

Early Christian Response to Contagious Disease: Insights to Religious Group reactions to Coronavirus Pandemic (Covid-19) in Nigeria

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Abstract

Contagious Disease has been with man, since he knew the history of the earth. The Holy Book (Bible) gives instructions on how to deal with it. Jesus himself once touched a patient with contagious disease and healed him; he advised him to follow the lay-down practices of the elders (ancestors) for his safety and acceptance by the society. History has shown that sometime a localized contagious disease became an epidemic and spread the world over. Coronavirus pandemic (covid-19) is a current example of a world-wide contagious disease that has kill over 3 million people and about 80 million affected, and it is still occurring. The advent of covid-19 at the tail end of 2019 brought fear among people of the world at the beginning of 2020, when it was recognized as a pandemic (coronavirus). The fear sent many signals to different groups of people in the world; the religious circle in Nigeria has concluded that the "end-time" has come. Both Christians and Muslim were easily making references to the end of the world and the long-expected arrival of Jesus Christ to rule the world. However, history has shown that contagious pandemic has not only occurred in this generation, but some generations passed had experienced it. How did early Christians handle these experiences and how did they use the bible to interpret their situation? This review examines a few of the previous world epidemiology experiences and Christians adaptation to give insight to covid-19 reality and acceptance as human exigencies. To give a clear vision of the direction of the review, historical and narrative account of some of the events are given and evident records proved that Christians accepted the pandemics as natural occurrences that God allowed at their time for a purpose. The recent pandemic (Covid-19) is one of those natural occurrences that need not precipitate "Armageddon" (Apocalypse).

Key Word: Pandemic, Christian Response, Covid-19, Epidemiology, "Amaggedon"

Introduction

Christians all over the world, as usual, celebrated the coming of a new year, on 1st January 2020 with church services. Hope for a good year and prophecies for good things to come were expressed by the faithful people of goodwill who had wished the year 2020, which had a some sought of magic fixation – twenty, twenty to be a prosperous and better year for business, politics, science and even discoveries. In Nigeria previous administrations had fixed some policy duration to 2020, for example “Economic development plan – 2010-2020”. Non-governmental organization were not left out, some had projected their programme like 5 years or 3 years to end in 2020. So, the year was full of good expectation and unfortunately, it turned out to be the opposite. It became a year of world worse economic woos since after the end of second world war. Within first quarter of the year virtually every country of the world was engulfed with covid-19 and the economies of the big nations like America, Russia, China, Britain, France were shaken to the bricks of collapsing. According to Ugbechie “All the buzz of commerce, all the grand standing about street credibility, all the boastful, clatter in the market place have been quietened by a tiny virus” (34). Never in the history of man that the world economy is threatened like this - covid-19 pandemic. It was a shock to the world collective bargaining: a technology encouraged by Global village and socio-culturally engineered world economy. Soon the reality manifested that man strongest might cannot equate minor unforeseeable power of nature (Reality).

It all started in a far corner of East of the earth, Wuham in China in December 2019 as a virus transmitted from wild animals to human beings. Many were reported dead and Chinese government thought it was an epidemic and according to them necessary precautions were taken to curb its spread. The World Health Organization (WHO) agreed with the government that it was an epidemic. Many countries did not expect a pandemic that follow the epidemic. Within three months of the arrival of the virus, Europe and America have become the epic centres simultaneously. On February 27, 2020 Nigeria had gotten its first case of Coronavirus, while Egypt on Feb. 14th recorded the first confirmed covid-19 case in Africa (Alagbe 3). The Nigerian case came by an Italian businessman returning to Nigeria. Since then, the health and social system including economic and political spheres of Nigeria had never been the same all the ills and failures of the governments are exposed and heaped on coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19).

The religious circle was agog with various apocalyptic predictions and manifestations. Some even predicted the arrival of Jesus Christ within few days for his millennial rule. The Christian Clergies were virtually busy with one programme or the other to encounter the “emergences visitor” into the country. Some notable Clergymen even saw the whole

incidence as a pre-arranged plan to usher in an “Anti-Christ” figure in the world. A Cleric Olisadebelum Onuoho even said that “it was spiritual invention by Satan to reduce the population of the world by killing unbelievers...” (Paul Osuyi 46). It was an atmosphere of religious confusion on the theology of eschatology. Some Muslims felt that man’s disobedience to Allah’s instruction is the cause of the pandemic while the African Indigenous religion practitioners felt that foreign religions had desecrated the Africa culture and therefore the natural potency of African medicine to fight epidemic is weakened and not even recognizes by the people and government.

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in all the argument and confusion that followed the arrival of Covid-19 in Nigeria, if diligent time was taken and proper studying for understanding how the early Christians and previous generation handled the pandemic that occurred in their period, some lessons would have been learnt. And the rush to conclusion for an imminent apocalyptic should have been avoided and more time devoted for finding solution and succor to human suffering that accompanied the pandemic. This paper is engineered in three segments to bring home the points that insight was needed before jumping into conclusions on covid-19. The first segments of this write-up deals with biblical ideas and some references on contagious disease and how Jesus reacted to the bearers of the disease. Some previous (world) pandemics and the early Christians reactions are recollected, and the avoidable mistakes of religious organization were examined in the last two segments of the work. A historical and narrative of the events were taken to bring home the intended message.

Bible and Contagious Diseases:

The Bible is not ignorant of contagious diseases from on set. The plagues story in Exodus is not far from epidemics: the sores on the Egyptians were contagious disease that spread among the populace, though it could not reach Goshen region of the country. God promised to protect the children of Israel from sickness and dreadful diseases that the Egyptian experienced (Deut. 7: 15). The statement in Deuteronomy implies that contagious Disease the Egyptians had was “common” and often occurrences that can erupt anytime in the world. But God is not willing to allow the Israelites experience them. However, in chapter 28 verse 59-61 He said I will not “hesitate to allow these epidemics you fear on you if you misbehave and follow other gods”.

The contagious diseases are infectious and so can spread easily among people of close relation. In Moses time some of them were mentioned in the Torah (Lev. 14:55-56). The law of Moses provided remedies for the sufferers and the land. The priests are to identify the types of disease and if any healing occurs the method of acceptance is prescribed. To safe

guide the society, quarantine rules and social distancing are put in places (Lev.12:1-4, 13:5, 14:28 etc). The idea of physician came late in the Lexicon of the Hebrew because, the Yahweh is known as the healer of Israel (Exd.15:26). The contagious diseases needed remedy and provisions were put down to contain the spread. It was that led to having a physician. The likely first-time physician (doctor) was mentioned is in relation to God's healing power (Exod.15:26). By the time of kings and prophets, doctors are recognized as medical personnel of healing (Ministry) institution (Jer.8:22).

Healing and physician have the same root word in Hebrew "rapha" which means to "restore" (Gen.50:2, Isa.30:26) it occurs nine times in the O.T (David Adamo 39). The application of the knowledge of healing is also rampant in the old testament. As early as the story of Jacob and his four wives, Mandrakes (herb for love and fertility) was mentioned (Gen.30:14-16). The use of fig flour as paste on ulcer and balm from olive oil were common incidences (Isaiah 38:21, 1:6). It is assumed that the Lord (Yahweh) permits the use of the medicine with more understanding that God has provided these herbs for his people within the geographical possession of Israel. Outside solution to the healing of the people is viewed as faithlessness and failure to depend on the provision of the Lord (Yahweh). Jeremiah inquired

Is there no medicine in Gilead?

Are there no doctors there?

Why, then, have my people not been healed? (8:22)

The nation that God is the healer of Israel, is not far fetch with the New Testament ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus said

"The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me,... to proclaim liberty and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed...(Lk.4:18).

When the women with hemorrhage problem came to Jesus after she had spent a very lot sum of money, said "If I touch his clothes (having heard about his fame and power) I will get whole". She was healed as she applied her faith, which Jesus confirmed as the needed ingredient in appropriating God's abundant healing grace in the land (Mark 5:26-34). By the era of Jesus Christ, healing and physician were common events. The Good Samaritan incident showed the knowledge of "first aid" principle and establishment of sick bay and little catering homes (Luke 10:34-35). Jesus also mentioned the importance of physician in the healing of a sick person (Matt.9:12).

The contagious disease like leprosy, was common at Jesus period and the same lay-down guidelines by the law if Moses was in Operation. Quarantine and social distancing were used. A leper was supposed to stay in an excluded environment or colony. He comes to the town more or less by permission and he must identify himself by shouting "unclean" or create a sound that is designated for a person with skin disease. The sound reminds the healthy that "unclean person" (sick person) is around. It is for those around to take a necessary precaution and maintain their social distance. The Irony in this story is how the Leper came direct to Jesus for help and how Jesus defied the lay-down protocol to touch the leper. Omowole explained that Jesus did not actually break the law, after all he had later said "I do not come to do away with the law of Moses and teaching of the prophets but to fulfil them (Mk.5:17). rather Jesus was willing "to show love and give salvation to needy humanity" even it means breaking through the "cultic and ritual system" of the Torah. After all, he has the right as the son to amend – "but now I tell you....." (Mk5:21) (108). In essence no disrespect of the law was intended by Jesus because he directed the leper to present himself to the priest to comply with the law (107). It must be noted that Jesus central teaching of love was at stake here and he did not fail to demonstrate it: he touched the man out of love.

The apostles of Jesus Christ had no different ideal of healing than what Jesus bequeathed to them. Go make disciples.... And heal the sick (perform miracle) (Mk.16:15, Matt. 28:18). The command was equally a gift to them. So, the apostolic church sees the gift of healing as a high calling like any gifts of the Spirit (1Cor.12:9) (Alon Richardson 328). Like Jesus, the apostolic church does not emphasize difference between the sickness of the soul and body. This gave rise to the church establishing hospitals and even asylums for areas it operates. Modern world is the beneficiary of the Christianity medical experiment. The church cared for the sick and the destitute and established healing centres for them. In Rivers State, there are at least two known hospitals established by the missionaries as early as 1930s before the state was created. The Baptist church founded a medical centre at Okaki in Enginne and The Seventh Day Adventist church the present general Hospital Elele (Alimini) in Ikwerre. These hospitals were built in notion that God is the healer of the people. There is no difference between the human bodily needs and soul's crave for relation with the creator. The maker (God) breathed His being into the man, and he became a living being. So, a complete man is a healthy being. Jesus said, "those that worship the Lord must worship him in spirit and truth..." (John4:24). Jesus healed the sick and provided for their continuous sustenance both in spirit and body (Mk6:37, 41; John6:51). The church has not departed from the practice. As early in second century, Celsus remarked that the Christians were much interested with their leader's attitude to care for sick and the destitute (Richardson 38). So, by nineteenth century when the Evangelicals intensified

the church interest in social and media evangelism (Marsden 26) modern medical advancement became Christian civilization legacy bequeathed to the world.

Some Previous Pandemic Recorded

Just as it was noted early in this review that epidemic and pandemic are not new to world. There are records of previous spread of contagious disease like influenza and coronavirus that ravaged the world. At least 20 epidemics can be traced by records but three major ones that occurred in the early era of emergence of Christianity and the twentieth century pandemic are looked at.

1. Antonine Plague (AD 165-180)

This was named after the five famous maximum rulers of Roman Empire. Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-180) was the 5th of the Antonine dynasty whose reign epitomize natural calamities and wars. Before his reign Rome has enjoyed relative peace and stability. There was Pax Romana (27-BC-180 AD) The reign of Augustus Caesar had ushered in the success of social justice and fairness in almost every human endeavour and the empire enjoyed peace and prosperity (Johnson "Early church history" 12-13). Good network of roads brought about better communication. People could move from one end of the empire to another and so were the goods. In Rome, many soldier returnees came with wealth and illness. It was rumored that the soldiers who returned from war zone in Parthia infected the city dwellers with Antonine plague. About 5 million people died in the Empire. This was era Christianity was rising and many homes and establishment had Christians. Among the high families of the empire Christians were located: "The wife of Herod's steward and Herod's Courtier Mamean, at the Antioch church Sergius Paulus, Proconsul of Cyprus (Lk8:3, Acts 13:1,13:2)" and the Empera "Domitian's niece, Domitilla, wife of a Consul was exiled in 96 AD because she was a Christian"(60).

2. Plague of Cyprian (249-262)

The plague was name after the Bishop of Carthage, St. Cyprian. He was the first known writer on the plague of history. Carthage was a Roman city in Tunisia. Christian population in the city was very high because of the Roman citizens who migrated there and Cosmopolitan nature of the city. This was the reigns of Decious (249-259) and Valerian (259-262 AD, which saw severe Christian persecution. The church was prosperous and vocal at this period and so was seen by the Empire authority as "imperium in imperio" – "a state within state". The state authorities saw the church as a rival and thereby persecuted the church. Many church leaders died at this period – the likes of Novatus, the archrival of St. Cyprian, Novatian, Cyprians himself died

before the end of the wave of persecutions at that the time. Cyprian was known for his scholarly brilliance and position on the authority of the Bishop and the unity of the church (Johnson "History of early church" 102). The epidemic in this period was like smallpox, influenza type of Ebola. It was severe in big cities. About 5000 people died in Rome a day (Ethereal Library 1885). The death was in millions.

3. Plague of Justinian (Ad 541-542)

Justinian flea or Bubonic plague was common in the reign of Empero Justinian I (527-565). The Byzantine Empire was at its peak and the Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) was built in Constantinople (the Present Istanbul). The Emperor was able to virtually "closed all pagan temples in the East and in AD 529 stopped Greek philosophy school in Athens" (Johnson, *The church History*", 3). The ecclesiastical power was with Rome, but the civil authority had shifted to the Constantinople and with the high religious emperor like Justinian the city laid claims to ecclesiastical authority and influence in the activities of the church (4). The church and the empire enjoyed a flourishing and reburse economy and relationship. But there were parallel incidences that later weakened the empire: the advancement of Islam with Arabs, the Barbarians like German visigoths and the Asiatic Huns and the Flea called the "demon", slowed down the progress of the Eastern Roman Empire. The Pandemic caused by flea killed millions of people and it was acclaimed that 10% of the world population died of the influenza.

4. The Spanish Flu (1918-20)

The geographical origin was not certain, but Spain was a media created idea with the grave and mysterious illness of king Alfonso XIII. Spain was viewed as the worse hard hit. Many European countries and Africa were infected by the influenza. Nigeria was not spared. Nigeria with a population of 18 million lost 500,000 people in 6 months. The world lost almost 50 million people and 3rd its population was infected, and it was second of the 3rd hard hit pandemic in the world. The pandemic was exacerbated by the world war I which promoted superinfection caused by bacteria. The Spanish flu was caused by Hini influenza, a virus, which is of the same kind with swine flu – 2009 pandemic (Wikipedia).

The church at this time of Spanish flu has spread to most African countries and Asian region dominated by Muslims. The modern medical technology was a little high then and again some medical records were kept for posterity. Many 3rd world countries hospitals were ran by Christian missionaries. In Nigeria most were built after the influenza experiences. The church was very active in curtailing the advent effect of the influenza. There were prayer houses and prayer men and groups that came up at this

time. The emergence of Aladura group in the Western Nigeria is not far from the incidence and the Great prophet of Niger Delta, Garrick Braide was holding sway at the peak of the influenza.

Church Response to the Pandemics:

The four pandemic experiences examined here are unique and had severe economic and social devastated effect on the world and Christian religion in particular. The first epidemic was at the middle second century of Christianity inception. The popularity of Christianity as a religion was yet to be acclimatized with the euphoria when accusation of misfortune of the Roman Empire, that has started showing the sign of economic decline and incursion by Barbarian Mercenaries that has over run Roman's Military service. The Christians were made the "Scape goat". Every illness of the empire was attributed to the failure of Christians to worship the gods or disobedient to the constituted authority. Paul wrote to churches in Rome to be obedient to ruling authority (Rom.13:1-5). Emperor Decius forced the Christian to worship idols and Valerian gave certificate of sacrifices (Libellus) to those who performed sacrifices to the pagan gods and anytime anyone was called on to show the certificate must be ready to provide it. This was the time Antonine plague and plague of Cyprian came in second and third centuries, respectively. The Christian leaders showed majority and leadership acumen, piloted the affairs of the church without crumbling under the weight of the state persecution and exacerbation of imminent coming of the Lord.

Bishop of Carthage, Cyprian was noted to have advised Christians not to question the horror and death as a result of the pandemic rather should rejoice that the situation offered them amid opportunity to share in suffering they did not cause which is a Remini-silent of Christ suffering for the world's sin; they rather in further receive reward at the judgement day. A convert to Christianity after 50 years of the plague of Cyprian responding to the allegation that Roman Empire gods failed to protect the people because the gods were not happy since the advent of Christianity in the Empire, said the church performed creditable well than the pagan atrocities that brought about the deadly diseases (Classics Ethereal Library).

In Africa, the church saw the Spanish flu as a time to prove God's Omnipotent power. If he really created the world, he would save his people from the pandemic. This prove the rise of African Independent churches across the continent at this period. Call it Aladuras (Praying group), Zionism, Ethiopism or Prophetic Messiahist, they all arose to solve mankind's problem – defeat the pandemic and its attendant concomitants. The desire to pray and bring back trust in the God of Abraham and Jesus the Messiah established a

brown of Christianity that had grown to stabilize and spread Christianity in Africa and outside it.

Christian faith is not very abstract, this James says faith without work is dead. One must demonstrate his faith in action. Do what you preach. If Christ is the hope of the world, the people should feel him and see him in real terms. He should solve their problems. The demonic influence and presence should not deter Christians from praying and expecting answers from God. If Jesus healed the leper in the Bible, his disciples could equally do the same. He has given power to every Christian to heal the sick and set the demon possessed free.

The early Christians traced here were not consumed by the Christian's apocalypse and coming Amalgedom. The present Christians, probably because of the modern technology feel they can predict God or force Him to "obey his word" and bring down the reign of Christ. Christ shall come when the time is due and God wants it. Man can not by prediction bring the Millennium and so let the present Christians learn to depend on God and wait for the "God's appointed time".

Conclusion:

The early Christians were Jesus disciples just as present Christians are. The eminency of Jesus' return was every generation vocation, even Paul encouraged his generation;

"We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will take back with Jesus those who have died believing in him... There will be the shout of command, the Archangel's voice, and Lord himself will come down from heaven..." (IThes.4:14-16).

From history it seems subsequent generations learn and understand more about the second coming of Jesus and his millennium reign. They do this bearing in mind Jesus warnings: "No one knows, however, when the day and hour will come – neither the angels in heaven nor the son, the father alone knows" (Math24:36), rather taking his warning seriously, "so then, you also must always be ready because the son of man will come at hour when you are not expecting him" (41).

Christians in Nigeria, even other religious bodies should have looked back, study past events and cases on Epidemiology and world plagues before rushing to conclusion. Some of their unproven theories and claims at the end are not true because the Almageddon did not come and Jesus has not ushered in his reign. Things continue as they are, rather the

confusion and arguments they ignited is still ranging within the domain of religious sphere. This review believe that a careful study of the past should have given some hope, strength to religious people in the country to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic.

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