

Responding to Global Pandemics: A Paradigm of Christianity from Church History

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ABSTRACT

The role that Christianity has played in history has tremendously impacted society and helped in the spread of the Christian faith. This study examines the models that Christianity adopted in responding to different epidemics since antiquity. These historical approaches provide the contemporary church a conceptual paradigm in responding to contagions that pose a threat to both church and society. Pluralism is putting people far from God, and in such circumstances, there are provisional options that are made available for the world to adopt. This has occasioned reflections among church historians on the best way to respond to these epidemics. In a time of global panic that puts the world in a state of social, economic, and religious uncertainties, the church needs to be proactive. The response of Christianity is immersed in a biblical agenda that puts it at the helm of a global solution. Therefore, this study explores the paradigmatic approaches that Christianity adopted in curbing various diseases in the past. The models could be a roadmap in providing an enduring response to global pandemics in the 21st century.

KEYWORDS: Christianity, Global Pandemics, Christian Response, Paradigm, Church History

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I. INTRODUCTION

Global pandemics are a reality that changes how the world thinks or plays a significant role in changing how people perceive the world around them. For example, it is substantially correct that the COVID-19 has raised global panic because of scary anxiety induced in humanity. In Peckham's book, Bashford aptly remarks that fear or unfriendly anxiety is closely connected with communication, the touch of words, so close etymologically, to contagion.¹ Abreast, the COVID-19 pandemic is not the first pandemic that has befallen humanity as history shows that years with the 20s, e.g., 1520, 1620, 1720, 1820, 1920, and 2020, require careful note. Recently, we see the coming into media some recorded epidemics that have affected the world every one hundred years.² It begins with the 1720 bubonic plague at Marseille called "The Great Plague of Marseille." An estimated 100,000 registered people lost their lives. There is the 1820 cholera, which estimated death is debatable among historians, and the 1920 Spanish flu. The Spanish flu is described as the most unrelenting pandemic. It claimed an estimated registered life of 100 million people.³ After another one hundred years, the world in 2020 is confronted with another epidemic known as "The novel coronavirus" (COVID-19). It is noteworthy that these are not the only calamities that have befallen humankind in antiquity but the most recent.

Meanwhile, world powers shift the blame on each other for the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ The average life of people has changed rapidly. It is essential to assert that this blameworthiness began from man's fall when

¹ Robert Peckham, ed., *Empires of Panic: Epidemics and Colonial Anxieties* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015), 3.

² "In 1720 Plague, 1820 Cholera Outbreak, 1920 Spanish Flu, 2020 Chinese Coronavirus--What Is Happening," accessed March 21, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/629878-in-1720-plague-1820-cholera-outbreak-1920-spanish-flu-2020-chinese-coronavirus-what-is-happening>.

³ Neal Rozendaal, *Duke Slater: Pioneering Black NFL Player and Judge* (Jefferson, North Carolina & London: McFarland, 2012), 35; cf., Claire O'Neal, *The Influenza Pandemic of 1918* (Delaware: Mitchell Lane, 2020).

⁴ History shows that in every epidemic that has befallen mankind, people sought for ways of interpreting the scenario. On the coronavirus pandemic, China has received the blame, promoting and repeating historical stigmatization. On the other hand, others sought for biblical basis to interpret the plague because like in the past, the world cannot affirmingly tell the source of the virus. In following the way of history, the plague is making people to recall God and wonder what God might be telling the world as the angel of death is allowed

Adam, in Genesis 3, shifted the fault on Eve and Eve on the serpent. Foremost, the response to COVID-19 takes political and social mediums. People no longer know what is right from wrong or what to believe and what not to believe because of the absorbent information on social media. In light of this, the church ought to rise and offer hope and proffer solutions to these glaring needs.

Similarly, in such periods, pandemics are not to be spiritualized or politicized because lives are at stake; instead, they are moments that require the world to take responsibility. Also, the church ought to be united in fighting the deadly virus that befalls humanity. It is worthy of note that history has a way of repeating itself. Every event in antiquity serves as a mirror of reflection and provides numerous means of responding to current calamities. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic offers the church the ample opportunity to reach out with the Gospel of Jesus to areas that Christianity has received unfriendly treatment in recent history. Also, the disease outbreak is a wake-up call to the 21st-century church for spiritual revitalization. In past pandemics, Christianity has always proffer sustainable measures that have promoted the Christian faith and have drawn the attention of historians. Consequently, the church needs to stand in the gap for God's creation in this time of need. As a result, the momentous contribution of the Christian church since antiquity is worthy of consideration.

The Rise of Christianity⁵

The urgency of Christian response to global pandemics cannot be underestimated. How the church responds to the dilemma that befalls the world defines Christianity and its future in a society that is losing fate in both church and science. Alarming, in times of global panic, people, Christians included, are returning to traditions to seek guidance and solutions to threats that befalls them.⁶ This practice has brought back the traditional sacrifices and the shedding of blood as the means to avert all forms of intimidation. However, Stark in *The Rise of Christianity* explores some basic approaches to smallpox pandemics that took place in the West (165CE) and lasted for fifteen years, noting that from a quarter to the third of the empire's population died, including the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius himself.⁷ This pandemic was repeated in 251CE, which swept the Roman Empire and extended to the rural areas as hard as the cities.⁸ While this plague hit intensely on the Roman Empire with devastating results, it was such periods that promoted the rise of Christianity due to the response of the church at that time.⁹

to wave his sickle far and wide. Others shift the blame on moral and spiritual life of society, asserting that God might be punishing a set group of people because of certain practice like suppressing the economy of other nations, the compromise of faith within the church, the rise of LGBTQ theology and many more. This kind of blame game must stop because similar viewpoint led to the killing of many Israelites during the Black Death. Amotz Aza-el, "What Caused Coronavirus?," *The Jerusalem Post* / *JPost.Com*, last modified March 20, 2020, accessed March 21, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Middle-Israel-What-caused-corona-621630>.

⁵ The Christian movement is a phenomenon that describes the activities of early Christianity, which began in Jerusalem describing the primitive church that grew in Judea. The movement also refers to the Christ-confessing community in various cities of the Roman empire and outside of Palestine. Christianity was promoted through The Jesus Movement, which was established in the latter half of the first century. The Jesus Movement displays continuity, character and practice of the followers of Jesus in the early centuries. A basic reality associated with the Jesus Movement is their civic ideology. The movement was committed to promoting a democratic society that was friendly to all. These characterized the Christian identity up to the Reformation, with significant impact to contemporary Christianity. Meanwhile, Christianity grew in an atmosphere of poverty, though there were few wealthy men and women. However, the rate of poverty in the Roman Empire made the Empire vulnerable to all kinds of diseases, and Christianity took advantage of the spread of diseases to expand. Ekkehard Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, *Jesus Movement: A Social History Of Its First Century* (Edinburgh: A&C Black, 1999), 1; cf., Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, eds., *Christian Origins and the Establishment of the Early Jesus Movement* (Leiden and Boston: BRILL, 2018); Ralph J. Korner, *The Origin and Meaning of Ekklēsia in the Early Jesus Movement* (Leiden and Boston: BRILL, 2017); Jan N. Bremmer, *The Rise of Christianity Through the Eyes of Gibbon, Harnack and Rodney Stark: A Valedictory Lecture on the Occasion of His Retirement from the Chair of Religious Studies, in the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies* (Groningen: Barkhuis, 2010), 15.

⁶ Terence Ranger and Paul Slack, eds., *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the Historical Perception of Pestilence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 266.

⁷ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 73.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ David S. Potter, ed., *A Companion to the Roman Empire* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 587–606.

The history of Christianity covers the growth and expansion of Christianity within the ambiance of the Greco-Roman world. Cameron opines that emphasis on the systematic moral life plan and the transcendent ideological power in human history offered early Christianity a significant growth in the context of the Roman Empire.¹⁰ A study of Christianity deals considerably with the teaching and preaching of Jesus about the future and how it was expanded from Palestine, which constitutes the initial Christian mission of the early centuries.¹¹ Christianity arose in the Roman era due to the Romans and the Greeks removing themselves from the sick and exiting from the cities as quickly as possible to save themselves from the pestilence.¹² They (the Romans and the Greeks) left their loved ones to die of the plague to protect themselves. However, during the epidemic, Christians saw the situation differently, as James 1:2-4 was practically applied by Christians. Instead of running away, Christians saw the plague as an opportunity to deny themselves of all things and take up the cross of Jesus. The disease was an opportunity to depend on God and see God act in human history through the love that Christians demonstrated. Christians took charge of the abandoned sick, attending to their every need, both physical and spiritual, and as a result, those pagans who died departed this life serenely happy. Other Christians lost their lives in the stead of the forgotten sick pagans. In Dionysius compliment to those Christians who loved their neighbors to the point of giving up their lives for the heathen, he noted that “The best of our brothers lost their lives – presbyters, deacons, and laymen, receiving high commendation so that death in this form the outcome of inordinate piety, and strong faith seems in every way the equivalent of martyrdom.”¹³ As a result, the growth of Christianity in the Roman Empire was the moral character of Christians and faith and the preaching of the Gospel, which was ambiguous to pagan practices. It was not only that Christians and their Bible emphasized love and charity as the central duties of faith, but that these virtues were sustained through the everyday behaviors of Christians.

Consequently, Christianity did not instantly rise during the epidemic, but it grew after the plague and because there were many survivors among the pagans. Also, the demonstration of Christian love encouraged the pagans to subscribe to the Christian faith. The recovered pagans might have discovered that the Christians were willing to take the risk of death, and many Christians survived the plague. Foremost, pagans after the epidemic had close friends among Christians, and this increased attachment and established relationship to Christians heightened the odds of converting pagan survivors.

Without a doubt, healthcare had a significant impact on the antique growth of Christianity.¹⁴ Christian faith did not receive global reception because of a single factor; instead, multiple reasons contributed from a solid doctrinal foundation to the teaching of salvation through faith. Importantly, the significant and voluntary engagement of women in offering care and reaching out to other women showed pagans the promise of a life after death, which gave hope to dying pagans and many more who survived. These factors demonstrated sufficient reasons why historians assume that 30 million out of the 64 million populace in the Roman Empire were Christians by the third century.¹⁵ Thus, the legacies of the Jesus Movement remains the practice of modern Christianity, in leading sinners or the sick at the time of death.

Christian Models in Responding to Global Pandemics

The paradigms characterized by inspired faith and an impulse of love towards the needy were behind the growth of Christianity in antiquity. Foremost, the heroic sacrifices and love that Christians offer to society as rooted in Christlikeness, and the wisdom needed to respond to such pandemics require careful thought. In ancient times, Christians always had something to offer. For instance, in the epidemic of 251CE, Christianity offered a more satisfactory account as to why the terrible times had fallen upon humanity, and it projected a hopeful, even enthusiastic, portrait of the future. Foremost, in every aftermath of the epidemic, Christians made up the more significant percentage of the population that survived. Stark avers that, in every widespread disease or pandemic, the larger society was left without interpersonal attachment that had previously obliged them to the conventional moral order. However, it is the survival rate of Christians that often provided pagans and unbelievers the social networks and replaced their lost attachments.¹⁶ In some instances, Christians during the

¹⁰ Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 3.

¹¹ Sean Freyne, *The Jesus Movement and Its Expansion: Meaning and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014), 8.

¹² Alan Cross, *When Heaven and Earth Collide: Racism, Southern Evangelicals, and the Better Way of Jesus* (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2014), 267.

¹³ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 82.

¹⁴ Hector Avalos, *Health Care and the Rise of Christianity* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1999).

¹⁵ Kevin W. Kaatz, *The Rise of Christianity: History, Documents, and Key Questions* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2015), 192.

¹⁶ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 74–75.

time of epidemics were described as confident, and the mortality rate was often recorded higher among pagans. Accordingly, in 251CE, Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, understood the reality of the epidemic, and non-Christians were once depicted as afraid. However, Christians who died were described as “called to refreshment,” while the ungodly to “torture.” Similarly, in addressing Alexandrian Christians, Dionysius affirmed that, while people may think that this is not the time of the festival, for the Christians, the period of the epidemic is not of distress but unimaginable joy.¹⁷

Christians demonstrated the pastoral care model of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 10:8 in responding to global outbreaks, which can be illustrated thus. First, during the black death that swept Zurich in 1519, Zwingli, who was on a mineral-spring vacation, rushed back to his city to minister to victims. Though Zwingli himself was soon caught up with the diseases, he soon recovered to write a famous plague hymn, recounting his sense of trust and his joy in regaining his health.¹⁸ Second, Luther, who was willing to sacrifice his life and his pregnant wife to minister to those infected with the Black Death that was spread by the bites of fleas, and even when there were several calls for him to flee from the hit city of Wittenberg. Luther’s mind was determined to help the infected, and his house became a nursing home for sick people. This reality describes the passion that ministers of the Gospel possess in times of changes, fear, and uncertainty.

Christians must be willing to care for the sick. The period that Luther opened his home to care for the infected was an opportunity to preach Christ, not waiting until the final moments of the dying people; momentarily, they had enough time to make a conscious decision for Christ. It is indeed during the severe effect of the plague and the experiences of Luther that he wrote the renowned hymn “A Mighty Fortress” to describe the political, social, natural, and spiritual instability of society and the need for God’s people to depend solely on God’s protection and promises amid chaos.¹⁹

Furthermore, the cholera pandemic of 1665 brought Spurgeon and the Puritans to the touchstone of Christian service. Chang outlined five conceptualized models that Spurgeon adopted, including prioritizing local ministry, adjusting meetings and not stopping church sessions, caring for the sick, being open to evangelistic opportunities, and entrusting all to God.²⁰ In prioritizing local ministry, Spurgeon resolved to preach in villages availing himself to the sick, pointing them towards the Gospel and God’s comfort.

Meanwhile, Congregations continued to meet but not in disobedience to medical instructions and advice or instituted government restrictions; however, homes provided the church with new opportunities to reach out to unbelievers and inactive members. Spurgeon did not focus on itinerant preaching but specifically on care for the church and community. Coronavirus disease has led to the stricture measures and closure of church buildings as people were asked to stay home. However, facilities were closed and not the church because the church is a living organism and not limited to auditoriums. In such stringent situations, pastors and church leaders must re-strategize and promote cell-church to promote fellowship, encourage believers, and prioritize society in trying times.

Cell-fellowship is a biblical New Testament model that promotes commonality, service and provides individual Christian the opportunity to offer assistance and encourage genuine fellowship (Acts 12:5-17; 16:15). Comiskey avers that household churches in the first century met in private domestic houses and rooms used for Christian purposes. The house church provided teaching and preaching ministries, baptismal instructions, and other missional activities. Above all, it allowed the early Christians to have prayer meetings and celebrate the Lord’s Supper.²¹ Comiskey further noted that the cell-church strategy unites the body of Christ to feel more connected across different cultures and denominations. Consequently, it creates a good network among Christians, encourages brethren, promotes learning capabilities, and focuses on helping each believer become a disciple-maker.²² Thus, the importance of the local meeting of believers is the primary focus of New Testament

¹⁷ Ibid., 80.

¹⁸ “Black Death Inspires Zwingli’s Plague Hymn,” *Christian History | Learn the History of Christianity & the Church*, accessed March 25, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-4/black-death-inspires-zwinglis-plague-hymn.html>.

¹⁹ The Chorus In The Chaos, “Martin Luther and His Incredible Response to the Black Plague,” *The Chorus In The Chaos*, March 5, 2020, accessed March 25, 2020, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/chorusinthechaos/martin-luther-and-the-black-plague/>.

²⁰ Geoff Chang, “5 Lessons from Spurgeon’s Ministry in a Cholera Outbreak,” *The Gospel Coalition*, n.d., accessed March 25, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/spurgeon-ministry-cholera-outbreak/>.

²¹ Joel Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church: Developing Disciples Who Make Disciples* (Moreno Valley, CA: CCS Publishing, 2012), 93.

²² Joel Comiskey, *From 12 to 3: How to Apply G-12 Principles in Your Church* (Moreno Valley, CA: CCS Publishing, 2015); cf., Steve Atkerson, ed., *House Church - Simple, Strategic, Scriptural* (Atlanta, GA: NT Reformation Fellowship, 2008); Rad Zdero, *The Global House Church Movement* (Pasadena, California:

Christianity that was promoted in the early centuries of Christian expansion. Its significance is both for social and religious activities as the church often assumed a central role in the life of individuals and families.²³

Modern technology provides the church with a broader opportunity and can serve as an evangelical strategy in redeeming society and culture. Christian gatherings should promote digital worship and reach out with messages of encouragement grounded in the Bible. The legacy of the Reformed Church during the 1918-1919 United States flu epidemic that killed millions of people globally is particularly relevant in this instance. Christian Reformed members responded by conducting worship services at homes. Like the 1918 flu, churches disobeyed government orders to continue with Sunday gatherings, which left a tainted scar with widespread indignation upon churches that disregarded orders to safeguard the community's health.²⁴ The COVID-19 outbreak gives an opportunity to the church and a chance to preach the Gospel but strategically. In a COVID-19 pandemic and the call for a swift response from the church, the home church model is relevant. It can both safeguard the peace and health of society and the community of believers and the quest for an immediate overhauling of the disease. Thus, this calls for a collaborative and dialogical approach among Christian leaders so that the church is not inconspicuous and silent.

Responding to Global Pandemics in Modern History

Moral degradation plays a significant role in acute punishment that society faces. In modern civilization, the situation may not be far from real; however, lack of attention to God's creation, immorality, lukewarm ecclesiastical attitude, and the competition among nations to suppress the other may contribute to the tsunamic disasters, epidemics, and virus outbreaks. Like the early centuries, Christianity is supposed to offer more adequate measures in responding to these challenges. On the 9th of January 2020, the World Health Organization announced an outbreak of a new – or – novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) discovered in China city of Wuhan.²⁵ However, COVID-19²⁶ was declared a global pandemic on Wednesday, 11th March 2020, and for the first time in modern history, put a halt to globalization and the villagization of contemporary society. Human ability and capability are stretched in the search for a cure. World powers became scared and brought to their knees as borders were closed, and travel restrictions enforced. The world economy has crumble and in a state of uncertainty. For the first time in modern history, some politicians abandon their political agenda and uniting to fight a common enemy that threatens human existence. Enemies have become friends and willing to accept each other's aid, be it intellectual, moral, or physical (medical). The World Health Organization (WHO) wrote, "We are in this together to do the right things with calm and protect the citizens of the world. it is doable."²⁷

Astoundingly, some parts of humanity are forced back to morality and spirituality with a reconsideration of what the future holds because of fear and ambiguity. On the other hand, some families had the opportunity to rebuild and reunite with their loved ones. Many homes were full as some children got the attention of their parents, so do husbands and wives. The mortal body itself did receive attention and care as people stay home. Creation is allowed to enjoy freedom; nature takes its due place as streets remain quiet with wild animals romping deserted streets. Literary, birds are singing, and the breeze blows freely and unpolluted. Some relationships between neighbors and close relations are being restored. Individualism is giving way to a collaborative relationship. Several people within the neighborhood have developed friendships for fear of the

William Carey Library, 2004), 133; Steve Cordle, *The Church In Many Houses: Reaching Your Community Through Cell-Based Ministry* (Moreno Valley, CA: CCS Publishing, 2014).

²³ Paul Toews and Kevin Enns-Rempel, *For Everything a Season: Mennonite Brethren in North America, 1874-2002 : An Informal History* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Kindred Productions, 2002), 137.

²⁴ Anxious Bench, "What the 1918 Influenza Pandemic Meant for American Churches," *Anxious Bench*, March 10, 2020, accessed March 25, 2020, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2020/03/influenza-pandemic-1918-churches/>.

²⁵ Peter Brookes, *The 2019 Coronavirus: How to Think about It and How to Respond* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 2020), 6.

²⁶ According to Norton, coronaviruses are larger group of viruses that can cause sickness in both humans and animals. People get infected without knowing and can infect others without showing any symptom of sickness, which makes it dangerous. The virus is called "coronavirus" because of its crown-like spiky surface. Though other types of virus have been discovered in the past, this kind of virus was learned in 2019 and, therefore, called coronavirus disease 2019. This virus is a respiratory disease that causes diarrhea, flu, cough, headache, muscle pain and can lead to complication and pneumonia. Greg Norton, *Coronavirus Outbreak: How to Stay Safe and What They Do Not Want You to Know About COVID-19?* (Smashwords: Digital Publishing Group, 2020).

²⁷ "WHO Director-General's Opening Remarks at the Media Briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020," accessed March 21, 2020, <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>.

unknown. Once again, reunion and reconciliation define society's character, where love, peace, and sympathy are evident, and care for the needy and the aged are rekindled.

Despite these new norms, the coronavirus pandemic has created fear and anxiety. Social life in many nations is suspended as close friends maintain distance with no handshakes. Ordinary life within the society is disrupted, and urban life's rhythm has changed with movements restricted for fear of contracting or spreading the virus. Schools remained closed, and businesses are not as usual. For instance, the Nigerian situation records skyrocketing of the price of goods as people take advantage of the demand to hike commodities prices. For example, in Nairobi, shopping malls were full during the first weeks of declaring COVID-19 a pandemic, with people scrambling to stock their homes with basic amenities and maintain good hygiene because of fear. Public gatherings are reduced to a minimal percentage.

Meanwhile, in the history of epidemics, doctors and instituted authorities, together with concerned citizens, always follow the pattern of public health measures in controlling infectious diseases, which are usually mandated and provided by government establishments.²⁸ All of these are efforts to curb the spread of the virus. Sadly, social media worldwide promote the devastating effect of coronavirus fear, with little attention given to the successes recorded and the number of recovered cases. Amid all this hopelessness, many look up to the church for answers, which Christians must strive to provide.

While the world unites in fighting a common enemy, Africa, a dependent on the West, braced up with swift measures in addressing the global threat and engaging itself in restructuring for self-dependence. Coronavirus disease is not a respecter of anyone, nation, tribe, or religion; indeed, the rich also cry as more world leaders and the elite class test positive and many succumb to its effect in death. Both the rich and the poor either die or recover. For instance, It is ironic that many Africans celebrated the coming of the COVID-19 pandemic because the disease has challenged the political class to wake up for the first time to national issues that concern and affect ordinary citizens, primarily healthcare infrastructure. Many who travel abroad for healthcare and whose business investments are established in foreign lands could not access these services. However, the unfortunate effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in China, Italy, Spain, and North America raises concern as the contagion is likened to "war" as people die in hundreds daily. Medical responses have become challenging in fighting what is described as an unknown enemy that is not fightable with traditional arms.²⁹

In all these, the church ought to rise to offer sustainable measures of drawing people to the cross of Christ so that what seems a temporal result may become permanent. Shamefully, the church is not doing very well in the help to fight the virus. Some church leaders have sent fake prophetic messages and encouraged their congregation not to obey instituted authorities, putting people's health at risk. Thus, many have been exposed to contracting the virus because of overcrowding in church buildings. Using Nigeria as an example, pastors and church leadership are described as nonchalant. The emphasis was shifted to asking people to send money (offerings and tithes) to designated accounts because they could not attend church services on Sunday. There was little or no consideration of the economic situation of the congregants. While the church was to help cushion the people's pain, little seem to be done towards their welfare.

The church has become a place that people would rather not be because of the lack of a genuine church partnership resulting in transformation. Brooks describes the church as a fortress built to keep the community's struggles outside or patronize social-service entities that prescribe answers to the community.³⁰ Many Christian organizations do not have a long term welfare program to return to in times of emergencies. This reality has questioned the real purpose of church existence, as many depend on government or non-governmental agencies for support, and others have remained mute. Contemporary Christianity must grow from becoming a receiving organization to the one that gives out, especially in times of challenges that threaten society.

The Relevance of Christian Models in Responding to Global Pandemics

Disease and illness affect human life though they have both pathological reality and social construction, connected to social and political changes.³¹ Also, complacency is contagious, and viruses and ailments can cause social tension and propagate pandemics. The changes that affect society can be extended to medical responses, explore the government's complex role, and professionalization. Its effect can be

²⁸ Judith Laurence Pastore, ed., *Confronting AIDS Through Literature: The Responsibilities of Representation* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 199.

²⁹ Angela Giuffrida, "Italian Nurse: 'An Experience I Would Compare to a World War,'" *The Guardian*, last modified March 13, 2020, accessed March 23, 2020, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/13/italian-doctor-an-experience-i-would-compare-to-a-world-war>.

³⁰ Jonathan Brooks, *Church Forsaken: Practicing Presence in Neglected Neighborhoods* (InterVarsity Press, 2018), 15.

³¹ J. N. Hays, *The Burdens of Disease: Epidemics and Human Response in Western History* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 1.

demographic, economic, and spiritual, leading to stagnation and the falling of the human population. Both historically and traditionally, pestilences are often connected with God's wrath;³² nevertheless, Christians always have a way of responding to those diseases, and the Roman Empire often describe Christianity as a healing religion because of the positive result in depending on the God of the Christians. Though modern society is different from early Christianity, the church is often considered to offer. Therefore, as Christians arise to their responsibility in the fight against pandemics, the lessons of the early Christian Movement are relevant to contemporary Christian responses.

Showing Sacrificial Love for the Affected

Early Christian communities took on themselves the responsibility of nursing the sick and considered it an essential obligation, which resulted in the rapid growth of Christianity. Christian service towards humanity must not promote religiosity because service is not an option for Christian life but a duty. Nevertheless, for Christianity to remain relevant in an ever-changing society, it must rekindle its sacrificial commitment towards the needy. Note, throughout Christian response to diseases, Christianity has always offered to the world both the promised power of God and His healing, which are practically demonstrated in the diligent care of ailing members of society. Notably, Christian communities reacted and responded to epidemics differently throughout history; nevertheless, they are always described as responding practically and their response striking.³³ One can, therefore, assert that Christian response throughout history to different pandemics can be characterized with care, compassion, and service to the diseases that ravaged the more densely populated places of the Roman empire.³⁴

Consequently, individual personal attitude is critical in responding to challenges that befall a society. Christians exist to glorify God and serve the community. In times of need, the identity of the church can be affirmed, and the presence of the church strengthened. Therefore, the Christian call to service must be put into effect as society seeks everyone's support in fighting the disease outbreak. Christians must be willing to offer sacrifices without expecting anything in return as material benefits, nor use the opportunity to enrich themselves. The prophetic voice of Christianity is faith that recognizes and empathize with the sufferings of people in dire need.

Therefore, the church ought to be willing to spend her resources and energy, promoting this traditional prophetic relationship that defines the true church and not waiting for government or some free support elsewhere. Since antiquity, isolating religious beliefs from practices destroys the true pillars of the Christian faith, which is rooted in Christ's teachings and practices. The teachings of Jesus in Luke 6:31; Matthew 25:31-46 are to spur Christians to love and care for the sick and the dying. These biblical injunctions cannot be different from 21st century Christianity.

Maintaining an Optimistic Approach

Pandemics do cause global panic as people display doubt and fear. Many are misguided by the countless information both from media and the news people receive daily by other means. In the early church period, the revitalization and historical development of Christianity arose in response to chaos, fear, misery, and life brutality in the Greco-Roman world. Christianity arose to offer new forms of life and hopes to a falling society with a new and expanded sense of family life and social solidarity.³⁵ Christians in the time of pandemics have never been described as fearful nor lost hope in the power of a healing God. They (Christians) have promoted a sustainable enthusiasm in times of challenges. The disciplined mind has remained fundamental in times of trials, though they do not know how things might turn out to be; nevertheless, Christians have remained convinced of God's faithfulness and see every challenge as God's sovereign plan. However, at the heart of an optimist Christian is humility.³⁶ For instance, Bailey submits that Calvin displayed a heroic character of visiting homes during the first outbreak of the Black Death epidemic, never giving up on the infected citizens and immigrants. As a result, they recorded multiple conversions.³⁷

³² John Aberth, *Plagues in World History* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 25–28.

³³ Noah Riseman, Sue Rechter, and Ellen Warne, eds., *Learning, Teaching and Social Justice in Higher Education* (Melbourne: UoM Custom Book Centre, 2010), 155.

³⁴ Ron Scott Sanders, *After the Election: Prophetic Politics in a Post-Secular Age* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), 133.

³⁵ Leif E. Vaage, ed., *Religious Rivalries in the Early Roman Empire and the Rise of Christianity* (Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), 229.

³⁶ William G. Covington, *Individual Achievement in Social Systems from a Christian Perspective* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc., 2002), 85.

³⁷ Greg Bailey, "Serving Christ in a Time of Plague," *Ligonier Ministries*, accessed March 25, 2020, <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/serving-christ-in-a-time-of-plague/>.

It is of concern about how contemporary Christians are responding to challenges. Like the children of Israel, Christians are more fearful and displaying a lack of trust in God. An example from Scripture is worthy of note; in 1 Samuel 7, Israel faced a far-superior enemy with a more sophisticated military force, which made Israel tremble. However, in the passage, two things can be learned; first, Samuel led the people in prayer amidst the panic, and second, he offered a burnt offering before the Lord. Consequently, God responded with a thunderstorm that confused the Philistines, and Israel was able to defeat their enemies in battle. Prayer and praise are two optimistic measures of responding to challenges of all kinds. Prayer, repentance, and a lifestyle change are virtues for reestablishing a relationship with God. Morgan offered Christians ten lessons from the Red sea experience of Israel, affirming that in order to be confident during trials, the following are the essential requirement:

First, realizing that God wants us to be where we are. Second, Christians must be more concerned for the glory of God than for self-relief. Third, believers must acknowledge the challenge; nevertheless, they must fix their eyes on God alone. Forth, prayer is vital, and Christians must remain calm, confident and give God the time to work through the challenge. Next, it is logical to take some measures by faith. Also, Christians must learn to envision God's enveloping presence. What Christians need next is to trust God to deliver them in His unique way. Foremost, Christians must learn to view the current crisis as a faith-building opportunity to take us to the next level. Above all, believers should not forget to praise Him when He delivers them.³⁸

These characteristics are evidence of an optimistic Christian, which is consequential when the believer is in a good relationship with God. Christians need to develop an unconditional and personal relationship with God, which could help build confidence and admonish society's trust in the church's contribution.

Preaching a Message of Hope and Repentance

The church must rise and challenge society to return to God. A message of repentance and hope brings restoration both to the body of Christ and nations. Pandemics are disasters and threats that can result in catastrophic loss of life, leading to environmental changes and threatens the extinction of human life.³⁹ Throughout the history of epidemics, the church has remained active in helping areas that are hit with the disease and preaching the good news. The world needs poignant sermons that center on salvation, redemption, and the love of God. The mission of the church has been challenged within the context of religious pluralism. However, the mission of the church is witnessing the kingdom of God, and therefore, the centrality of the Christian Gospel must focus on systematic, eschatological theology that stresses eternal concerns.

Christian eschatology affirms the idea of the resurrection of the dead, founded upon the resurrection of Jesus. However, much of society is familiar with the afterlife. Still, the concept of life beyond death is vague and undefined and is more of a cultural idea about spiritual survival than something based on the biblical notion of the resurrection of the body and all its implications. Rausch submits that:

When the early Christians celebrated the Eucharist, their eschatological imagination was much in evidence. They expressed their faith communally and saw themselves as the saints or the holy ones, the redeemed community, and sharing evidence of the Triune God. The gathering of believers on Sunday was to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus, the Eucharist itself symbolized the huge messianic banquet in the kingdom, and the liturgical celebrations were expressed in prayer, which includes a present and future reference and postures the faith and hope of the believers in the Lord's return.⁴⁰

Preaching is more than just a communication of the good news to the people. It is inviting people to be immersed in God's dramatic theological narrative in His continuous unfolding reality through time. However, Christians of the 21st century raise the question of biblical relevance to contemporary Christianity and the challenges that confront modern society. In Barton's perspective, what connects or separates humanity from the past and the future is time; nevertheless, it is through time that we look back and make sense of history from which we have come from and is the road upon which the prospect of God's future is currently becoming a reality.⁴¹

The eschatological preaching of the Word helps both church and society understand God's theological framework in understanding His dealing with creation. It equally unveils the biblical hope and promises of God as people are drawn to meditate on God's love, His promised blessings, and His unreserved judgment upon an unrepentant society. Therefore, the church is God's instrument to remind the world of God's blessings and

³⁸ Robert Morgan, *The Red Sea Rules: 10 God-Given Strategies for Difficult Times* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2014).

³⁹ William Doyle, *A Message For Our Times* (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2013), 54.

⁴⁰ Thomas P. Rausch, *Eschatology, Liturgy and Christology: Toward Recovering an Eschatological Imagination* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2012), 1.

⁴¹ Casey C. Barton, *Preaching Through Time: Anachronism as a Way Forward for Preaching* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017), 59.

judgment, which kindles the heart to look up to God and seek refuge in Him and concretize the human spirit to reverence God as the creator of the universe. Thus, the preaching of the Word, past, present, and future, reminds the world of God's judgment and gives hope to God's people of a sure deliverance.⁴²

The Task before the Church of the 21st Century

The contemporary church has a responsibility to the community of saints, government, physicians committed to promoting the healthcare of society, and God. Christians must take advantage of the available means to reach out with the Gospel. The world needs to turn back to God, and the church is the instrument He uses to actualize His purpose. Christian organizations must promote a message of peace and hope. Believers should be willing to take the risk of helping the needy. In a world of technological advancement, the church must be innovative; Christian medical experts and stakeholders must rise to offer moral, intellectual, and financial support in combatting the pandemic. While the world is calling on citizens to make sacrifices, Christians must be at the forefront of making such personal commitment and advocating for a comprehensive response.

The Christian world has the most advanced medical knowledge and medical sectors. Like in Nigeria, some of the best medical hospitals belong to Christian stakeholders and church denominations, which the church can work towards developing and offering humanitarian and medical services. Also, in times of pandemics, economic hardships are evident. In such periods, people's expectations of the church to provide material and moral assistance are rated highly. To combat such pandemics like the coronavirus disease, faith-based organizations can collaborate with non-governmental organizations to campaign, support, and inform the population about the disease by distributing literature from a Christian worldview.⁴³ These religious organizations have high chances of impacting society and are described as having the most influential role in dealing with social networks, social norms, and social capital formation.⁴⁴ The pandemic contagion is not a time for Christians to take advantage of the economy or the social restrictions to enrich themselves; neither is it a time for churches to be nonchalant towards the dilemma that affects society. Christians ought to show acts of diligent service with total dependence on God's sovereign wisdom to avert the disease.

II. CONCLUSION

The church is the body of Christ with strength, credibility, and grounded in society to glorify God. Over the years, the Christian community has remained relevant and offers her prophetic voice to combat societal issues. The study of the rise of Christianity is inevitably necessary that requires a collaborative approach. The contributions of Christian movements are decisively foregrounded in the conceptualization of a reawakened paradigmatic integration of Christianity in the 21st century. This provides the church with the avenue to offer a contextual approach that could bring the world back to God in times of trouble such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering the urgency of the above, therefore, it is right to emphasize that the time to reflect on the models that contributed to the rise and success of Christianity is now.

⁴² C. H. Spurgeon, *The Complete Sermons of C. H. Spurgeon, Book 1 (Vol. 1-3)* (Louisville, KY: Lulu.com, 2015), 194; cf., Nancy Guthrie, *Hearing Jesus Speak into Your Sorrow* (Carol Stream, Illinois: NavPress, 2015); Norbert Lohfink and Erich Zenger, *The God of Israel and the Nations: Studies in Isaiah and the Psalms* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2000).

⁴³ Elias Kifon Bongmba, *Facing a Pandemic: The African Church and the Crisis of HIV/AIDS* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007), 23.

⁴⁴ Michael Bollig et al., eds., *Aridity, Change and Conflict in Africa: Proceedings of an International ACACIA Conference Held at Königswinter, Germany, October 1-3, 2003* (Bielefeld: Heinrich-Barth-Institut, 2007), 441.

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