Pentecostal spirituality in the context of faith and hope gospel (prosperity preaching): African Pentecostal response to the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract
Covid-19 has challenged humanity in several ways and has created the opportunity for reflection on our spirituality and the hope for divine healing of the world, while scientific communities do their best to find solutions to the pandemic from their perspective. In light of this, the article seeks to address issues of spirituality in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and how the Pentecostal community is responding to this challenge through the preaching of faith and hope messages. The article addresses the issue of “prosperity preaching” from the perspective of the concept of faith and hope gospel. The article argues that the faith and hope messages of the Pentecostals are not only proclaimed as means of the spiritual sustainability of members but also for psychological/emotional stability. It also argues that although Pentecostals are doing their best in their religious and spiritual response to the pandemic, they should accommodate the application of the theology of the sovereignty of God in every situation and encourage their members to seek medical attention where applicable.

KEYWORDS
African Pentecostalism, Covid-19, faith and hope gospel, prosperity preaching, pentecostal spirituality, spirituality

1 | INTRODUCTION
Human life is dynamic and full of issues over which we have no control. Covid-19 is not the first pandemic experienced by humankind. Pandemics, plagues, and disasters are part of human existence. Some of these occurrences are recorded in the Bible.¹

The Covid-19 pandemic is one of the most threatening pandemics in human history and has not only impacted the health and economic conditions of the world, but also the religious life of people. Religious lives were especially affected during the lockdown period.² During the lockdown, believers were unable to participate in the on-site congregational worship as they needed. In this context, people were encouraged to strengthen personal and family devotion and to develop a personal relationship with God as a means of addressing their spiritual needs.

Covid-19 has challenged humanity in several ways. The challenges have not only had a negative effect on humanity but also taught us to look for new ways of understanding and approaching spirituality. In exploring new ways, we often use the phrase: “the new normal.” In the context of
this new normal, the pandemic has helped the church, and for that matter believers, to reflect on their spirituality and develop their hope for divine healing of the world, as scientific communities do their best to find medical solutions to the pandemic.

Although church traditions have in their various contexts responded to the COVID-19 challenges, this article seeks to address issues of spirituality in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with reference to the response of the African Pentecostal community to this challenge through its preaching of faith and hope messages. The article discusses Pentecostal spirituality in the context of COVID-19 such as the call for prayer, deliverance, and healing of the nations, preaching of faith and hope gospel, the use of bible verses for faith declaration, demystifying and democratization of the holy communion, as well as the shift to e-congregations/e-ecclesia and the challenge to loyal membership. I also discuss the importance of a balanced theology of healing and the sovereignty of God in every situation. I approach the discussions in this article from the perspective of the Classical Pentecostal and the Neo-Pentecostal Churches. For the purposes of clarity: Classical Pentecostal Churches are the traditional mainline Pentecostal Churches that follow the ethos, dogmas, and praxis of the proponents of the Azusa Street revival. The majority of Classical Pentecostal Churches have structured leadership and administration, well-written church constitutions, and church polity. The Neo-Pentecostal Churches, on the other hand, are independent churches that came into existence after the charismatic renewal of the 1960s and 1970s both within and outside of mainline Protestant Churches.

2 | PENTECOSTAL SPIRITUALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

Spirituality is the core of the Christian experience and the encounter with God in real life and action. Missiologically, it is the means by which churches and individual believers participate in the mission of God, through the way they live in and by the Holy Spirit, in order to discern the will of God with regard to what He is doing in their context and to do the same. Although there is no consensus on what spiritual experience means or how it can best be studied, most modern approaches to Christian spirituality note that it is an ongoing existential phenomenon. Kourie argues that there are diverse spiritualities, each one culture-specific, expressing its own historical, sociological, theological, linguistic, and philosophical orientation. Although there are diverse approaches and views on spirituality, Christian spirituality is inherently Trinitarian spirituality. This Trinitarian spiritual relationship with God was initiated by the Father (Godhead) through the work of Jesus Christ and becomes effective in the Holy Spirit.

As a matter of fact, despite the various challenges of COVID-19 to humanity, it has increased the spirituality of believers in their engagement and encounter with God for divine intervention, healing, protection, and provision. This became evident among African Pentecostals because, in the African context certain types of ill health, evil, or misfortune are usually explained in terms of the work of negative supernatural forces. It is not surprising that the coronavirus has been framed as an “evil virus.” This view is affirmed by one of the leading Neo-Pentecostal figures in Africa, Archbishop Nicolas Duncan-Williams of Action Chapel International. In one of his sermons before the total lockdown, he called the spread of the virus “a demonic attack from Satan.” This was the belief of many Pentecostal ministers and believers. Pentecostals’ response to the pandemic manifested in the following ways: Call for prayer, deliverance, and healing of the nations; Preaching of faith and hope gospel; The use of bible verses for faith declaration; Demystifying and democratization of the holy communion; and The shift to e-congregations/e-ecclesia and the challenge of loyal membership.

2.1 | Call for prayer, deliverance, and healing of the nations

In addressing the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, African Pentecostals resorted to the concept of deliverance from the bondage of Satan and evil forces. This approach was strengthened by the embedded African view of demonic attack and evil forces that perpetrate calamities. Problematizing Covid-19 and other pandemics in terms of supernatural evil, means that the responses to pandemics included the deployment of religious resources for supernatural intervention.

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, African Christian communities expressed their own opinions on what could be the cause of the pandemic. Some Pentecostals perceived the pandemic to be either an attack of the devil, the wrath of God due to sin, or an action of God to call the nations to repentance. To substantiate this claim, Pentecostal preachers and practitioners referred to biblical events of a similar nature such as the flood in Genesis 6-8, and the plagues recorded in Exodus 7-12.

In their response to the perceived non-scientific cause of the COVID-19 pandemic, they appealed to scriptures as part of the spiritual remedy, for example, 2 Chronicles 7:14:

"If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek
my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”

Pentecostals’ spiritual interpretations of the above scripture is that the sinfulness of humanity has reached its peak, hence the pandemic. As a result of this perceived understanding and interpretation of the cause of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pentecostal Churches in South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya made nationwide calls for repentance, prayer, and fasting. The calls for nationwide prayer were not limited to the Pentecostal Churches but were also accepted by some African leaders.

There were two appeals for national prayer from President Cyril Ramaphosa. The first was on March 26, 2020, and the second in his speech on May 26, 2020, entitled A call for a day of prayer on coronavirus. In his opening remark he stated:

This evening, I would like to address you on matters that are of great importance to many people in our country – firstly, the call by religious leaders for a day of prayer as the country unites against the coronavirus pandemic… We have a responsibility to also take care of the spiritual, psychological, and emotional well-being of all South Africans. In helping our nation to cope with these difficulties, we acknowledge and welcome the call that has been made by our religious leaders for a day of prayer. Prayer will comfort and strengthen us as we continue to confront this pandemic.

Similarly, during a breakfast prayer meeting held on March 19, 2020, at the Presidency of Ghana (Jubilee House), President Akufo-Addo urged leaders of the Christian Council present at the meeting and Christians, in general, to call on God, whom he believes has the power to heal and restore Ghana. Interestingly, he emphasized the call by quoting Psalm 9:10 and 2 Chronicles 7:14, and said:

“These are not ordinary times, and in such times the country, where the population is predominately Christian, must seek the face of the most high God for healing and restoration.”

The call by the two presidents for a day of prayer was accepted by the Pentecostal community, which believed that prayers and intercession would bring divine healing and deliverance. It was also seen as a means to secure the forgiveness and the mercies of God for the nations.

### 2.2 Preaching of faith and hope gospel (prosperity preaching)

The devastating and psychological effect of the pandemic led to the majority of Pentecostal ministers preaching sermons that ignite faith and hope in the lives of members. This approach to their sermons was informed by the Pentecostal theological emphasis on personal transformation, healing, deliverance, prosperity, and wellbeing. In view of this, African Pentecostals often employ and apply the theology of faith and hope in their preaching as a biblical foundation for liberation theology.

In this article, I refuse to use the term “prosperity gospel” as some scholars do. My position is informed by the fact that prosperity gospel does not exist from either a biblical or a theological perspective. I approve the use of the term “prosperity theology,” largely because it falls under the umbrella of liberation theology. I feel more comfortable with using the term “faith and hope gospel,” since the term “gospel” refers to the proclamation of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the salvation of humankind. The basic definition of the word gospel is usually in reference to the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ – the bloodshed through his death, and resurrection. In other words, the message concerning Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God, and salvation.

I used prosperity theology as faith and hope gospel to establish the fact that the gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel that stirs faith and brings hope to humanity. The faith and hope gospel is defined as the gospel that addresses the spiritual, emotional, social, and material needs of people by using scriptures that bring hope and inspire people to exercise their faith for breakthrough and transformation in their lives. The practitioners and adherents of the faith and hope gospel are encouraged to look beyond their circumstances and believe in God for miracles, to have hope and exercise their faith in every situation. My contention here is that this should, however, be approached in the context of the sovereignty of God.

Faith and hope are distinct yet related. The concepts are related as seen in Hebrews 11:1: “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen.”

Biblically, faith is a complete trust or confidence in God. It involves intellectual assent to a set of facts and trust in those facts. Biblical hope is built on faith. Hope is the earnest anticipation that comes with believing for something good. It is a confident expecta-
tion that naturally stems from faith. Hope is a peaceful assurance that something that has not happened yet will indeed happen. Hope must involve something that is yet unseen. Further, faith and hope are complementary. Faith is grounded in the reality of the past; hope is looking to the reality of the future. Without faith, there is no hope, and without hope, there is no true faith. Christians are people of faith and hope.  

Therefore, proclaiming the message of faith and hope in the Pentecostal sphere, in the face of the pandemic, enabled people to keep their faith and hope in God for divine protection, healing, and deliverance. Apart from the issues of health, healing, and protection, people who lost their jobs were encouraged to keep believing in God for miracles and job opportunities to meet their families needs.

### 2.3 The use of bible verses for faith declaration

Preaching of the faith and hope sermons among Pentecostal believers led to the practice of faith declaration. In Pentecostal theology, faith declaration is a major praxis in affirmation of faith in the word of God. This practice is based on the literal reading of two main scriptures: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit” (Prov. 18:21). And Jesus’ statement: “For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says” (Mark 11:23).

Some faith declarations during the lockdown period were based on Exodus 12:13, which says, “The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.” Others were based on Isaiah 53:5 and on 1 Peter 2:24 – “By his stripes, we were healed.”

Another passage that received much attention is Psalm 91:1-6:

He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge and my fortress; My God, in Him I will trust. For He will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler, You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, or the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday.”

These scriptures became very common in Pentecostal churches and members were encouraged to keep declaring them as a form of prayer for divine protection against the COVID-19 virus. In the Pentecostal context, these scriptures were approached and confessed in a literal manner.

### 2.4 Demystifying and democratization of the holy communion

Holy Communion is an important sacrament in many Christian traditions. It forms part of the liturgical rituals. The Apostle Paul used the term “Communion” to describe the nature of the Lord’s Supper. Paul used the Greek term *koinonia* to express the basic meaning of the Christian faith, a sharing in the life and death of Christ which radically creates a united relationship between Christ and the believer, and the believers with one another. It is a memorial celebrated by the early church to signify Jesus’ sacrificial death for the sins of mankind as the paschal Lamb of atonement.

Administering and participating in communion is an important component of the doctrine of the church. In many churches only ordained ministers are allowed to officiate and administer communion. In the Pentecostal context, the core spiritual practices and divine encounter are exercised through prayer, fasting, reading, and meditation and discernment of scriptures. However, during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, and more especially during total lockdown, many Pentecostal believers resorted to the use of and administration of family communion. Though it is unusual for Pentecostal believers to demystify and democratize the concept of the breaking of bread as many believe that the communion can only be administered by ordained ministers and church elders, the shift took place when there was no opportunity for on-site congregational meetings and church services due to lockdown regulations.

At the peak of the lockdown restrictions and protocols, some prominent Pentecostal ministers began to follow in the footsteps of the biblical exodus experience and event, whereby family heads were given the responsibility to lead the Passover meal/the feast of unleavened bread and perform the rituals (Ex. 12). The communion was demystified and democratized with a view to securing divine protection during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There have been testimonies of people who claimed to be healed through the practice of taking communion when
they were in a critical condition after they were infected by the virus. On March 18, 2020, some West African news outlets reported the testimony of a medical practitioner, Dr Amade Emmanuel, who narrated his experience of getting infected with the COVID-19 virus during the lockdown. According to him, one of the things that kept him going was his meditation on the word of God and partaking in communion. I heard similar testimonies from some Pentecostal believers. Although they are not ordained ministers, they assumed the responsibility of officiating and practicing daily family communion. In their view, this approach to communion resonates with the Passover celebration in Exodus 12, and the practice of the breaking of bread from house to house as recorded in Acts 2:46.

Although it is an uncommon practice among Pentecostal believers, the bold decision by some members of the Pentecostal churches to demystify the communion did not only give them the opportunity to practice their faith, but also helped them to address their psycho-spiritual needs resulting from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown experiences.

2.5 | The shift to e-congregation/e-ecclesia and the challenge to loyal membership

According to Niemandt, a missional church is a church sent to bring the gospel everywhere and into everyday life. If the church is to reach this goal—and this generation for Christ—it must utilize media more effectively than it is being used by society every day.

E-church/e-ecclesia/cyber church is not new in the context of the growth of Christianity and the advent of technological advancement but became a relevant and necessary means for churches to worship during the COVID-19 lockdown. Louw refers to this approach to church and congregational life as “cyber-” or “virtual spirituality.” It is a spirituality that functions “outside the confines of the proverbial (ecclesial) box.” Matthee argues that “cyberspace has the potential to be both a creative and a transcendental space where authentic experiences take place. Therefore, it is possible that spaces within cyberspace can be sacred and facilitate ritual liturgical expressing.”

While the majority of the Pentecostals would like to have mass or corporate church services, with singing, drumming, and dancing, the COVID-19 restrictions and protocols hindered members of Pentecostal churches from experiencing the vibrant church services.

The switch to e-congregations or e-ecclesia was helpful in addressing the spiritual needs of church members. However, it also led to the challenge of membership loyalty in some of the churches. Church members in this context had the opportunity to turn to alternative media platforms for church services without restrictions if they had the means to do so. During the lockdown period, some congregations switched membership loyalty to alternative and available avenues to attend e-church. Consequently, some found they had lost their members to other churches by the time churches were again allowed on-site. Some Pentecostal ministers reported that the e-church concept has also affected the commitment of some members in offerings and tithes.

Regarding church finances in the context of the COVID-19, White proposed the development of a “COTApp” – “Church Offerings and Tithes Application”. He noted that Churches should start engaging software developers to assist them in developing applications that can help them with online church attendance, as well as the collection of offerings and tithes from church members. Furthermore, there should also be a serious and intentional investment in technological infrastructure to enhance undisrupted in-house and online church services and participation of members.

3 | REFLECTION: BRINGING IN A BALANCED THEOLOGY

African Pentecostals have done well in their religious/spiritual response to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, some ministers were not balanced in their theological response to the pandemic. In this section, I argue that even though believers should be encouraged to exercise their faith in the word of God for protection and divine healing, it is equally important for people to seek medical attention as part of their journey of faith and spirituality. This approach to healing does not negatively affect one’s spiritually. It is an act of applying wisdom and using available medical resources for good health and healing.

One of the areas in which many Pentecostal believers are lacking is their inability to accept and apply the theology of the sovereignty of God in every situation. Piper submits that “God is sovereign over the coronavirus. … His sovereignty means that he can do, and in fact, does do, all that he decisively wills to do.” The Psalmist puts it this way, “Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps” (Ps. 135:6). The Apostle Paul also wrote on the sovereignty of God in his letter to the Ephesian church when he stated that God works in all things according to the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11).

Butler argues that Luther’s view of God’s revelation of himself on the cross as a foundational idea of suffering and
sickness should be one of the theological approaches for Pentecostals when dealing with the human need for divine healing. This will help them to be theologically balanced on issues related to divine healing.35

My submission for a balanced Pentecostal theology in the context of COVID-19 is based on the fact that there are video and voice recordings from Pentecostals claiming that the COVID-19 vaccine is demonic, or contains a microchip which has the mark of the beast 666, etc. These claims are still held by some Pentecostal believers without scientific proof. Furthermore, there were reports of some notable Neo-Pentecostal pastors who openly campaigned against COVID-19 vaccination. For instance, Bishop David Oyedepo of the Living Faith Church International (Winners Chapel), reportedly said he would not take the COVID-19 vaccine because “he wouldn’t want to be a guinea pig.” Other pastors including Johnson Suleman of Omega Fire Ministries International, Chris Okotie of Shepherd of the Household of God Church International Ministries, and Chris Oyakhilome of Christ Embassy, among others, have also condemned the vaccine administration and referred to it as anti-christ products.36

Although the anti-vaccine campaign of these prominent pastors is based on personal conviction and faith, and available information on the possible effects of the COVID-19 vaccine, their conviction had a great impact on their members and distant followers. It was, however, encouraging to see some leading Pentecostal figures openly speak against such claims after consultation with their members who are medical practitioners.37 Churches such as the Church of Pentecost (one of the leading Classical Pentecostal Churches in Africa) and the Christ Apostolic Church International issued communiques which encouraged their members to fully participate in the vaccination process recommended by the World Health Organization and the scientific community. Others, like Pastor Enoch Adeboye, the general overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Matthew Ashimolowo of Kingsway International Christian Centre, Mike Okonkwo of the Redeemed Evangelical Mission, Ituah Ighodalo of Trinity House, and Sam Adeyemi of Daystar Christian Centre also joined the campaign to encourage their members to be vaccinated.

4 | CONCLUSION

Although, the COVID-19 pandemic has been with us for the past two years, we cannot claim one-dimensional approaches to addressing the challenges it has posed for humanity. In light of the diverse approaches required, this article discussed how African Classical Pentecostal Churches have been and are responding to the COVID-19 challenges. In this article, I discussed spirituality in the context of the COVID 19 pandemic, especially during the lockdown period. I argued that the pandemic challenged Pentecostal practices of spirituality which are usually approached through on-site congregational worship. In contrast to this understanding of spiritually, the pandemic gave believers the opportunity to develop their devotional life and personal relationship with God.

Furthermore, the article discussed how Pentecostal churches and adherents responded to the pandemic. The article argues that the initial response of the Pentecostals was a nationwide call for repentance, prayer, fasting, and deliverance. It was noted that the catalyst for this call is embedded in the African Pentecostals’ worldview of demonic attack and evil forces that perpetrate calamities. The call for prayer was further strengthened by their appeal to scripture and the request from some African leaders.

The article also addressed issues related to prosperity theology and faith declaration, which became prevalent among African Pentecostal churches during the lockdown period. I argued for the use of the term faith and hope gospel when referring to prosperity theology since the term gospel is theologically and biblically in reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It was noted that as part of the spiritual response to the pandemic, some Pentecostal churches and adherents demystified and democratized the administration of the communion. According to them, they saw it as a means to address their psycho-spiritual needs resulting from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown experiences. Again, most of the Pentecostal churches switched from on-site worship to online worship. It was, however, noted that this approach led some people to transfer their membership to other churches. The article ended with an appeal for balanced theology among Pentecostal churches when dealing with healing and miracles.

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