



## THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES.

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*Matt. 16:3, Can Ye Discern the Signs of the Times?*

I. The Pharisees and Sadducees had been brought together temporarily by common hatred of the Lord Jesus Christ. They had demanded of Him "a sign from heaven." They may have been demanding of Him such a sign as Moses wrought when he gave bread from heaven; as Joshua, when he bade the sun and moon to stand still; or as Elijah when he called down fire. They hoped to make capital in case of His refusal to work such a miracle, or in case of His attempting to work it and failing to do so.

In the course of His answer, our Lord says: "Can ye not discern the signs of the times?"

II. In these words He implicates two propositions, viz: 1st. That the men of His day ought to have seen indications that the epoch of the Messiah was at hand. 2nd. That in every age men ought to observe signs of what in the near future awaits the kingdom of God, ought to do this in the exercise of ordinary sagacity--by considering the teaching of God's word and providential conditions.

III. Let us take the first of these propositions up very briefly:

There were ample indications that the epoch of the Messiah was at hand. They were such as the following:

(1) The scepter was about to depart from Judah and the lawgiver from between his feet. But prophecy had said (Gen. 49:10), "The scepter shall not depart from Judah nor the lawgiver from between his feet till Shiloh come."

(2) The prophetic weeks of Daniel were closing at which time the Messiah, the Prince was to come.

(3) John the Baptist had come in the Spirit and power of Elijah; Matt. 11:14; John 5:32-33; Mark 1:1-2. But prophecy had foretold that, on the heels of this new Elijah, the Messiah should come; Isa. 40:3; Mal. 3:1 and 4:5, 6.

(4) Jesus' own teaching and miracles proved that the Messiah had come in Him. He had not only taught as never man. He had lived a sinless life, had no consciousness of sin, could not be convicted of sin. In His teaching He had claimed to be the Messiah, God's own Son, and had supported His claims by miracles of love and power. Men ought to have seen that the epoch of the Messiah had come.

IV. The second proposition is, that *men in every age ought to observe the signs of the time as to the near future of the kingdom of God.*

You cannot doubt the truth of this proposition. You cannot doubt that in certain later decades of the last century Japan was peculiarly open to the gospel, and that the Church should have observed the fact, poured missionaries into the field, and gathered in the people when the Lord was ready to bless. You cannot doubt that our Church, and especially its Executive Committee, should know the territory assigned us for evangelization, as Napoleon the Great knew the face of Europe, and should, as far as possible, throw our missionary recruits into sections promising the most effective results. You cannot doubt that the Church should behave in like manner in its home missionary work.

Out of the second proposition a more limited proposition immediately follows, viz: *We ought to study the signs of the time as to the near future of the kingdom in our day.*

To this subject—the signs of our time as to the course of the kingdom in the near future—you are now invited.

Our study must be necessarily partial on this occasion.

1st. Amongst the signs of our times are some portentous ones, which seem to indicate that the Church visible, the visible kingdom, must expect trouble from without and from within. Of these may be instanced:

Sign (1). Attacks on the moral principles of God's word, by the heterodox outside the Church, which were never more bold or insolent.

These heterodox without the Church attack God, representing Him as a fabrication of man's mind and no reality. They attack marriage as not the best relation in which the sexes may meet sexually, as an institution that fruits in great unhappiness. They attack private property as a custom that should be abolished. They attack the courage of fortitude and submission. They still admire the courage of daring, adventure and exploit but the courage of endurance they despise. They attack reverence, which they call superstition, and modesty, which they call prudery. They attack kindness, which they call weakness. They attack duty and would banish the word from the human vocabulary, and the feeling of it from human experience.

Representatives of this bunch of the heterodox without the Church are found writing novels, plays, articles for magazines and reviews. Their articles are sympathetically read by many younger people, by many restive people, by many who feel that they are down and out. They are more or less blind followers of the mad philosopher of Germany, Nietzsche, whether they have ever heard of him or not. Unless they be won away from their pernicious views they mean trouble for the Church,\* and trouble for the state. They are fountains of anarchy. They make man a beast, with morals of a beast—rather with the *amorality* of a beast, whether he be blonde or brunette.

Sign (2). Attacks on the cardinal doctrines of the universal Church of God, e. g., the attack on the doctrines of the Trinity and the constitution of Christ's person. It has been said in various quarters that these doctrines are revamped heathenism—that they were suggested by analogous heathen doctrines. A man must be an ignorant or a slanderer to make any such statements. Heathenism knows of triads of gods, but never dreamed of an analogue to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity

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\*For a description of this group see the article in the North American Review, August, 1923, pp. 200-206.

—the doctrine that God is one in substance, but subsists in a threefold personal mode. Loyalty to the Word of God drove the early Church to the mysterious doctrine. For that Word asserts that God is one and that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. It represents these three modes or persons as existing contemporaneously and as addressing one another and acting on one another. Again, heathenism has legends of persons born of a human mother and a divine father, but heathenism never had a conception of a personality such as our Lord Jesus Christ's is conceived to be. Recall the description of that personality as set forth in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 21: "The only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who being the eternal Son of God became man and so was and continueth to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person forever." A description of Christ's personality to which loyalty to the Scriptures, which affirm that Christ was true man, true God, and teach everywhere his Unipersonality, must drive the logical mind, if it accept the Scriptures as the Word of God or even as inerrant in doctrinal content.

Yet these doctrines are attacked by magazine writers, editors, novelists, by writers of devotional books, and by occupants of theological chairs as well as by Unitarians and the representatives of various modern isms; and these attacks mean trouble for the Church of God, which was designed to be the pillar and ground of the Truth.

Sign (3). Attacks are made to-day within the pale of the great Reformed churches on systems of doctrine, certainly Biblical and once universally held by the people of those churches. For example, a brilliant writer says in the July issue of the Forum, 1923: "Strictly speaking, what Calvinism is in thought, Herbert Spencer's system of absolutism is in agnostic philosophy. Every big idea found in Calvin's theology is found in Spencer's material philosophy. Spencer said, 'Infinite force,' Calvin said, 'An infinite God.' Spencer said, 'The strong survive.' Calvin said, 'The elect survive.' Spencer said, 'The weak go to the wall.' Calvin said, 'The non-elect are

doomed to hell.' Spencer said, 'Force is conserved and cannot be destroyed.' Calvin said, 'The elect persevere and cannot fail.' There is not one idea in John Calvin's system of theology that is not repeated in Spencer's system of absolutism. To-day both Spencer's absolutism and modern Calvinism are like unto two great icebergs, caught in the Gulf Stream of God's providence. Slowly the sun melts the iceberg at the top; slowly the Gulf Stream gnaws it at the bottom. Little by little the cold mass of ice is dissolving, and will soon enter into the warm waters of a better, higher form of thinking in a world where God is as immanent as the embracing air, and where all systems, all arts, all laws, are permeated by the influences of a being whose face is Light, whose name is Love, and whose providence is the Gulf Stream of history."\*

We have in these words no fair representation of Calvinism, or of its future, but they make easy reading, are read, and make it more difficult to preach the truth to the readers with saving effect. And this attack is but one of a vast number of the same general class.

Sign (4). The attacks made on great cardinal doctrines of our Presbyterian standards by Presbyterian teachers and preachers—attacks tolerated widely, even by those who are not active in the attacks:

(a) Attacks on the doctrine that the Scriptures are the Word of God.

(b) Attacks on the doctrine of the virgin birth of our Lord.

(c) Attacks on the doctrine that Christ offered Himself up a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice and reconcile us to God.

(d) Attacks on the doctrine that our Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead on the third day with the same body with which He suffered, and that with that body He ascended into heaven, and there sitteth at the right hand of God, making intercession for His saints.

(e) Attacks on the doctrine that our Lord Jesus Christ showed His power and His love by working mighty miracles.

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\*N. D. Hillis in the Forum, July, 1923, pp. 1681-1697.

These attacks have received widespread toleration, to use no stronger word, in the Presbyterian Church, in the United States of America. They were condemned, indeed, by the General Assembly of the present year, but by a majority of only about 80, in a body of about 743; which is to say that 330 members of the Assembly appeared to be tolerant of such attacks.

A God who is transcendent as well as immanent is being set aside for a God who is immanent only.

Dr. Machen, in his volume, *Christianity and Liberalism*, says: "The attacks of modern liberalism in the Church upon the fundamentals of the Christian faith are being carried on vigorously by Sunday-school lesson helps, by the pulpit, and by the religious press." (Page 17.)

Sign (5). The attacks made upon the Bible by the teachers of a Godless and materialistic evolution, in universities, colleges and public schools of every grade. The minds of our young people are being poisoned against the doctrine that there is, or can be, such a thing as supernatural revelation.

Sign (6) The loosening of the moral fibre of Church teachers and ministers is another mournful sign of the times. The minister of the Northern Presbyterian Church, for example, just as in our own Church, declares solemnly that he believes the "Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice," declares that he sincerely "receives and adopts the Confession of Faith of that Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures," and vows that he will "be zealous and faithful in maintaining the truths of the gospel, and the purity and peace of the Church, whatever persecution or opposition may arise unto him on that account."

If his views change he has no right to preach those changed views while holding his office and receiving support from funds for the propagation of the gospel as interpreted in the Westminster Standards as amended and adopted by his Church. Honesty should move him to preach only what he believes to be true, but honesty equally dictates that he preach his neology, if he has it, at his own charges, or at the charges of those willing to establish new sources of support. Some preachers of

new and false doctrines prate much about their right to liberty of conscience in their preaching, forgetting that there can be no liberty of conscience to use funds, given for the support of the preaching of the gospel, to preach that which is no gospel, but ill-spell—that there can be no liberty of conscience to betray a trust.

We are making no invidious references to the Presbyterian Church, North. We have high regard for a great wing of that Church. I am personally indebted to recent leaders of that wing—to such men as William Henry Green and B. B. Warfield, to their published works, and in the case of Dr. Warfield to private correspondence.

Some years ago it became necessary for me to teach a course on the inspiration of Holy Scriptures. I sought in vain for an available text book. At length I discovered a long article, published in 1882, in a review, Drs. A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield being the joint authors. The article was too brief for my purpose, but it was Biblical and suggested a line of treatment. I wrote a naive letter to Dr. Warfield, telling him of my pleasure in the article, that I thought of using it as a sort of core of a series of lectures, but that I would like first to know whether his views on the subject had changed.

He wrote in return a friendly letter, in which he said that he had never ceased to study the subject, but that the only change he was aware of was in the deepening of his conviction of the truth of the positions set forth in 1882. By the same post he sent me printed copies of perhaps half a dozen long—forty page—articles on some phase or other of the subject, showing, indeed, that he had continued through the decades his study of this vitally important subject. From that day I think he rarely published an article of which he did not send me a copy.

I cannot but hold him and his wing of the Church in high regard. I have referred to the untoward movements in his Church because of our special interest in them. The same sort of phenomena are even more conspicuous in other churches of the country.

It is portentous that not a few men think that they have liberty to betray a trust.

2d. *But these are not the only signs observable as to what awaits the Church of God. There are indications that the Church is to prosper.*

Sign (1). There is a chaos in the philosophic world of to-day. A teacher of philosophy in one of our State universities said in my hearing recently that the world is now without an outstanding philosopher, that such philosophers as we have are eclectics, that the entire philosophic realm is one of chaos. The same thing is true of psychology, which has degenerated into the study of animal anatomy.

This may be a sign that God will, in His providence, proceed to bring order out of chaos: (a) In the history of this earth there was a period of chaos of the material elements. Gen. 1:2 tells us: "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep." On the heels of this chaos, in the material realm, God proceeded to bring order. Read Gen. 1:3-31.

(b) There have been many periods of philosophic, ethical and religious chaos in the history of man, followed by God's gracious working. There was such a chaos just before the entrance of Christianity into the conquest of the Graeco-Roman Empire. Yes, Christ and His apostles and martyrs were sent on the heels of a chaos of philosophic and religious teaching. There was a similar chaos in the fifteenth century. God brought the Reformation in the early part of the sixteenth century. There was a philosophic and religious chaos in England in the first half of the eighteenth century resulting from the teaching of Thomas Hobbs and the English Deists of the preceding century. During this period the religion and morals of England were lower in the judgment of eminent historians than they had ever been before in Protestant times, and lower than they have ever been since. *The Spirit of the ever-living God* brooded over the great deep of that chaos, and through thinkers like Butler, and through evangelists like Whitefield and the Wesleys, using his own almighty power to regenerate, brought order out of chaos, gave to the Church of our Lord an impetus not lost down to this day.

*It may be that in the chaotic conditions of philosophy, ethics*

and religion of our times we should see ground for hope of a coming revival of religion. A sovereign and gracious God is often pleased to bless His Church when it is passing through deep waters.

Sign (2) A more hope-inspiring sign: God's Word was never before so widely spread as it is to-day. It has been translated and published not only in every considerable language, but in most of the greater dialects of the earth. Thus one of the great conditions of the salvation of man has been pushed far along.

Sign (3). The efficient working of God's Spirit seems to be in evidence in every continent and amongst peoples of every clime and condition, if one may judge from the professions of faith and repentance.

(a) Men are giving evidence, too, of a living and divinely wrought faith by taking God at His word and endeavoring to do His will. Young men are devoting themselves to the ministry in increasing numbers. Men and women are going as missionaries to every part of our own land and to every quarter of the earth, and God's people are consecrating their wealth.

(b) Men are in many cases bringing forth fruit meet for repentance—confession of sin, reparation of wrong, and amendment of life—holy living in short.

Sign (4). The Church's aroused interest in her young people and their youthful zeal, if the Church guide them in accordance with the principles of God's Holy Word, which is sufficient as a rule of faith, worship and government, is a most hopeful sign.

Sign (5). The same be said of the work of the women of the Church.

Sign (6). The Church is being aroused to the dangers which confront her and some of her people are solemnly buckling on their armour, defensive as well as offensive, as soldiers of the Lord God Almighty. I received a letter from a true man in the Presbyterian Church, North, not long ago, in which occurred these not insignificant words: "The battle has just begun." This was said with reference to certain work already done in behalf of some really fundamental doctrines of Scriptures.

Sign (7). There is another sign of the future of the Church—not peculiar to our time, but a pregnant sign nevertheless. It is in the Scriptures now spread everywhere. It is specifically in such Scriptures as Matt. 28:18-20; Dan. 2:35; Matt. 13:31, 32; Phil. 2:10, 11. Jesus Christ is on the throne. He is going to disciple all the nations of the earth. Neither shall all the powers of paganism which have invaded the modern Church, nor the gates of hell prevail against it.

*V. Now what should we severally do in view of the signs of the times?*

I am speaking now to the younger men of the Synod.

1. Nothing to reflect on the historic trustworthiness or the inspiration of God's Holy Word; nor on the truth of the doctrine of the victorious atonement; nor on the virgin birth of our Lord: nor on our Lord's true bodily resurrection from the dead; nor on the fact that He showed His ability to work miracles of love and power; nor on any doctrine of Holy Scripture.

God keep us from trying a fling at any part of God's Word, when we know not how to reconcile it with some crotchet of the time which we favor, for example, from flings at certain of Paul's teachings, against which, flings are so frequently made to-day, in an age when it is the fashion to make such flings.

2. Everything in our power to herald in due proportion all the doctrines of sacred Scripture.

3. Continue in the practice of all the duties and instructions of Holy Scripture, and do our part, in God's own appointed way, to disciple all the nations of the earth—to disciple all of all nations, all of our own nation, all of others, every strata of society.

This can best be done by preaching the unadulterated gospel, with Christlike love for the world, with supreme love for God as revealed by prophet and apostle and the Lord Jesus Christ, and in reliance upon the Holy Spirit to give efficacy to the Word as preached and lived, by doing all this in the most strategic way possible for us.

(1) The Baptists in Virginia in the eighteenth century preached in the main the simple gospel of Christ. They did

vastly more good by that course than the Freethinkers in Virginia and New England; and they grew. Hence, in considerable part the strength of that denomination in Virginia to-day.

(2) The good women who upheld the hands of those evangelical preachers were doing vastly more good than the women who were, at the same time, forwarding a gospel that was no gospel.

(3) In the late eighties of the last century, Doctors Newman Smythe and Theodore Munger were entertaining scattered audiences of intellectuals in their respective churches on the beautiful New Haven Green, but a simple evangelical preacher in a nearby pulpit of the city, had crowded houses to which he regularly dispensed the gospel of the Grace of Christ and a Christian ethic to which his hearers were motived by a love to God in Christ.

(4) Paul preached in a strategic way where he could advance the kingdom most effectively.

God keep us all on the task, set the whole Church to making disciples of all the nations of the earth.

4. See to it that our children have a religious education in the home, Sunday-school, church, colleges and church academies, that we have colleges under Church control, where the minds of our sons and daughters may not be prejudiced against the gospel of Christ while receiving an education in philosophy, economics, the sciences, languages and literature, as good as the best; and that our sons and daughters attending State institutions have religious tuition corrective of contra-Christian teaching given in these institutions.

This religious education we must effect in order to our children's personal salvation, and in order to their taking their part in the world's salvation.

There are portentous signs—signs that the Church is to pass through troubled waters; but there are signs that God is at the helm; that further triumph is ahead of the Church.

It is ours to devote ourselves with all the powers we have and all the powers we can acquire, to proclaiming and living the glorious gospel of the blessed God—*furthering it to the utmost.*