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## 6 COVID-19 VACCINATION AND THE ZIMBABWE CHRISTIAN (EVANGELICAL/PENTECOSTAL AND APOSTOLIC SECTS) COMMUNITY

### *Abstract*

The year 2019 witnessed an unprecedented rise of the Coronavirus (COVID-19). Millions of people were left stranded as their socio-economic, cultural, religious and political life got affected by lockdowns and restrictions on peoples' movement. The bruises of Coronavirus did not spare the Christian communities as they were equally affected by the novel disease. Various theories and strategies by radical Christians were thrown in the fray to try and resist the COVID-19 vaccine. Some Christians in Zimbabwe linked the vaccination to the satanic mark of the beast or the end of the world as prophesied in the book of Revelation and Daniel. In this paper we used interviews, secondary literature and Focus Group Discussions (FDGs) to come up with a holistic engagement of how Evangelical/Pentecostal and to some extent Apostolic White Garment Christians understood the COVID-19 vaccine.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Virus, Vaccination, Pentecostal, Charismatic, Zimbabwe Christians

### **Introduction**

The coronavirus pandemic caught Christians unaware. But the coming of COVID-19 made it difficult for Christians to comprehend let alone adapt to the new normal, as well as positively engage issues to do with the disease. Fear and confusion gripped both the Christian and non-Christian community. A lot of media reports as well as conspiracy theories took the centre stage with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccines. The pandemic was followed by lockdown restrictions as well arrests for not obeying the set down regulations and the louder calls for the vaccination of all the people. This made it more challenging for Christians who believe

in faith healing other than any other medical interventions. Some radical Evangelical, Pentecostal and African Independent Churches took the radical call by garment for all citizens to be vaccinated as a test of their faith, They regarded faith healing as the solution to the COVID-19 pandemic and not science or any medical intervention.

Various theories were put in motion in as far as COVID-19 vaccination is concerned. Accusations and counter-accusations were made amongst Christians for accepting or not accepting vaccines. Taking or not taking the vaccines became a measurement of one's faith. Some Christians associated vaccination with the mark of the beast or the devil as prophesied in Revelation 13:17. The book of Revelation became so relevant in the face of the pandemic. The context of biblical texts was not taken into consideration. In some circles, the COVID-19 crisis was interpreted as the end of the world. And the COVID-19 vaccine got interpreted by Evangelical/Pentecostal Christians as meant to divert people from following God. However, with the passage of time (as a result of proclamations by the government), vaccines were grudgingly accepted by the Christian fraternity as there were promises that only those fully vaccinated would be allowed to congregate for services. For some Christians, the world was coming to an end with the vaccine taking the mark of a beast as in Revelation 13:17. The belief that coronavirus vaccination was linked to the mark of the beast was reinforced by sentiments issued by the government that one will not get services if they do not produce the vaccination certificate. In several schools, organisations and institutions, there were notices which demanded people to be vaccinated. Some notices read "*No Mask, No Vaccination, No Service*". The Zimbabwe's Statutory Instrument 119 of 2021 made it compulsory for persons intending to come into the country without valid PCR test and a certificate, not to be allowed in. Those who did were supposed to be quarantined for 10 days at their expense.

The statutory measures were too heavy for the fundamentalist Christians to fathom. They easily associated COVID-19 vaccination with the end times especially the forceful approach by government to make people get vaccinated. Radical Christians remained resolute against vaccination. Cross-border Christians who depended on importing goods for income had no choice save to be vaccinated. However, there are claims that some fundamental Evangelicals/ Pentecostals and White Garment Churches had no choice but to bribe health personnel so as to get the Vaccination

Certificate. Strong shivers were felt by most Christians as they resisted the vaccine as a way of protecting their faith as well as those who believed conspiracy theories that the vaccine was meant to exterminate Africans and make both men and women barren so as to control the growth of the African population before the neo-colonial foreign invasion to control the African population and their resources. Revelation 13:16–17 became popular amongst Christians because of the jab and the purported mark left by the jab. References were also made to Daniel 2 and 7 which was given similar interpretations as Revelation 13. The other serious conspiracy theory was on the disease's origin and its association with the Chinese nation claimed to be anti-Christian which further complicated the acceptance of vaccinations. China for radical Christians got depicted as anti-Christian and under the influence of the devil whom Jesus describes as “a thief who comes only to steal and kill and destroy; but he had come that people may have life, and have it to the full (John 10:10)”. Coronavirus is regarded as that thief or type of infection that affects the respiratory system resulting in the suffocation of an individual and then death.

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that range from the common cold to *Middle East Respiratory Syndrome* (MERS) coronavirus and *Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome* (SARS) coronavirus (WHO 2020). Any new coronavirus is called novel and is denoted by nCov. The recently discovered coronavirus is called 2019-nCov. PERLMAN & NETLAND (2009) define the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) as an RNA virus, with a typical crown-like appearance under an electron microscope due to the presence of glycoprotein spikes on its envelope. According to World Health Organization, COVID-19 is an acute respiratory disease which is caused by a newly emerged zoonotic coronavirus. European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC 2020) airs out that the modes of transmission of the virus from person to person are coughed droplets, exhaled droplets by infected persons and touching droplet-contaminated surfaces or objects and then touching the eyes, nose or mouth (WHO 2020). As it stands, Coronavirus has no concrete origins. A number of writers have attributed the pandemic to animals that were sold at the market in Wuhan, China in 2019, while others assume that it was man-made. Among some of the animals presumed to have brought the disease are: raccoon dogs, squat dog-like mammal used for food and their fur in China (WOROBEBY 2022). There is an analysis that reinforces the suspicion that the pandemic began at the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market which many of the people had visited

were infected earliest with SARS-CoV-2 (PEKAR 2022). Research conducted through geo-location analyses connecting many of the samples to a section of the market where live animals were sold. The results pointed towards the market as the source of the outbreak (PEKAR 2022). Some evidence points the origin of coronavirus to viral evolution in nature and jumped to people through some unidentified animal host. The exact animal that transmitted the disease to human beings has not been established. Others pointed to bats as possible creatures that transferred the disease to human beings (NIH 2022). As a result, what is clear is that, the source of coronavirus cannot be established with certainty. Religions scholars, Biblicists and faith believers have resorted to religious theories, beliefs and practices to interpret the threats brought by the coming of the coronavirus.

## Religious Interpretation of COVID-19

Christians explain pandemics that affect the world mainly from a religious or biblical perspective. Diseases are generally explained as curses that came along through the sin of the first man, Adam. When Adam was created, he had no blemish before God; diseases were not part and parcel of humanity. The understanding is that, all forms of disease are a result of sin and disobedience and this includes COVID-19,

... because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle and above all wild animals... (Gen 3:4).

Interestingly Christians take the coming of every disease as communicating something between God and humanity with humanity either obeying or disobeying God is resulting in curse or a blessing. Some believers have ascribed this COVID-19 pandemic as punishment from God for the sins committed, or for disobedience to His word by humanity. Interestingly, there are incurable diseases which were already predicted in the Bible. On most occasions, Evangelical and Apostolic White Garment Churches associate any new disease with disobedience to the laws of God and curses as communication or a message from God to humanity. Thus, the emergency of COVID-19 was something which frightened the Christian community to some extent as even those who got vaccinated unfortunately died.

Moreover, it became complicated for White Garment Churches (Apostolic sects) in Zimbabwe as they do not believe in going to hospitals or consulting medical doctors and any vaccine inventions which they label as foreign and western. Anything western is regarded as meant to dominate Africans. When members of White Garment Churches (Apostolic sects) get sick, they get prayed for at their shrines. To talk about medication and let alone COVID-19 vaccination is regarded as anathema and blasphemous to their God. A number of these members have vowed never to be vaccinated as the idea is taken as foreign and ungodly to them. An interview with one of the respondents, Mr Abureti Gwamakunguwo Gwindingwi (not his real name), said that,

I would rather die at my shrine rather than going to a hospital to get the vaccination for COVID-19. God's power at our shrine is enough to get us going. It explains why we are still alive right now. Although, the disease killed a lot of people, as you can see here, we were spared. It means that God loves us.

When quizzed about those who die in their church, Mrs Monicah Togarepi Chafuka Machingura (not her real name) went further to say that,

Death is God's command, you cannot escape death, whether vaccinated or not. So why worry about being vaccinated when we know that God will protect us. After all, 'in everything God works for good to those who love him, who are called according to his purpose' (Romans 8:28).

With such groups of people who do not believe in medical attention when they get sick, it may take time to convince them about vaccination against the coronavirus. To make matters worse, they (White Garment Churches (Apostolic sects) actually boast about their Christian resilience because they do not get their children jabbed/vaccinated for immunisation, believing that God will take care of them. It is unfortunate that this has had negative effects as it risks people as a result of such beliefs and practices. Others think it's ushering in the end time. Interestingly all appeal to the Bible for psychological support and healing in their discourses about God's healing power against every disease.

## **The Bible and Healing**

Generally, people across the religious divide engage the Bible for solutions to whatever challenges of life. Interestingly, the Bible contains a

number of people who suffered different ailments both in the Old and New Testament. The Bible then becomes a source of inspiration, guidance and solace in the face of threats to life. In most of the stories, God is portrayed being at play in bringing smiles to the infected and affected or as a sign of curses against the disobedient. The argument by radical Evangelical/Pentecostal Christians is that, methods of healing that are prescribed in the Bible did not demand injections or jabs or vaccinations but quarantining as in the case of leprosy. As a result, Christians have also focused on the concept of being quarantined because of COVID-19 and how it is perceived or viewed in the Bible. In most cases, leprosy or those perceived to have sinned got quarantined. In this case, when it comes to COVID-19, the infected are medically quarantined in order to contain it. Diseases such as leprosy were contained through quarantine. In the book of Leviticus, those who suffered from leprosy were supposed to live in secluded places so as to contain the spread of the disease as happened with the COVID-19 where those who contracted the disease were supposed to live in secluded places, away from people. The following biblical examples would suffice as examples that are cited to confirm the notion that COVID-19 was a curse from God;

- Miriam, the sister of Moses lived alone for seven days when she got the leprous disease in Numbers 12:10–14;
- We also have Uzziah king of Judah who lived the last part of his life in quarantine when he was smote by leprosy by God (2 Chronicles 26:20–21);
- The four lepers were banned from the city of Samaria and chose to live at the gate of the city (2 Kings 7:3–5); and,
- And Naaman the army commander of the Syrian army who also contracted leprosy (2 Kings 5:14).

All biblical narratives about leprosy called for the infected to be quarantined and secluded from the mainstream society. The same method of quarantining and secluding the infected is applied on COVID-19 victims. The argument on leprosy healing is regarded as having only happened with the intervention of God and not vaccinations. The same assumptions and expectations are then related to COVID-19.

The miraculous power of God is cited as having healed people, for instance, king of Judah, Hezekiah got sick Isaiah 38:1–8. He was healed when the prophet Isaiah came back with the word from the Lord that the

king lived 15 more years. The argument by radical Christians is that, there is no use of jabs as in the case of COVID-19 and modern treatment. However, for the liberal Christians, modern healing is not evil *per se*, since life is preserved. There is several examples of individuals who got healed in the New Testament. Jesus healed all types of infirmities, for instance, he restored the ear of a soldier who had been wounded in the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:51); the woman with haemorrhage (Mark 6:21–34) and the paralytic man (Mark 2:12). Moreover, in Acts of Apostles, Peter and other disciples were quite active during the course of their ministry as they also healed a lot of people. At one time, Peter did wonders as shown by the reference below,

...and more than ever believers were added to the lord, multitudes both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on the beds and pallets, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them (Acts 5:15).

At one time Paul did the same,

...and God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them (Acts 19:11–12).

With this in mind, most Evangelical or Pentecostal Christians strongly believe in prayer and faith healing. In some denominations, prayers are assumed as able eradicate any form of disease let alone viruses. Biblical references which were used by these denominations included references such as,

...for with God nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37).

The assumptions are that, if people get vaccinated, it's a clear confirmation that God has failed or that believers have lost faith in God. Thus, for Christians to take vaccination jabs is taken as a defeat of their faith. Anything that comes with mandatory tone (Zimbabwean Government) as was the case with COVID-19 vaccinations where people got even arrested for not putting masks was considered as meant to mock God's power, the faith of Christians and had to be resisted. Why do Christians rush to link the vaccinations with the mark of the beast in the book of Revelation? Did they do their homework well enough in as far as the mark of the beast is concerned? But are Christians clear on the context of Revelation 13 in

their denial of the vaccinations equating it with the mark of the beast in Rev 13:16–17 or relating it to the book of Daniel?

## Interpretation of Revelation

What is interesting is why and how did Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians find the Book of Revelation predicable about COVID-19 vaccines? Yet on other hand, apocalyptic writings are literatures of protests against oppression. In this case, they are literatures of inspiration against disease and protests against any forms of coercion to take vaccines despite one's religious beliefs. Apocalyptic writings were used as confrontation works of art to take on dictators or any dictatorial tendencies, to embolden the oppressed, for example, Christians standing up against the oppressor and fight for their rights, beliefs and practices. Oppressed people look forward to their total independence and oppression from all forms of evil. The Book of Revelation was written at a time when the Church was undergoing persecution. For GUTHRIE (1987), it is, however, debatable as to which Roman Emperor was persecuting the Church, Nero (60-65 CE), Vespasian (70-80 CE) or Domitian (late 90s CE). The New Testament books clearly show us, from the inception the Church has always been facing all forms of violence: direct violence-torture (the persecutions of Paul against the followers of Jesus, Acts 9:1ff); humiliation (as reported in the Johannine literature), bullying (Acts 7:54–60) from the Roman imperial authorities, for example, Christians being denied access to basic needs (symbolically where no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark in the name of the beast [Rev 13:16–17] or the number [Rev 13:18] of its name) (EHRMAN 1999:63).

The message of end times in several denominations in Zimbabwe must respect the context of the texts in Revelation and Daniel when relating to diseases. Believers seem to have scant knowledge about the context of Revelation and Daniel which is usually associated or related with the end of the world, especially the kingdoms that were prophesied in Daniel 2. The following is a response from Mrs Florence Muchizii (not her real name) in light of the end time message,

You see my brother; this topic you are bringing is really new to me. We do not know these things. What we know is that there is a 666<sup>1</sup> mark but how

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<sup>1</sup> The number “666” refers to Rev 13:18.

Pastors and teachers of the word brought it up in relation to the vaccine is so confusing and breeds fear. Our pastors do not teach about this topic and when they touch on it; you easily lose sleep. It is also quite unfortunate that they spend a lot of time teaching about money, faith and other subjects leaving out this important topic and number which they always cite whenever there is a crisis or pandemic. Any call for vaccination is associated with the number 666 of the beast. It explains why we have this confusion about COVID-19 vaccination and mark<sup>2</sup> of the beast 666.

It can be deduced that believers are definitely in confusion in relation to COVID-19 vaccinations. It is either that, Pastors themselves are not aware of the topic or they are afraid of losing believers by opting to use the harvest of fear to keep people under the lock and key of their Churches' teachings that generate phobias. It seems the major fear of most Christians was shrouded in mystery and lack of information about COVID-19. Some writers would want to refer to the mark of the beast as related to artificial intelligence characterised by chips being inserted in peoples' bodies connected to their bank details typified as the mark of the beast. Already in some western countries, the chips were tested and have been found to be working (BROOKS 2018).

In as much as this was a good move to protect people from the pandemic by getting them jabbed, there was hesitance or resistance by the majority of the Evangelical/Pentecostal and Apostolic sects' Christians to accept the jab or vaccine which they associate with the mark of the beast as in Revelation 13:17. Most Evangelical/Pentecostal Christians take for a word what was said by prominent preachers against the COVID-19. According to Revelation 13:16, the mark of the beast is to be inserted on the right hand and the forehead which was not the case with COVID-19 where the jab is usually on the left hand and not the forehead. However, the situation was worsened by some companies that demanded vaccination cards for people to get their services. The scenario in Revelation depicts a picture of the devil and his agents forcing people to have the mark of the beast. To reinforce the hesitancy of Christians to take the vaccine was the lockdown that was put forward in the country. People spent more than six months without meeting for Church services. There were restrictions on the number of people who were allowed to attend funerals for the bereaved. Movement from place to place demanded vaccination cards. At the

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<sup>2</sup> The "mark of the beast" is mentioned in Rev 13:16–17.

same time, some universities were requesting students to get the jabs so as to into exams rooms. Apart from vaccinations, the population was advised to buy sanitizers as a way of disinfecting hands and building structures. When vaccinations were introduced, the government of Zimbabwe had a target to reach the herd immunity. Unfortunately, the number of those who received the jabs was way below the required target. As we speak to date, the herd immunity has not been reached yet. Initially the vaccinations were meant for those who were above 18 years old. But with the passage of time Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC 2020) introduced vaccines for secondary school going age children who were also included into the fold. Members from the Ministry of Health paid visit to schools and had learners vaccinated *en masse* against the COVID-19 disease. Several schools in different districts had their learners vaccinated at school premises. Unfortunately, social media militated against proper dissemination of information about COVID-19. Conspiracy theories took a toll and generated fear.

## **WhatsApp and the Harvesting of Fear as well as Acceptance of the Vaccine**

The pandemic resulted in a number of strategies that were put in place by the government to contain the disease and which at the same time fed into the phobia theories against the vaccine. National lockdowns made it difficult for Christians to meet and hold services as they used to do. The alternative that was developed was the use of social or online media and in particular WhatsApp online Church services. Pastors and Church leaders would record their sermons and send to their members via WhatsApp groups created for that cause. It also became easy to spread the false gospel about the vaccine by mischievous people. A number of people had challenges accessing or attending such online services. Apart from that, the aged Christians were left out in the whole programme as most of them are not well versed with the technological advancement. It was mostly the young generation that benefited from such facilities and other members who could afford. The majority of the rural folk found it very difficult to have such access. One respondent Mr Gombuzhe Ruvanda Dambashoko (not his real name) argues that,

The use of WhatsApp for Church services was quite effective during the lockdown period. We were able to be kept afloat as we were strengthened by the word of God. We took our time to pass the message to our elderly Christians through the created online Home Groups. We only had challenges of network as it is not reliable but costly this side. However, a number of our folks were left behind and lost a lot on any information to with COVID-19.

The cost of data bundles was out of reach for many Zimbabweans as most of them were informally employed or unemployed. SILUMBA & CHIBANGO (2020) note that, the online services relate so well to one's economic and social situation. Some Christians were affected by the national levels of poverty to the extent that they could hardly afford a cell/mobile phone or computer or laptop for online Church services or fellowshiping or worshipping. In Zimbabwe, several ministries were required to show proof of COVID-19 vaccination at their workplaces for admittance. At the same time, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education teachers were given deadlines for members to be vaccinated so as to compel all citizens including school going children to be vaccinated. It should be said that in as much as this was a noble move to force members to be vaccinated, it violated Christian members' right to make their own decisions as they were afraid of losing their jobs. With the emphasis that was put on vaccination certificates and results associated thereof, it fed into the mark of the beast conspiracies in disguise. As a result, certain Evangelical/ Pentecostal leaders possibly used the "mark of the beast strategy" as disguise or protest against the vaccine. The other challenge is that, the government at first did not fully involve Churches in the dissemination of information about the vaccine. As a result, most people depended on social media to get information about COVID-19 and the vaccine.

With the passage of time, some Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians began to gradually accept the vaccine as it was the only alternative that would allow them the opportunity to come together again. Pentecostals began to call or plead with their members to be vaccinated against the COVID-19 disease. However, others such as CHANG (2019) maintain that the vaccine have nothing to do with the mark of the beast. Research has shown that since time immemorial, whenever a vaccine was invented against any virus, theories on the mark of the beast from some Christian circles would resurface. It is very disturbing to see and hear renowned

pastors and men of the cloth discouraging people to be vaccinated by associating vaccines with the number of the beast 666 (Rev 13:18). This definitely points to misconception that is going around on the Christian circles. Probably, Pastors need to read further about the subject and give people the correct information about the symbolical numbers, colours and beasts enumerated in Revelation and Daniel. In as much as people rely on prayers for their healing, there is need for medical attention as thousands of people succumbed to the pandemic. Everyone in the world, including schools, businesses, companies and Churches need to come together and work as one people whenever there is a virus or disease such as COVID-19. Others thought the COVID-19 ushered or heralded the end time message about the coming of Christ. The Church has passed through various disturbing crises in the past centuries. Signs of the end times include wars, rumours of war, earthquakes, pestilence, famine and chaos, to say the least (Matthew 24:1-14). Verse 7 of the same chapter particularly mentions pestilences (plural) which some associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Vaccination has no link at all to the mark of the beast in the book of Revelation. Other diseases or pestilences are yet to come in future as happened in the past centuries. These are just signs but it does not mean this is the end of the world, as no one knows except the Father God in Heaven (Matthew 24:36; Mark 13:32). However, taking vaccines against viruses isn't evil or anti-Christian. And COVID-19 vaccine is definitely not the mark of the beast, but is only a vaccine like any other developed in the past for polio, influenza, tetanus, hepatitis, rubella, measles and chicken pox, etc. Any development of vaccines must be understood and embraced positively against any diseases or viruses in future. In fact, Religions or Faiths must embrace science or any scientific discoveries if development in Africa is going to be realised.

## Conclusion

Pandemics did not start with COVID-19. In history, we have experienced a number of pandemics that killed thousands as articulated above. Therefore, COVID-19 will pass. Going forward, both Christians and non-Christians should first of all seek relevant knowledge about pandemics before rushing to make conclusions about rejecting vaccines. The government and health officials must raise awareness programmes and workshops that are inclusive of Evangelical-Pentecostal and Apostolic Christian groups whenever there are pandemics.

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