

PENTECOSTALISM AND CORONAVIRUS

REFRAMING THE MESSAGE OF HEALTH-AND-WEALTH IN A PANDEMIC ERA

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Abstract

One of the global effects of the COVID-19 pandemic is the religious responses that it has generated. For contemporary Pentecostalism in particular, which is a religion that preaches and teaches a theology of human flourishing through the principles of prosperity, the negative effects of the coronavirus on people proved a theologically challenging endeavor. Pronouncing curses on evil or blaming Satan for it in human life has always been part of the means to achieve health and wealth for contemporary Pentecostals. This is very much the case in Africa where the instrumentalist use of religion as a means of personal and communal survival and wellbeing already exists. Thus, the contemporary Pentecostal health-and-wealth gospel, although appeals to the Bible for theological legitimacy, also resonates very much with the African worldview. In the midst of the pandemic, however, the monolithic understanding of flourishing preached by some Pentecostals came unstuck. In this article, we discuss African contemporary Pentecostal responses to the pandemic in order to show how the reality of evil can challenge existing understanding of life's challenges and the need to be holistic in our responses to them.

Introduction

This article reflects on Pentecostal/Charismatic responses to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussions are situated within the African context where contemporary Pentecostalism is flourishing both in numerical strength and in public presence because of the extensive use of modern media technology. There is a strong affinity between Charismatic Christianity and media and in the last year in which in-person meetings have had to be restricted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of media technology by religious organizations has been moved several notches up from where things were just about a year ago. The outbreak of the pandemic, I point out elsewhere, coincided with the celebrations of major Christian events.¹ In the year 2020, the Christian seasons of the Passion, Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost, and Christmas were all celebrated either in lockdown mode or under restrictions. The celebrations in the year 2021 are likely to be the same, at least in most non-Western contexts, where vaccination against the virus is unlikely to take place until past the midpoint of the year.

The coronavirus pandemic triggered a world crisis of monumental proportions and as Klaus Schwab and Thierry Malleret point out, “deep existential crisis also favors introspection and can harbor the potential for transformation.”² The pandemic has created “a dangerous and volatile period on multiple fronts—politically, socially, geopolitically—raising deep concerns about the environment and also extending the reach of technology into our lives,” Schwab and Malleret note.³ When the two authors add that no industry or business will be spared these changes brought upon the world order by the pandemic, it definitely includes the business of the church. In this article, we first learn about the nature of contemporary Pentecostalism before pointing out how its theology of prosperity and interpretations of reality are brought to bear on a public health issue—the COVID-19 pandemic—helping us to appreciate the importance of religion, and in this case, the religious and theological responses of Pentecostal Christianity to existential evil.

Contemporary Pentecostalism

The designation contemporary Pentecostal or Charismatic church/ministry is usually deployed in the African context to refer to those urban-centered prosperity-preaching churches and ministries that emerged across Christian Africa from the middle of the 1970s. The well-known characteristic features of contemporary

Pentecostal churches/ministries include an emphasis on the critical place of charismatic manifestations in the lives of believers and the worship of the church; urban-centered mega-size congregations; hermeneutics of success and prosperity; prayer and proactive attacks on the sources of evil; ministries of healing, exorcism, and deliverance; belief in the powers of positive declarations and the cursing of evil; and a focus on spiritual warfare as a means of human flourishing. Contemporary Charismatic churches have built or aim to build modern and imposing worship auditoriums that are fitted to accommodate a strong and innovative media culture and a taste for religious internationalism and globalization of faith. Their modern outlook, media technology driven religious services, and messages of motivation appeal strongly to Africa's upwardly mobile youth.

Contemporary Pentecostal churches and ministries are led by highly influential and charismatically gifted leaders. Many of them have a public ministry because of their strong and powerful media activities that reach millions of followers around the world. The adoption of a motivational approach to preaching, their knack for breaking down biblical narratives and applying them within a context of personal development and economic empowerment, and their existential and pragmatic approaches to faith that use the Bible to speak to real-life situations in times of peril has endeared the average contemporary Charismatic pastor to a wider public in a way that the historic mission churches have not been able to do. The responses to the outbreak of the pandemic that we discuss in this article are based on data obtained from the media sources of contemporary Pentecostal/Charismatic pastors such as their live televised worship services, and especially YouTube videos circulating on various social media platforms. At the height of the pandemic these are the locations from where religious resources of supernatural succor were obtained by many people. The contemporary Pentecostal/Charismatic culture of mobilization of prayer for the public good—whether it means positive declarations of prosperity or the cursing of evil—is something that proved very relevant in how this wave of Christianity has dealt with the pandemic.

Preaching Prosperity During the Spread of an Evil Virus

The discussion of the negative effects of COVID-19 in the light of contemporary Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity is important for theological reasons too. These are churches that emphasize a theology of health-and-wealth. The general thrust of the message is that Christians must believe God for success, wellbeing, prosperity,

emancipation, positives, elevation, and empowerment for various endeavors in this life. The preaching of prosperity is not necessarily inconsistent with the promises of God in Scripture. One of the many biblical passages one heard over and over again at the height of the pandemic was Jeremiah 29:11, “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” The problem is therefore not with the message of wellbeing and prosperity, but rather, it is with the simplistic emphasis on a formulaic theology of success that does not leave room for self-denial, pain, and suffering as outlined in a proper theology of the cross.

This gospel of prosperity, in several of its aspects, came unstuck in the face of what sermons and prophetic declarations describe as an “evil virus.” This has been very much the case, at least in African Pentecostal/Charismatic homiletics and rhetoric. In the theology of many of the charismatic figures who lead these churches and movements, the presence and persistence of evil would normally be explained in terms of the work of the devil and other principalities and powers. What creates the spiritual spaces for evil to thrive, in the Charismatic prosperity discourses under scrutiny here, range from living in sin to the non-fulfillment of tithing obligations to the church. In Africa, the general belief among Christians, but in particular Pentecostals, is that traditional religious practices of libation-pouring to deities and ancestral sacrifices and celebrations of festivals have become sources of spiritual contamination and setbacks to the fortunes of a continent that is otherwise very materially blessed by God.

On the world stage supernatural evil, it is believed, comes upon humanity as a result of social deviations like the endorsement and toleration of alternative sexual lifestyles—the LGBTQI agenda—and these are considered to be a source of affliction as it goes against the teachings of the Bible on proper human sexuality and marriage. Contemporary Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity propounds a reciprocal theology, in which Christian giving in particular is transactional in nature because not only does God bless those who give to their pastors and prophets, but he also withdraws his cover and protection from those who do not give. This is a Christianity that also believes very much in the authority possessed by Spirit-filled believers to curse evil, cancel curses, and to principalities and powers generally to neutralize their powers and effects on people’s lives and situations. In contemporary Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity, spiritual and material prosperity follows the cursing of evil and so the coronavirus was problematized as an “agent of Satan” inflicted on the world not just to upset our lives, but also to trouble seriously the people of God.

Contemporary Pentecostal Responses to Coronavirus

How are Africa's contemporary Charismatic pastors with this prosperity mindset, authoritative approach to prayer, and belief in the prophetic and supernatural evil, responding to a pandemic that has defied their theological logics? There are many influential Charismatic preachers in Africa who have founded very large or mega-size ministries with public influences unparalleled in the history of Christianity on the continent. Their religious media empires, as we have noted, enable these charismatic figures to speak to global audiences. The ones whose responses to the pandemic are discussed in this article include Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams of the Action Chapel International (ACI) and Pastor Mensa Otabil of the International Central Gospel Church, both based in Ghana. Pastor Chris Oyakhilome of Christ Embassy, a Nigerian church based in South Africa, receives mention for buying into conspiracy theories surrounding the outbreak of the pandemic. Pastor Oyakhilome shares that position with the American prosperity preacher Kenneth Copeland, who at the height of the spread of the pandemic declared it nullified. Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa of Zimbabwe predicted the outbreak of a pandemic about five years ahead of the coronavirus pandemic and we discuss what he prophesied as an example of the Pentecostal/Charismatic emphasis on the deployment of spiritual gifts in public life.

Pastor Otabil is a motivational speaker who usually takes a pragmatic approach to existential issues. Archbishop Duncan-Williams leans towards mobilizing prayer to deal with crisis and Pastor Oyakhilome is known for his miracle working ministry and in particular for his emphasis on healing and deliverance. Pastor Makandiwa functions as a charismatic prophet. This is to say that although we categorize all these pastors and their ministries under the general rubric of contemporary Pentecostal/Charismatic ministry, there are differences in the way their ministries operate or function. In spite of these differences one can say that, to a very high extent, they all belong to the prosperity believing and preaching category of Pentecostalism and that orientation shows to various degrees in the ways they have preached, prayed, or prophesied in relation to the pandemic.

Religious Responses to the Pandemic

Pentecostalism is an experiential religion with a very forceful oral culture and so the data for discussion is accessed mainly from sermons, statements, and prophetic declarations made during the lockdown and restriction periods through various

media outlets. There are a number of things to note from the outset: first, many of the sermons and declarations were very inspirational as they sought to bring hope to hearers through various media networks; secondly, some have bought into religious conspiracy theories relating to the pandemic with Pastor Chris Oyakhilome even claiming that the whole thing was a hoax perpetrated by media technology companies seeking to install a new 5G network facility that would harm the world; thirdly, the trajectories of the messages also showed how the pandemic was challenging contemporary Pentecostal/Charismatic triumphalist assumptions on faith and evil in human life; and fourthly, the element of the prophetic has played a key role in the religious responses to the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has, among others, challenged the faiths of many people with Christians calling for concerted prayer to defeat a virus that some thought had been inflicted on the world by the devil. In many sermons, especially from the Charismatic sector, the coronavirus was “cursed” as demonic, and as an agent of the devil, is out to destroy God’s people and this was particularly on account of the fact that it disrupted the nature of church as we have come to understand it. In not a few cases there were submissions speculating that perhaps this was the beginning of the apocalyptic times about which the Bible talks. Pastor Chris Oyakhilome of Christ Embassy has also indicated that the virus attack is a way in which technological giants are diverting human attention to facilitate the setting up of their 5G infrastructure around the world.⁴

One of the most important biblical passages that served as the foundation of prayer in the COVID-19 period was Psalm 91. It begins with the words, “You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust’” (Ps 91:1–2).⁵ The psalmist’s reference to God’s deliverance from “the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence” in verse 3 provided the appropriate discourse for many seeking to invoke the name and power of God in dealing with the pandemic. A lot of prayer circulating in the media used verses from this particular Psalm. Of the various Christian churches in Africa, I found the responses of the contemporary Pentecostal or Charismatic churches to the outbreak of the pandemic very instructive and revealing. This is because as churches that focus on the charismatic experience in the power of the Holy Spirit, their theology has an interventionist orientation; they take the theology of evil seriously and how to deal with evil features prominently in their ecclesiology.

Lockdown and Contemporary Pentecostal Theology

The COVID-19 era came as a test of a situation that provided an alternative context within which to articulate Charismatic motivational messages. Pastor Otabil is one among a very few Charismatic pastors who decided, when the government increased the numbers of people gathering in a single location from twenty-five to one hundred, to continue services online. In the face of depressive spirits, failing businesses, empty pockets, family dislocations, sicknesses, bereavements, and so on and so forth, many, like Jesus on the cross, felt forsaken. Pastor Mensa Otabil seized the moment to repackage his messages on the principles of success, positives, promotion, and wealth creation to suit the spirit of the times. A number of Charismatic pastors returned to eschatological messages, a theme that is normally missing from prosperity discourses.

That is not to say Africa's Charismatic church leaders do not believe in judgment, hell, the second coming of Christ, and the like; no, they do. However, that sort of message was simply inconsistent with the regular emphasis on health, wealth, and material prosperity that had become part of the Charismatic self-definition in terms of religious emphasis. Whether articulated in terms of the power of Jesus or that of the Holy Spirit, Charismatic Christianity speaks the language of power in which God turns impossibilities into possibilities. The depressive circumstances that the COVID-19 pandemic situation created offered the virtual perfect fit for the sort of motivational and inspiring messages associated with contemporary Pentecostalism. Thus, the responses to the pandemic also brought to the fore contemporary Pentecostal/Charismatic religious cultures of the mobilization of prayer for the public good in the light of their strong hermeneutics of evil as spiritually caused.

Its prosperity message had often sounded a bit monolithic and myopic in the sense that although it is preached in full knowledge that suffering and evil are real, those sorts of human circumstances have often been ignored. The American prosperity gospel exponent, Kenneth Copeland, even responded to the pandemic against the backdrop of the American elections that eventually President Joe Biden was to win. He wrote on his Facebook page on October 17, 2020, as follows:

The COVID-19 pandemic has been used as a pretext for the election to force all of us into fear. When we are fearful, we are willing to sacrifice our peace and prosperity for security, but it is a false security.

We need to stand firm in our faith and have dominion over fear. Resist fear, and the devil will flee from you.

The emphasis on the power of triumph, success, promotion, life, health, victory, and overcoming has blinded many Charismatic, especially prosperity touting, preachers to the real-life circumstances of their patrons. With businesses, domestic economies, and the personal health of many people taking a hit, the messages of prosperity were simply confronted with a reality check in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Until the onset of the pandemic, it was the triumphalist stories of those who are winning the battles of life that we often heard about in Pentecostal testimonies. The lots of those going through challenges were often treated as if they did not apply the right principles of success, which would usually mean, the faithful fulfillment of tithing obligations. In the particular circumstances of the pandemic, everyone to some extent was confronted with the realities of evil and suffering with even the wealthiest of nations and their economies being crippled.

Suddenly, the messages of prosperity had to be repackaged due to the onset of affliction with the outbreak of COVID-19. In contrast to the regular messages that those who fulfill certain religious obligations would be successful and win the battles of life, this particular demon of a coronavirus was affecting the fortunes of everyone including pastors and prophets who had assured us that faithful Christians were beyond the logic of suffering. Many took to social media to question the inability of the African Charismatic prophets to foretell the onset of the coronavirus and if not deal with it, at least get the world to prepare. The world was locked down through Good Friday and the Easter periods of 2020. Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams claimed that the virus was a demonic attack from satanic and demonic wombs and incubators.⁶ He further declared that the virus would disappear by the Passover, but this did not materialize with another Passover upon us in 2021.⁷ The lockdowns did not afford African Pentecostal/Charismatic pastors their usual opportunities to advertise the “benefits of the cross,” “the blood that speaks,” or the “power of the resurrection” during Lent and Holy Week.

Here for instance is a selection of a combination of prayer and declarations made by Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams in the early weeks of the pandemic:

The Coronavirus is a name, is a person without body and in the name of Jesus, as we bow our knee and we pray, in the name of Jesus, this

plague, pestilence and virus will bow the knee and will stand down and go back from whence it came in the name of Jesus. The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble and he knoweth them that trust in Him. I challenge you, within these thirty days to trust in the Lord like never before. Show the enemy that your faith is in God. If we only trust God when everything is good and in good times when everything is alright, then it is not faith and it is not trust. But it is the times of trouble and moments like this that we know whether we trust God, or we don't trust God. It is times like this that your faith and my faith is renewed, it takes times like this, trying situations like this, to reveal the strength of our faith. Trust in God, I challenge you to trust in God, to have faith in God, as never before.

This is not the end of the world, there are people who are saying that this virus is judgement from God and that it is the sign of the end of the world. They are entitled to their opinion. And others believe it is from the enemy but whatever these schools of thoughts are, doesn't bother me. The most important thing is for you to have right standing with God because if you have a right standing with God, if it is from the enemy, the Bible says "no weapon formed against you shall prosper and every tongue that rises in judgement against you, you shall be condemned." And if it is judgement from God, in the day of judgement, God has promised to deliver and to exempt His chosen, His children from the judgement. So, whatever it is, you are covered. And I don't want you to entertain fear, don't entertain any fear because the blood of Jesus has covered us, the Bible said "when I see the blood, when I see the blood, when I see the blood, I will pass over you."

We invoke the blood of Jesus over this nation, we invoke the blood of Jesus over our borders, our airwaves, our high seas and the land, and every family of this country and nation and all the members of our church. We invoke the blood of Jesus that this virus and this angel of death will pass over our dwellings, will pass over our loved ones, will pass over all that concerns us and that there will be no loss of any father, mother, wife, husband, boy or girl or grandson or granddaughter. There will be no loss of any life among us and that our wives will not be widows and our children will not be fatherless. And no father or mother will bury their children by any means in the name

Jesus. . . . In the face of adversity, in the face of disaster and in the face of tragedy, you are an overcomer.⁸

In this mix of discourses on hope, demonization of the virus, and the declaration of protection from evil, Archbishop Duncan-Williams very clearly confronts an issue that had become a problem for the otherwise prosperity theology that he has been propagating. As with the first Passover and the first Crucifixion and Resurrection days in the Bible, everyone was locked down at the height of the pandemic and churches were closed. That was a reality away from which no one could run as it was the reality the world was facing. The messages were still empowering; preachers were challenged by the circumstances to tweak them a bit to account for what the world was going through.

“The Man Who Could Not Be Locked Down”

During the 2020 Resurrection day televised church services, one of the sermons came from Pastor Mensa Otabil. The word “lockdown” featured quite prominently in his Easter Sunday message. The text for the day was Matthew’s account of the resurrection and the theme was “The Man Who Could Not be Locked Down.” There were three instruments that the authorities used to lock Jesus down, according to Pastor Otabil. These were the physical, legal, and political. The physical instrument was the stone that was used to seal the tomb in which Jesus was laid. The legal one was imposed when the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and asked him to issue a “command for the tomb to be made secure until the third day” because “the imposter,” when he was alive, had said he was going to resurrect after three days. Pilate complied and gave the request legal backing (Matt 27:62–63). The third instrument of lockdown was the political one in which soldiers were sent to guard the tomb of Jesus: “Pilate said to them, ‘You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.’ So, they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone” (Matt 27:65–66).

In spite of these three instruments of lockdown, Pastor Otabil averred, Jesus resurrected from the dead: “God wants to breakdown something that has locked you down,” Pastor Otabil assured his hearers. There were three instruments of lockdown used to restrain Jesus, but God needed only two instruments to release him. These were the natural and the supernatural instruments of God and both are listed in Matthew 28:2, “And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.”

Pastor Otobil explained that God has his own way of intervening when we are locked down by the circumstances of life. In the case of Jesus, God deployed the natural instrument of an earthquake and a supernatural instrument of the intervention of angels. The stone was rolled away for us to see what God had already done, and that is, he had raised Jesus from death. Pastor Otobil illustrated his point using parts of the Pentecost day message preached by Peter: “But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power” (Acts 2:24).⁹

The Eschatological Gear

Until the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, one would have struggled to hear sermons on the second coming of Christ among contemporary Pentecostal preachers. One scarcely hears sermons about eschatological events in the contemporary Charismatic world. This is because a preacher cannot, in prosperity fashion, encourage members to make as much money as they could, build big and palatial homes, buy the best in luxurious cars and at the same time preach that, but anyway, Jesus could appear like a thief in the night.¹⁰ Contemporary Pentecostals believe in God’s end time judgement and the second coming of Christ, but they simply do not preach it. Paul Gifford also mentions this in his book, *Ghana’s New Christianity*, noting that the recurring emphasis in this form of Christianity “has to do with success, wealth and status.”¹¹ If these are the recurring themes of contemporary Pentecostalism, what changed in the first quarter of the year 2020?

Prosperity preachers were forced to respond to a pandemic that revealed the realities of life. In the period of the coronavirus consternation, there was certainly a change in mood and several preachers took on eschatological issues that had hitherto been placed on the back burner. Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams of the ACI claimed on Palm Sunday that this was a wakeup call for the church to realize that “we have a place to go.” The reason for the born-again experience was for us to prepare for eternity, he noted. In his words: “this is the time for purity, holiness, righteousness in heart and motive; this is not the time to make money but to give and be a child of God like never before. This is not the time to bear grudges.” These “worldly things” would be obstacles when Jesus returns to judge the world. This message was a complete antithesis to his proposals in the book *You Are Destined to Succeed* in which the Archbishop claimed that the use of luxurious material things were divine rights and not options for “a man of God.”¹²

On the Sunday of the Triumphal Entry, Archbishop Duncan-Williams preached on the works of the flesh (1 Thess 5:2–3). “This is the time for people to get saved . . . if we do not get into the ark now, we will be left behind.” This coronavirus is a “pestilence and a plague,” he noted. The only thing that can save humanity is to get into the ark of our salvation, which is Christ. It was instructive to hear Archbishop Duncan-Williams saying people must “endure” trials and temptations. All the prophecies are falling into place, he further noted, for the Son of Man is coming again. He refers to Matthew 24:22, “And if those days had not been cut short, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect those days would be cut short.”

In the particular sermon, Archbishop Duncan-Williams preached that in the COVID-19 situation, we have seen nations evacuate their citizens. It is the same way in which “heaven will evacuate its own,” that is, the elect at the imminent return of Jesus: “God will send an aircraft with Jesus as its captain and every believer will be evacuated home.” He explained that only “citizens of heaven” would qualify for the evacuation and made a direct appeal in his broadcast for listeners who did not know Jesus to embrace him as Lord and Savior. The days of suffering would be shortened for the sake of the elect, he emphasized. God said, “I will spare the elect” and so, all the citizens of heaven will be evacuated; you cannot go to the airport if America sends an aircraft to evacuate her citizens if you do not have an American passport; even your spouse, if they are American would be evacuated and you will be left behind; the rapture is an aircraft,” the Archbishop noted.

The terms and expressions that were deployed in this thoroughly eschatological message by Archbishop Duncan-Williams were striking: heaven, hell, redeemed, sanctification, preparedness, purity, uprightness, rapture, and these as compared to the recurring emphasis on material success that Gifford talks about. Archbishop Duncan-Williams concluded with the story of the ten virgins (Matt 25:1–13). At the announcement of the arrival of the bridegroom, only those with adequate oil in their lamps were able to meet him. In the same way, “if you are not a citizen of a country, it does not matter who you are married to, you will not be evacuated when the rapture takes place.” It was striking because this is a preacher who, like many others in his category, often centered his sermons on tithing and offerings as seed-sowing for blessing: wealth, health, and upward mobility as the right of the Christian. “This is not the time to make money” the Archbishop said, rather, “this is the day to show compassion; you can have all the money in the

world, but it cannot save you; a day is coming when all these material things will mean nothing.”

The Prophetic Gear

A video recording still circulating on social media shows Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa prophesying the appearance of the coronavirus about five years before its emergence in China. Prophet Makandiwa has a thriving international ministry in Zimbabwe.¹³ He is the Founder and General Overseer of the United Family International Church (UFIC).¹⁴ Prophet Makandiwa is about the only known Charismatic voice to have prophesied the onset of the pandemic and that was in 2015. He delivered about five prophecies in total on different occasions pointing then to an incoming pandemic that was going to throw the world into confusion. In the first prophetic utterance made in January 2015, Prophet Makandiwa held a Sunday service at the City Sports Centre in Harare, Zimbabwe, where said, “we need really to pray,” noting that an ailment was coming out of China that would not compare to anything we have witnessed before in world history. He compared what was coming then to a nuclear weapon, noting however that it was not going to be about an explosion, but rather a catastrophic contamination of the atmosphere that was going to be chaotic. “It was going to take the world time and days to gather the dead bodies together,” he prophesied. He likened it to a demonic spirit on rampage that was going to stop at nothing, except prayer: “only prayer can save us now.”¹⁵

In the second prophecy delivered in November 2016 at a Sunday Service at the City Sports Centre in Harare, Zimbabwe, Makandiwa declares among others:

I saw also . . . another disease more deadly. I saw it coming from the sea. They will investigate and find it will come from the ocean. More deadly than HIV and cancer. Very fast. Very aggressive . . . and thousands, if not millions, will die. . . . It is a plague, so we must pray against it. God preserves. God gives life.¹⁶

Prophet Makandiwa put out a third prophecy in February 2017, also at the City Sports Centre in Harare, Zimbabwe. In this third one, he prophesied among others that the disease was going to kill more people than any disease that the world had fought previously. He claims to have been given a divine revelation that showed people falling like leaves and dying: “they will do everything to investigate where

it's coming from they will not find it, but eventually, they will confirm what I am telling you. . . . It is a plague that only God can stop.”¹⁷

The fourth prophecy was delivered just before the onset of the pandemic in Africa in early March 2020. At the Sunday service at Chitungwiza Basilic. Prophetic Makandiwa stated in part:

I say our intelligent people will break down. Doctors will cry. Leaders of our nations will cry. Now at this rate if (it) goes on for 3 months, it will be terrible. But you know that God has given us grace over every flying evil. . . . God will give power to his people. Power to do what? As you are praying now, you are pronouncing a curse over this curse. You will open your mouth and command every flying insect to die. As long as the insect is a virus, as long as it is a disease, you have to take charge over every flying insect which is a disease. . . . The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. He will deliver you from this plague and when you become proud again, he will give you other (another) one. Until you know that God reigns in the Kingdom of [humanity].¹⁸

Prophet Makandiwa's final prophetic utterance was delivered in February 2020 at his Chitungwiza Basilica.¹⁹ In this final one the prophet seemed to have prescribed hydroxychloroquine, which had been discredited in some quarters as one possible pharmaceutical intervention to the disease. Our concern though lies in the fact that at least Prophet Makandiwa predicted a lurking disaster that he referred to as a plague and also framed its emergence in terms of the demonic, although in the same breath both prayer and hydroxychloroquine were pointed to as possible cures to the pandemic.

Reframing the Message of Health and Wealth in a Pandemic Era

The religious responses to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially what I have referred to in this article as the “mobilization of prayer” against evil, are not new. At the beginning of the twentieth century, when the worldwide influenza epidemic broke out, African Pentecostal prayer and spiritual healing groups, as Lamin Sanneh calls them, mobilized prayer to fight the pandemic even resisting the use of modern scientific medicine in the process.²⁰ The prophetic element that surfaced with Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa's ministry was itself a reinvention of

something that was present in the ministries of the early African prophetic movements of the early twentieth century. The mobilization of prophetic prayer in African Pentecostal Christianity has always been inspired by the worldview that the enemy, lodged in the numerous maladies that afflicted the flesh, must be muzzled. It is usually up to the prophet or Charismatic leader to channel the forces of healing and protection into the community and sustain prayer “as the essential supply-line of the struggle” against evil.²¹ In the particular case of the COVID-19 pandemic, Prophet Makandiwa served both as the one through whose ministry the revelation came and also the one who mobilizes for prayer against the plague.

We also see from the narratives that in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, people who previously preached about prosperity suddenly found the space in the times to talk about the issues of heaven and hell. These examples we have cited from Charismatic preaching, prophecy, and prayer within the COVID-19 period show how difficult circumstances, the reality of evil, and the unpredictability of the future can affect one’s understanding of the church and the message that is carried in the name of Jesus Christ. On the one hand, we see how the coronavirus situation has led to the delivery of very pragmatic sermons, such as the one preached by Pastor Otabil, that confront evil as an existential reality. On the other hand, we see from Archbishop Duncan-Williams how the realities of evil led to a rethinking of a gospel that had become so materialistic that the things of eternity had been dislodged from their central place in contemporary Charismatic ecclesiology. The eschatological messages of the COVID-19 era resonate very much with what happened to the American apostle of the prosperity gospel, Jim Bakker, who after his fall from grace due to imprisonment for federal crimes returned to write a very instructive book, *Prosperity and the Coming Apocalypse*, in which he denounces his earlier message that materialism was a prime indicator of God’s favor. In that book he uses his own context to criticize a one-sided prosperity gospel devoid of any eschatological significance:

By and large, most of the church . . . does not want to hear an apocalyptic message. It wants a message of health and wealth, hope, healing, and financial prosperity. . . . Rarely does anyone talk about sacrifice, repentance of sin, or our failure to be what God wants us to be. When, for example, was the last time you heard a message on the cost of discipleship? When was the last time you heard someone preach on the judgment of God or the horrors of hell?²²

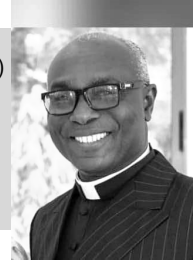
It is noteworthy that just as his personal troubles led him to return to an eschatological message, the COVID-19 pandemic literally led most African Charismatic pastors along similar paths as we saw, for example, in the preaching of Archbishop Duncan-Williams.

The messages of prosperity preached by contemporary Pentecostal pastors are not entirely unbiblical, for there is such a thing as biblical prosperity (Ps 1; John 10:10). And indeed, the born-again experience itself has in the lives of many people led to a redemptive uplift in both its spiritual and material senses. When the born-again convert from lives of vanity and carnality, critical material resources become available for constructive uses and investment in personal and family lives are enhanced. What we criticize is therefore not material prosperity as part of God's blessing, but the fact that materialism—the love of money—is the root cause of all evil. Besides, the materialistic gospel of prosperity fails to account for existential evil and those whose lives are impacted by it are left without answers regarding their afflictions. Many of the principles of prosperity come unstuck in the face of misfortune, calamity, and evil, and the hope is that the coronavirus has among other things exposed the areas of deficiency.

Conclusion

There has not been a monolithic response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic among African Pentecostal/Charismatic figures. The responses have ranged from mobilizing prophetic prayer to deal with the outbreak to inspiring hope in people in these times of despair and using the opportunity to return to messages that warn that eternity is not a figment of anyone's imagination. It is a reality for which people must prepare. This is a call for things to be rectified using the very biblical resources that are used to justify what it means to prosper in an uncertain world in which everything else is temporal and God alone remains sovereign. When we defer to his wisdom, we will walk through the valley of the shadow of death and still fear no evil, because God is with his people. That was the crux of the matter in Pastor Mensa Otabil's sermons of the pandemic era.

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Notes

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³ Schwab and Malleret, *COVID-19*, 11.

⁴ Tochi Juliet, "Pastor Chris Oyakhilome Speaks on COVID-19 and 5G Network," 7 August 2020, n.p., <https://clacified.com/religion/news/pastor-chris-oyakhilome-speaks-on-COVID-19-and-5g-network> (16 August 2020).

⁵ All Bible quotations are from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

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⁸ Nicholas Duncan-Williams, "Duncan-Williams Declares 30-days Fasting and Prayer against Coronavirus," 16 March 2020, video, 5:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TthFqQCAEFs> (30 March 2021).

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- ¹⁷ For His Glory, “Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa Compilation of COVID-19 Prophecies (From 2015–2017 & 2020).”
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- ²¹ Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 195.
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