief and hope to recraft the world as part of the story of the faith.

## Conclusion

COVID-19 is a global virus that will likely be with us for many years to come. At this point, people are navigating mitigation measures that lessen mortality rates and long-term health effects. The crisis presents a theological challenge to Pentecostal and charismatic Christians in that triumphalist tendencies will not soothe the world's pain. More to the point, expectations of triumph over the coronavirus may be a form of denial in the face of grief. Yet, despite the grief and trauma triggered by the pandemic, hope remains. This hope is borne of the ashes of grief, when we can finally look up to the sky and smile at the radiant sun/Son, while carrying the burden of the departed and the loss of the way things used to be in our hearts.

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## Notes

- 1 This article has been reprinted with permission, with changes only to form and style. The citation for the original work is as follows: Althouse, P., & McCormick, A. (2024). Pentecostal hope in the age of COVID-19. In W. Ma, O. Opoku, & R. Bled (Eds.), *The pandemic & the Holy Spirit: From lament to hope and healing* (pp. 265-279). ORU Press.
- 2 Special thanks to Betty Gilliam, who conducted some initial research into the responses of the historic Pentecostal denominations.

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A tall, slender, metallic tower with a pointed top, surrounded by a large, multi-tiered, golden structure with red and white accents. The scene is set against a blue sky with white clouds and green trees in the foreground.

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