

Is It Possible to Speak of a Surviving Church or Missional Church? Reactions to Steve Cochrane's Essay

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Abstract

This article is written in response to the essay by Steve Cochrane in this same issue of *Glocal Conversations*. Cochrane's essay considers the impact of Covid-19 on the advance of the Great Commission. In this response from Brazil, the author argues that the pandemic has prompted an important evaluation of the Church's posture in relation to the world: will the Church be committed only to surviving or will it intentionally pursue its mission? This article also has a Portuguese-language version in this same issue.

In this brief reflective engagement with Cochrane's essay (2021) about the participation of the Church² in the "Great Commission" and in the context of the pandemic affecting humanity since the year 2020, the intended purpose is not to oppose the arguments highlighted in Cochrane's essay, but to dialogue with that text about the questions raised.

It must be said that the questions raised are not based on unfounded criticisms made by the essayist about the phenomenon of the "pandemic", because the current situation corresponds – in the here and now - with other historical moments that involved real problems, and then as now the compassionate action of the Church was verified in facing them, since the phenomenon of the "pandemic" has affected not only the trajectory of humanity situated in different times and places, but human existence itself and, by extension, the whole of creation.

There is no denying that the "pandemic" phenomenon produced by Sars-Cov-2 brought repercussions at a global level; therefore, it cannot be evaluated adequately in isolation. However, it is necessary to emphasize that the ways of coping with the pandemic were not one and the same everywhere, and not the result of unanimous agreements between countries, but with differences related to sanitary, emergency, and public measures adopted, even within the limits of national territories, like in Brazil, with regional distinctives. The divergent measures dealt with basic issues regarding prevention policies, treatment, investment, and the application of physical, economic, material, and human resources.

In this response we do not want to go into Brazilian political partisanship nor ideological analysis, nor even the proliferation of fake news about the pandemic process and the state. Polarization on these topics has directly affected social institutions, especially the positions of ecclesiastical communities. It is worth reflecting, in this whirlwind of disagreements,

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² The word Church is used in the sense of universal community that has a call and a mission to participate in God's movement in history in relation to the plan designed for humanity.

misunderstandings, insecurity, fear, and hopelessness, on the right to religious freedom and the church's response to its reason for being, involving calling and mission.

It should be noted that the decrees issued by Brazilian state and local governments regarding the closure of places of worship (temples), the online transmission of liturgical acts and the control over the percentage limit of participants in public services, according to the temple's capacity, cannot be considered elements that hinder the Church's mission or the exercise of its fundamental right to religious freedom, since it has been building alternatives in the adoption of new strategies, from the use of social networks and the Internet to the production of handouts, that is, possibilities to give continuity to the teaching and communication of the gospel. It must be emphasized that the Church has not been cowardly in the face of the "pandemic" phenomenon.

The possibility glimpsed in our present reality, about the role played by the Church, relates to Cochrane's argument, when he speaks of two things essential to missional and ecclesiastic practice: adaptation and strategy. Crucially, adaptation and strategy only start to be thought of with more intensity when we face an unusual, depressing, untimely, uncontrollable, painful situation resulting from human action, something that tries by different ways to manipulate life as if it were "playing" God. In the midst of such distortion of action, the Church positions itself and faces the situation of chaos affecting categorically the pattern of creation instituted since the beginning by the Creator. The Church's message presses in the opposite direction of the messages of society and the media networks, compelled by hope, resilience, sustainability, preservation and comfort.

It must be said parenthetically here that the pandemic is not beyond God's control and governance. After all, everything is subject to his will, which does not mean that God caused it, but that he allowed it. This is part of his sovereignty and authority over all creation.

Understanding God's sovereignty and authority is fundamental to the process of knowing who God is, and how he acts in reality. As Mangalwadi notes, "The living God is a person. He is a holy God, a judge. Therefore, he is to be feared, respected, revered, and obeyed" (2009, p. 140). This response to God is part of the act of glorification, of which the Church is a part.

In an attempt to restate the problem facing the Church in fulfillment of its mission, Cochrane presents as the main thread of his arguments four questions that led Martin Luther King's reflection in a similar context of struggle, obstacles and challenges. These four questions highlight Cochrane's discursive construction. The questions focus on the lived context, the future perspective, the constitution of identity, and the way identity is affirmed in reality and in human relations. Certainly, these are reflections that demand in-depth study and positioning.

In fact, King's questions gain significance not only in the face of the analysis of the Sars-Cov-2 pandemic, but in the very sense of mission and life purpose for the Church as salt and light of the world, with all the breadth and repercussions that concerns. In other words, it is up to the Church to give evidence of its call and convocation, regardless of the circumstances involved. It is in this sense that we engage Cochrane's essay, in order to contribute to the discussion he started. The direction of this response then, is based on the question: is it more appropriate to speak of the Church as a surviving church or as a missional church?

The reflections that follow aim to address as well the root question in Cochrane's essay, "How is the landscape of the world being affected by the pandemic and what does this mean for the fulfillment of the "Great Commission?" This particular response takes the Brazilian scenario

as its stage, starting from perceptions about the reality experienced there. We begin with a look at our context.

Where are we?

In the context of the pandemic in Brazil, much of what was observed were disjointed and poorly planned actions, based as they were on the immediacy of responding to the urgent demands of the moment. These responses did not correspond well to the need, due to the lack of knowledge about the "enemy", and were compounded by the lack of coordination between the different federated entities and by the judicialization of politics.

As previously noted, we do not intend to give a complete panorama of the Brazilian context, but to sketch something of its present diversity. The pandemic phenomenon has accentuated the divergent positions that were already present, but that were not so evident until now. It must be said, that the divergence of different positions borders on extreme division, which presupposes that the mission of the Church will have to deal with this reality without abandoning its mission, since "biblical faith or justice demands that she (church) take a public stance on certain issues, so she needs to obey God's Word and entrust him with the consequences" (STOTT, 2019, p. 45), (addition ours).

So, the question "where are we" refers to the context in which one lives, that is, to the habitat, complete with geopolitical characteristics and the evident presence of human administration and government practices, manifested through acts of instituted power. In Brazil, the government is shaped by the democratic bias and is based on the respect for cultural, social, economic, political, physical and religious differences, since it defends the vision of the common good, at least this is the expectation produced.

The Brazilian Church cannot abstain from its context; rather, it influences it through the message it communicates. That is why its commitment and calling is to be salt and light in the midst of darkness and a lack of knowledge about the truth of the gospel. After all, "truth liberates. It empowers people by giving them genuine reasons to live and act in ways that are true, good, and beautiful" (MANGALWADI, 2009, p. 132). Based on this, the Brazilian Church's positions should not be anchored in ideologies nor in the perspective of a "human savior", but in God's own revelation.

The action of the Brazilian Church needs to be conciliation in Christ, at the same time that it exposes the injustices and evil present in the social reality. After all, she cannot separate "love and justice; for what love desires, justice demands" (STOTT, 2019, p. 32). In this sense, the Church proclaims the message that brings life, liberation, and transformation of mind and heart. If she loses sight of this, her purpose and mission become emptied of prophetic meaning.

We contrast here the perspective of a survivalist Church with that of a missional Church. A survivalist Church understands the miracle of life, but does not commit itself as a living witness, nor does it offer worship. It is in the world, but not an integral part of it. It counts blessings, but does not promote transformation through revealed truth. It brings the principles, but does not live them out in practice. In contrast, the missional Church not only answers the call, but lives with integrity of mind and heart. It understands that the world is the space of living witness, for this reason the Church is attentive to fulfill its purpose in "living and loving, witnessing and serving, suffering and dying for Christ" (STOTT, 2019, p. 47).

In going through the phenomenon of the "pandemic" what will be consolidated, the perspective of a surviving or of a missional Church? Will the Church look inward at itself or outward to the world? What will be changed about its involvement and commitment to the expansion of the Kingdom? And what directions can be contemplated in attending to the "Great Commission"? These are questions that generate expectations for the near future and that will be decisive for the Church's participation in the movement and action of God in history.

What is hoped for?

The vision of the question is prospective, evidencing the presence of hope. This hope, however, does not come from human beings, but from the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. There is no other way to reach it, therefore, announcing the message is an act of proclaiming "Maranatha", now come Lord Jesus.

The Brazilian Church needs to be connected in hope, in order to be the channel through which God's love flows. For this reason it is necessary to resume the path of revealed truth; and the Church needs to be the one driving this process, requiring decision, repentance, commitment and response to the call mediated by the sense of mission.

The Brazilian Church cannot remain passive to established evil, which is the orientation of the survivalist perspective. Therefore, what is expected is the exercise of its prophetic voice, leading us to think about the value of its witness in the midst of pain, hopelessness and practices of injustice. This reveals that the doing of the Church requires both the practice of evangelism and its involvement in the social political sphere, since this is also part of its Christian task (STOTT, 2019, p. 31).

The Brazilian Church needs to reaffirm its missional identity and to do so, its practice must reveal a Christian mind strengthened by the public witness of its faith in Christ. It must also solidify the foundations of its worldview through teaching and established relationships, indicating its desire to glorify God above all and over everyone. In this process, the Church will demonstrate in its actions its commitment to the proclamation of the gospel message, remaining attentive to the possibilities that may be produced in the social context for this purpose to be achieved.

A missional Church is compelled by compassion, justice and love. It recognizes that its reason for being is to worship and serve God, being obedient to Him, and therefore lives to fulfill His purposes. In regard to the question, "How is the landscape of the world being affected by the pandemic and what does this mean for the fulfillment of the 'Great Commission'?", it is possible to say that the pandemic must not be the driving force for the mission of the Church, but rather a new opportunity to reach lives with the message of hope in Christ Jesus. After all, the Church's mission does not depend on events present in reality, but has divine origin and purpose, and it is the divine origin of the Church's mission that motivates its action in the world.

The phenomenon of the "pandemic" has enabled the Church to produce strategies that need to be consolidated, improved, adapted and extended, geographically, socially, locally or communally. What is certain is that we are not looking at a Church that is merely a surviving Church, because then we would not talk about a Church, but about a social grouping in search of its own interests; such a grouping is not constituted as the Church that was called to the exercise of the Great Commission.

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