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Theology and HIV and AIDS

by James Nkansah-Obrempong

Introduction

The first cases of HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) and AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) came to public notice in the early 1980's. Since then the number of cases has greatly increased and HIV/AIDS has become one of the most deadly diseases to affect humanity in the last 100 years. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has taken the lives of many Africans and the disease continues to afflict the continent. Many people around the world and in Africa have been affected by this pandemic in many ways. Families, churches, and governments are trying to deal with this pandemic. Their approaches have focused on psychological, medical, and preventive methods. While these dimensions of fighting the pandemic are important, the HIV/AIDS epidemic needs an even wider multifaceted approach to deal effectively with the disease. HIV/AIDS is not only a medical problem; it has theological, ethical, social, and economic dimensions to it. If we would eradicate this pandemic from the world, it will require a multifaceted approach to do so. My thesis for this paper is that theology provides this multifaceted framework to address the scourge. My goal is to provide a theological framework for engaging and reflecting theologically and biblically on HIV/AIDS.

History and Facts About HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS was first discovered in the early 1980s among some North American homosexual communities, commercial sex workers and intravenous drug users. HIV/AIDS is no respecter of persons. It infects the poor and the rich, male and female, Christian and non-Christian. It can infect anyone regardless of faith, marital status, sexual orientation or social status.

Current statistics show that HIV has spread to every country in the world. Presently, world wide, there are 40 million people infected with HIV, 25 million people have already died from the disease, and Sub-Saharan Africa has suffered the most from the disease. Globally, 85% of HIV infections are through heterosexual intercourse. Infection in women is high and it stands worldwide at 42%. There are many factors for these high infections in women. Some are related to culture, economics, and a feeling of powerlessness.¹

Closer to home, Kenya has 2.2 million people infected with HIV - 7% of the population. 1.5 million people have died of HIV/AIDS since the epidemic was identified in Kenya. It is estimated that 700 infected people die daily in Kenya while there are 800 new infections every day.² These figures show the war on HIV is not over. Many more people are going to be infected and

¹ http://www.emedicinehealth.com/hivaids/article_em.htm. Accessed May 18, 2012.

² <http://www.kenyaspace.com/hivaids.htm>. Accessed, May 18, 2012.

affected if we do not keep on fighting this epidemic. It is imperative that we reflect theologically on the HIV/AIDS scourge.

Theology and the HIV/AIDS Challenge

Theology must seek to address the challenges HIV/AIDS poses for the human race, for the Church, and for society. The disease raises the issue of cultural practices that are at odds with the Christian faith, and issues of sexuality, protection, morality, medical care, stigmatization, powerlessness, and marginalization. Our responses to HIV/AIDS have largely focused on these issues. But for a comprehensive response to the issues HIV/AIDS pose for humanity, we also need to address them, especially issues of sexuality, culture, morality and poverty, from a theological perspective. What we have not done very well is develop a solid theological framework to shape our responses so we can address all the issues this disease has raised. For me then, HIV/AIDS issues are primarily theological issues. HIV/AIDS poses a challenge and raises questions about the meaning of life, the place of suffering in human experience, death, stigmatization, and the nature and character of God. Maluleke is right to observe, "AIDS raises deep challenges about the meaning of life, our concept of God, our understanding of Church, human independence, human frailty, human failure, human sinfulness and human community."³ These issues are theological in nature.

In addition to some of the issues pointed out by Maluleke, I add issues of human sexuality, our assumptions about sickness, gender, injustice, and poverty. All of these issues raise important questions that only theology can answer. God is concerned about these issues and the Bible can address them. Consequently, serious theological reflection is needed if the answers we give are to be informed by God's view of these issues. Theology, therefore, provides our foundation. It gives meaning to these many issues that confront humanity. It shows how God is involved, deals with, and relates to humanity on these issues. Theology helps us understand God's purposes and will for his creation. It challenges the ideological and cultural assumptions that underline our belief systems. It helps to give us balanced perspectives on these issues.

A Relationship Between HIV/AIDS and Sin: Biblical Teaching on Sickness and Death

The notion that human beings suffer because of moral failure or sin has long been held by many people in the church. The HIV/AIDS epidemic has been seen as God's judgment on the human race for choosing to go its own way. As the statistics show, the primary means for HIV infection has to do with sexual behavior. Consequently, in its early development, HIV/AIDS was

³ Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, "Towards an HIV/AIDS-Sensitive Curriculum" in *HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum: Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programmes*. Ed., Musa W. Dube. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2003, p.66

associated with people who had promiscuous sexual behavior. It was linked to immorality. This understanding of the pandemic made most Christians form the opinion that only people who are promiscuous contract HIV/AIDS. The Church interpreted this theologically, leading to the position held by some that HIV/AIDS is a punishment from God. People are infected because of the sinful lifestyles they choose. This belief was based on the premise that God is holy and righteous, and that he punishes sin. God punishes those who rebel and choose to ignore and violate his laws.

Consequently, infected people feared being looked at as sinful, so they did not disclose their HIV status. This contributed to new infections. Most infected people were stigmatized and discriminated against by those who were not infected. This is because everyone infected with the virus was viewed as sinful and therefore facing God's judgment, *which they deserved*. This reasoning is human and not divine. God does not have such attitudes towards sinners. God loves them and he wills to redeem and save them in spite of their sins, even if those sins led to HIV infection. The Bible affirms that "while we were yet sinners Christ died for our sins."

1. The Biblical Relationship Between Sin and Sickness

The relationship between sin and sickness is not new. In both African and biblical worldviews, sin always results in punishment if it is not purged. In Jewish and African cultures, sickness and death are attributed to many causes. Some of the major causes of sickness and death in African thought include sin, curses, witches, demonic forces and as punishment from God or gods as well as the ancestors. The Bible affirms some of these understandings of sickness and death so we will examine some of the biblical teachings on sickness and death.

The Bible teaches that sickness and death are the result of Adam and Eve's sin against God. Sin evokes punishment from God. Both the Old and New Testaments teach that Adam and Eve's sin against God resulted in sickness and death (Gen 3:15, 19). God told Adam, "The day you eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will surely die". Of course, we know Adam and Eve did not die immediately after their disobedience, but they entered or triggered a dying state or process, which eventually led to their physical death. They became mortal and subject to death. In Ezekiel 18:20, God said the person who sins would die. Sin is a cause of death.

The belief in the cause and effect principle in African thought has made many Africans associate sickness and death with people offending God or the ancestors. When people continue to disobey God and live wicked lives, God may bring sickness and even death upon them to punish them. For example, an evil spirit tormented King Saul so that it made him depressed and filled with fear (1 Sam. 16:14). God struck King Uzziah with leprosy for entering the Temple to offer incense as if he were a priest (2 Kings 15:1-5, c.f. 2 Chron. 26:16-21). Pharaoh's sin and disobedience caused God to inflict diseases

such as boils on both animals and people in Egypt (Ex. 9:1-12). In Deuteronomy 28:21-22, 58-61; 29:22, God inflicted diseases on the people because of their sins. God also uses sickness to get the attention of people who do not have time for Him. Through their suffering, these people come to experience his love and care and they surrender their lives to Him.

The New Testament also sometimes links sickness and death with sin and as punishment from God. Worms ate King Herod's insides because he sinned by taking God's glory (Acts 12:23). The paralytic in Luke 5:18-20 was healed after Jesus pronounced that his sins were forgiven. After Jesus healed the man by the pool of Bethesda, he warned him to stop sinning or something worse might happen to him (John 5:14). The implication of this warning is that either his sickness was the result of sin or sinning would bring sickness upon him. Either way, sin can have the effect of causing sickness and death. In Romans 6:23 Paul says, "The wages of sin is death" and so links death to humanity's sin. In Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15:21-22, and 56, Paul argues Adam's sin not only introduced sin into the world, it also brought death to the human race. Sin and death entered the world through Adam.

However, sickness and death is not always the result of sin. In John 9:1-3, Jesus' disciples revealed their misunderstanding of sickness and sin when they asked Jesus if it was the parents of the man born blind who sinned or the blind man himself. Jesus' answer is insightful. He points out two important things we must know about sickness. First, He pointed out that in this case, no one had sinned. By saying this he challenged the cultural understanding that attributed all sickness or death to sin. Jesus dismissed the philosophical and ethical arguments for their position on the issue of the relationship between sin and sickness. Not all sicknesses are caused by sin. Second, Jesus reveals that sicknesses may have a particular purpose in God's plan and agenda. This particular sickness had a purpose - to bring glory to God Almighty. In the Old Testament we have Job's story; his sickness was not the result of sin but served a divine purpose for God to prove Job's love, loyalty and faithfulness to Him. Paul's teaching on how we should approach the Lord's Table affirms this understanding of sickness as well (1 Cor. 11:27-32). There some sicknesses came upon the Corinthian Christians not because of a particular sin they committed, but because of not properly "discerning the Lord's body".

A proper theology of sin helps us hold a balanced view on the matter. Furthermore, an adequate theology of sin moves us to see and appreciate what God did about Adam's sin, and by extension, what God did about sin on behalf of the entire human race.

HIV/AIDS should be seen in light of this broad biblical and theological explanation of sickness and death. Sickness is part of our fallen human condition. This is not to pass judgment or encourage stigmatization of people infected by HIV/AIDS. Rather, sexual immorality is due to our sinful human nature, and that plays a vital role in this pandemic. This affirmation is very

important as we look to address the challenges HIV/AIDS presents to us. We cannot down play human sinfulness and wickedness as critical in the spread of the disease.

2. What Has God Done to Deal with Sickness and Death?

Is God concerned about human suffering? Specifically, is God concerned about those infected and affected by the HIV/AIDS scourge? If he is, what has he done? In what ways has God dealt with these issues of sickness, pain and suffering, discrimination, stigmatization, marginalization, poverty, death, and all the other issues HIV/AIDS raise for humanity? I believe theology provides solid and concrete answers to these questions and shows how God has acted and dealt with the problems humanity faces today. The good news is that God, through the death of Christ on the cross and his resurrection, dealt with human sins and human sickness including HIV/AIDS.

If sin is the ultimate cause of sickness and death, as we established from the biblical texts we examined, then Christ's death on the cross is the critical antidote to sickness and death because it provided the ultimate answer to human sin and sickness. The atonement or the death of Christ on the cross resulted in two important benefits for humanity. Firstly, the atonement was God's answer to sickness. Through Christ's death, humanity received healing for every sickness that they would experience. Isaiah the prophet predicted that through Jesus' stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53:3-5). Healing is in the atonement. Peter affirmed the Old Testament teaching on the atonement when he says in 1 Peter 3:18 that by the stripes of Christ we are healed. On the cross Jesus carried and bore our sicknesses and brought healing to our sick bodies (Mt. 8:17).

Secondly, the atonement is God's answer to death. Adam's sin brought death to humanity but through Christ's death, humanity received life. Through the cross of Christ, death's power over humanity is broken. Both sin and death have no power over human beings any more.

Theology as a Proper Response to the HIV/AIDS Pandemic

We previously asserted that the challenge HIV and AIDS pose for us is not simply sexual, moral, medical, social, psychological and economic but also profoundly theological. The theological challenges HIV/AIDS pose for us are fundamental and important issues. If our response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic would be holistic and effective then, we all must take the theological dimension to the problem seriously, as we engage and fight the pandemic.

If the issues I have raised are theological in nature, then, theology should be critical in providing the framework for addressing and responding to the fundamental issues of human suffering, sin, stigmatization, discrimination, sexuality, morality, medical care, pastoral care and counseling. These matters are central concerns for HIV/AIDS. In addition, some questions are not just philosophical in nature, but primarily theological: 1) Why God has allowed so

much suffering in today's world through the HIV/AIDS scourge? 2) Where is God in HIV/AIDS and if he is there, how has God revealed his nature and character through this epidemic? 3) What does this disease tell us about God and his creation? The answers to these questions can be found in theology. Theology tells us about a loving and compassionate God who has provided solutions for his creation.

The HIV/AIDS scourge has provided the opportunity for us to discern the character and nature of God in the mist of this pandemic. God as the God of life, compassion, mercy and justice, has acted through the cross to redeem humanity from sin and sickness and has restored humanity to newness of life and given humanity hope. He requires us to show that same attitude and care for the sick, afflicted, and powerless so they can experience his shalom.

Over the years, our responses to the HIV/AIDS pandemic have focused on medical care, psychological counseling, pastoral care, social and economic empowerment, and other forms of assistance. Although these approaches have been helpful, they have not addressed the menace holistically. I suggest that we give theology a central place as we seek to respond to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. We cannot brush under the carpet or push aside the critical theological issues that the pandemic raises for us as Christians, including issues surrounding sexuality, morality and the place of God in human suffering. Theology provides the critical framework for reflecting on and engaging with these issues. It helps us respond more adequately to the people who have been infected and affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

In addition to theology providing the framework for our response to HIV/AIDS, Christian virtues such as hope, love, compassion, mercy are important theological ideas that are foundational for our response to HIV/AIDS and help us to address the challenges this sickness has brought to the human race. Christian theology provides hope for the hopeless and helps them to look beyond their condition and situation to a God who is compassionate, faithful, merciful and loving and is concerned about their lives. "A theology of hope and love must be accompanied by practical care, which not only aims to improve people's quality of life within their community, but also demands action in the wider world."⁴

We must develop a proper theology of sexuality, one that is not based simply on cultural grounds, but one that is rooted in the character and nature of God as loving, caring, and faithful to his covenant. Such a theology would help us to understand God's intention and purposes for human sexuality and the sanctity of marriage. The Bible affirms the sacredness of marriage. Jesus approved proper sexual relations between a married couple as well as "faithfulness within a committed, monogamous heterosexual relationship as

⁴ Paula Clifford, *Theology and HIV/AIDS Epidemic*, Christian Aid, 2004, p. 1. See http://www.christianaid.org.uk/images/hiv_theologyfinal.pdf

'good.'⁵ God provided sex within marriage for humanity to enjoy. Human sexuality is therefore a gift from God for pleasure and for procreation. For a long time, the African Church and African Christians have handled the subject of sex with shame and uneasiness. As the Micah Network paper points out, "This lack of frank discussion has escalated the AIDS crisis by failing to offer opportunity for dialogue, clear guidelines, provide role models or accountability for those (particularly the young) exploring their sexuality."⁶

Furthermore, theology provides the materials to reflect on matters to do with the promotion of life, the dignity of the human person, justice, social responsibility, morality, death, just economic systems, pastoral care, empowerment, gender issues and religious beliefs that are essential for humanity to experience God's shalom in their lives. Specifically, the nature and character of God, how God deals with diseases and sickness in his world form the bases for engaging and dealing with the HIV/AIDS menace in our societies. Theology not only shows how God has dwelt with sickness and diseases in the world, but it can provide the framework that shapes our response to HIV/AIDS. Particularly, theology deals with the issue of stigmatization of HIV/AIDS infected and affected people; it helps restore the dignity of the infected people as men and women created in the image of a God who desires respect and honor; it helps promote and protect life; and it addresses the wider issues of injustice and poverty that God takes very seriously.

Cavalcanti holds that theology provides a framework for pastoral care and counseling within which the church can guide its relationship with those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS. Theology helps the church model its actions in the struggle against discrimination and oppression wherever these are still experienced by HIV positive people. It can take the lead in espousing moral values that promote holy living. It also offers hope of abundant life and encouragement in the fight for proper medical provision for people who live in our world's less affluent regions. "A theology of life is a more adequate model of theological thinking and practice for those who are confronted daily with issues of suffering, death and stigmatization. This is a theology that will express in a better way the Good News of the Gospel as well as respond to the context where the enemies of life arise."⁷

Theology helps us to understand human sin, frailty, and fallenness. Theology teaches that all humanity (and all creation) is under the curse of the

⁵ Kristen Jack, "Towards a Christ-Centered Theology of HIV/AIDS – Discussion Paper" September 2005, p. 5, accessed from www.servantsasia.org/index.../8.../216-alias-of-news-with-id216.html, May 18, 2012. The paper is connected with the Micah Network.

⁶ Jack, "Towards a Christ-Centered Theology," p. 5.

⁷ Rev. Joabe G. Cavalcanti, "Towards a Theology of Life within the Context of HIV and AIDS," African Health Policy Network. Accessed from www.ahpn.org/Upload/page/36_Theology_and_HIV_151.pdf p.1., May 18, 2012.

fall, and suffering, disease and poverty are the direct result of humanity's original sin as we have pointed out earlier. However, theology also gives us the answer to the problems of sin, disease, suffering and poverty. The cross of Christ has brought victory over sin, disease, death and poverty to humanity.

Theology can help us to address the problem of ostracism and isolation from the community. It can allow us to move beyond the stigma and fear of this disease with a loving touch and a compassionate prayer, in order to bring holistic healing to those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS - physical, social and spiritual healing. God consistently acts with mercy towards those in society who are already judged and excluded.

A Theology of Embrace, Affirmation, Life, Hope and HIV/AIDS

Within this seemingly hopeless situation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the church has a message of love to share with a broken and hurting world. Christians have a message of God's love to preach to the world persuading the world to be reconciled to God. On the cross, God extended his open arms to the world and he embraced the world. We are no longer enemies of God, but have become children of God if we respond to God's love for his creation. God in his mercy and grace has forgiven us our sins through the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross reconciling us to Himself.

Regardless of how people acquired HIV, God expects us to show compassion and mercy to those who are suffering as he has shown us mercy and compassion and has forgiven us our sins and embraced us. We are no longer strangers and enemies of God but sons and daughters of God. He has affirmed us as His children.

Christ, through his death and resurrection from the dead, has ushered us into new life. Humanity has been made new and each one of us can be made new by the power of the indwelling Spirit. All who embrace God's love in Christ have become a new humanity. Humanity is once again recreated in the image of God and therefore deserves to be treated with honor and dignity. God has embraced humanity and has showered his mercy and favor on her. What humanity lost to sin is regained by the new life Christ gives to all who come to him in repentance thus giving us hope after this life. Also through the power of the Spirit, humanity is empowered by God to live holy and pure lives, lives that bring honor and praise to His holy name.

This message of hope, of life, and of affirmation and of embrace, will have to play a major role in a theology of HIV/AIDS if we want it to be relevant for those most in need of the church's involvement in this pandemic. The mission of the Church is to bring wholeness to a broken and hurting world. As Christians, we must value life as God values it, cares for it, preserves it, and nourishes it. Like God, we must promote life, protect life, and ensure the quality of life of those affected and infected by AIDS so they may enjoy life again. We should not delight in destroying life by denying people with AIDS

the quality of life they deserve.⁸ Now we are ready for a theological framework that can shape and guide our response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

God's Acts as Model and Basis for our Responses to HIV/AIDS

Volf points out, "God's reception of hostile humanity into divine communion is a model for how human beings should relate to the other."⁹ The Bible affirms this position. God calls us to be holy because he is holy (1 Peter 1:16). Theology demands we reflect the nature and character of the triune God's attitude to suffering and disease. Jesus' response to sickness and disease was consistently one of compassionate acts to alleviate suffering. Rather than enter into speculation on the theological cause of how someone became sick, he instead saw his own response as an opportunity to glorify God (John 9:1-3).

His attitude and response to the marginalized and despised was one of compassion rather than judgment. His interactions with Samaritans (John 4:7), Gentiles (Luke 7:9), tax collectors (Luke 19:2), drunkards (Matthew 11:19), and women of ill repute (Luke 7:37), were all marked by responses of compassion, love, and life. For example, Jesus went out of his way to receive and fellowship with the afflicted, the sinners, and the rejected. Rather than pronounce God's judgment on them, he instead taught that these ones were actually closer to God's Kingdom than those the world considers rich, powerful or successful (e.g. Matthew 5:3-12; Luke 6:20-26). Jesus announced that he had come not to judge, but to save (John 3:17; 12:47). Indeed, Jesus reserved his harshest criticism for the most successful and exalted citizens of his day (Luke 6:24-26), while consistently acting with mercy towards those that society had already judged and excluded. He shared God's love and compassion with these people and they changed their hearts and attitudes towards God and they embraced Him and followed the ways of God.

Jesus' encounters with lepers are but one example of his response to the marginalized of his day. Particularly striking was Jesus laying on of hands to heal leprosy (Mark 1:40-45), a dreaded skin disease that in Old Testament terms was a curse marking the sufferer as being outside of God's blessing (e.g. Leviticus 13:45-46). Yet, Jesus has a place for such people in his life and ministry. No one was an outcast for Jesus. He embraced all and respected all as men and women created in the image of God.

Jesus Christ called his followers to emulate his concern for and ministry to those who are suffering - the poor, diseased and the marginalized (Matthew 10:5-10; 25:31-46; Luke 10:25-37). He called his followers to acts of compassion rather than words of judgment. Indeed, Jesus specifically warned

⁸ Isabel Apawo Phiri, *HIV/AIDS: An African Theological Response in Mission*, theologyinafrica.com/blog/?page_id=98

⁹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1996, 100.

against judging people before the proper time (Luke 6:37; John 12:47; c.f. with Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:5), and especially against associating suffering with God's judgment (e.g. Luke 13:1-5). Jesus taught that we are all "sinners", and we are all in need of repentance and conversion. We must demonstrate a humble spirit as we deal with people and help them.

Conclusion

Theology modeled on God's deeds ensures God-glorifying, compassionate responses to the HIV/AIDS pandemic rather than attributing blame to those infected and affected by the disease. This is particularly true of the Triune God's attitude and response to sickness, suffering, pain experienced by the most marginalized members of society who were excluded and regarded as "sinners" or as being "unclean". God's love, mercy and compassion embrace all such people and he offers them hope and life. We must respond in a similar fashion. God's response becomes a model for our own response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. We must extend love, grace, mercy and compassion to all who have been infected and affected by the sickness. The Gospel offers them life and hope in Jesus Christ who gave his life to redeem them from all their sins, pain and suffering.

As we reflect upon what we have heard and start our own formulation on a theology of HIV/AIDS, let us be humble enough to admit that we do not have all the answers to the problem of HIV/AIDS. However, the Gospel demands we share the message of love and hope with individuals, families, communities and entire countries facing inevitable death. We must assure them of God's presence and identification with them in their pain and suffering for he promised never to leave us or abandon us.

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