

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

And of the children of Issachar, which were men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do (2 Chronicles 12:32).

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The substance of the first message preached at the Bible League meetings in March 2003.

This verse comes in a chapter that chronicles a crucial period in the life of David. It lists the groups of Israelites who joined him at different times, before and after the death of Saul. These “men of Issachar” were among them, and they helped to make David king over all the tribes of Israel.

The Issacharites were noted for their wisdom. They had “understanding of the times,” that is, they were astute and perceptive. They could see how things were going, that it was now the right time to join David. Moreover, their discernment was practical: “to know what Israel ought *to do*.” It should be so with Christian people also: we need to understand the times in which *we* live, that we might know how best to serve our Lord - of whom David is a type - and our own generation.

If we would understand our times, we need to appreciate present conditions. Let us, then, consider our modern society, and the church in it, and how things came to be as they are. Understanding this can help us know how we should live for Christ and serve Him in our day.

What are these times in which we live and witness? And what is our special responsibility re them? These are times in which two revolutions have happened,

1. Times in which a *moral* revolution has taken place.

This has happened throughout the last fifty years of our nation’s history. During the Queen’s Golden Jubilee celebrations, much was made of the difference between conditions in 1953 compared with 2003. Such moral considerations are vital if we are to understand what has happened during the reign of just one queen.

It has to do with national righteousness. Being fallen, society needs laws to restrain wickedness and define right conduct. However, such laws must come from outside, because fallen man is biased toward self and sin. He cannot be trusted to legislate for himself. But where is this to come from? The basis of “the law of the land” must be biblical law - the Ten Commandments. It is God’s will that these underlie the statute books of nations.

This is related to the God-given role of civil rulers. In Romans 13:1-4 they are “ordained of God” and each is called “a minister of God ... for good, and ... a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.” 1 Peter 2:14 says their charge is “for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well.” They are called “gods” in Psalm 82:6 because they do God’s work, making good laws and punishing men for disobedience. However, this can only be if society’s laws are derived from the Moral Law. That must be the source of human law for society.

Scripture shows this is so, because God judged even heathen nations for what were breaches of His Law. He indicts Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, like this in Nahum 3:1-4. Notice here, their sins are defined from the Ten Commandments: the 6th (“bloody city”), the 9th (“lies”), and the 8th (“robbery”) are in verse 1; and verse 4 highlights the 7th, 1st and 5th. Conversely, nations are blessed when their societies are ordered according to God’s Law, for Prov.14:34 says, “Righteousness exalteth a nation: (not *the* nation, Israel, but *a* nation - any nation) but sin is a reproach to any people.” When the state fears the God of heaven and heeds His laws like this, it will be blessed. When it does not, it degenerates and sinks into shame.

Our own United Kingdom is a landmark example of this.

1] Historically, God’s Law has shaped our statute book.

In Anglo-Saxon times, King Alfred the Great laid an important foundation. He appended to his laws a free translation of the Ten Commandments and an abridgment of the enactments of Exodus chapters 21-23. Alfred took his responsibilities as a Christian ruler seriously, and the spiritual welfare of his subjects was as important to him as their protection from Scandinavian pagans. Similar developments took place under Henry II.

The later history of Britain is chequered, yet by Victorian times we were an avowedly Christian nation. Material prosperity followed the Protestant work ethic. By 1856 Great Britain was the richest country in the world, with no rivals in commerce or industry. Through colonial expansion, it had an empire that covered 1/3 of the globe and 1/4 of mankind. On the back of this rode the great missionary movement of the 19th century, bringing Gospel light and civilization to millions. Although there was a darker side to Victorian society at home, *officially* black was called black, and white was called white. Victorian Britain was characterised by reverence for God, Sunday observance, hard work, thrift, honesty, moral decency, respect for others and their property, and the sanctity of life. So that it could have been said, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people” (Deuteronomy 4:6).

2] The last forty or fifty years have seen the near-abandonment of this.

Until around the middle of the 20th century, the general belief was that our laws and values stem from our Christian history. It was not always liked; various movements had tried to change it. Nevertheless, this biblical heritage was acknowledged and largely accepted. However, by the 1960s the ethos was violently challenged. Britain experienced a widespread mood of change. Much of this centred on younger people, who had begun to develop their own tastes in fashion, music and moral lifestyle. A separate identity, the rebellious “youth culture,” led to the weakening of parental authority. This generation, with its own agenda, did not bode well for the future.

The driving force behind the change, however, was the activity of adults. Playwrights, authors, designers, celebrities and the media attacked the conventions of the past. Every moral standard and social convention was ridiculed. On the surface, it seemed that the “angry young men” voiced a post-war disillusionment with conventional society. In reality, behind this revolt lay a militantly secular view of things, the logical conclusion of the evolutionary worldview.

The 1960s saw an historic shift of belief. No longer did men see our country's laws as being of divine appointment, based on God's law, and therefore fixed. Rather, they were merely of human appointment, based upon "the will of the people." Therefore, they could - and needed to be - changed. British society went from absolute to relative, and throughout those heady days we were to hear phrases like "The Permissive Society" and "The New Morality." It was a systematic repudiation of one biblical law after another.

Tragically, Parliament caught the new mood, and "the powers that be" re-legislated the nation's moral standards. Here is the tally, together with the relevant divine commandments they abandoned.

1960 legalising of high street betting shops (10th Commandment).
1965 abolition of capital punishment for murder (6th Commandment).
1967 abortion legalised (6th Commandment).
1967 sodomy de-criminalised for consenting adults 21 and over. 1994 down to 18, now down to 16 (7th Commandment, also 6th).
1968 Theatres Act, stage censorship abolished (many commandments).
1969 Divorce Reform Act (7th Commandment).
1969 Curbs on Sunday sports, theatres, and dancing lifted (4th Commandment).

In the three decades since, we have see a further rash of legislation, including,

1993 Partial deregulation of Sunday trading (4th Commandment).
1994 Introduction of the National Lottery (10th Commandment).

In all, since the last war, more than 60 pieces of Bible-based legislation have gone, touching about 400 places in Scripture. The restraints are off, in open defiance of heaven. "No absolutes!" is the cry, together with "morality is what you make it." The true significance of this is well summed up by David Samuel: "When a law is passed by Parliament and put upon the statute book it can still be lawlessness when it is judged by that higher law - the Law of God. Yet we have witnessed this kind of thing repeatedly in recent years ... Iniquity, lawlessness, in our society today is no longer merely the aberration of the individual, but it is the structured, codified and deliberate lawlessness of society itself."

Roy Jenkins, the 1960s Labour Home Secretary, said, "The permissive society is a civilized society." I wonder if before his death at 82 this year, he reflected upon those words! We would have like to have asked Lord Jenkins if he thought that gun crime, child criminals, live-in boyfriend child abuse, child pornography, murder and body parts in bin bags, soaring rape statistics, teenage pregnancies, gambling debt, drunkenness, VD and AIDS, 1.7 billion pounds lost to shops by shoplifting each year amount to "a civilized society"? We only break *ourselves* when we break God's Commandments.

3] In this climate we have to live and witness as Christians.

No longer is our society leavened by God-fearing respect for His commandments, a clear sense of right and wrong, and just views of crime and punishment. Now, every man does that which is right in his own eyes. "Therefore the law is slacked, and

judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth” (Habakkuk 1:4).

All this has consequences for what we believe, and try to do in the spread of the Gospel. Concepts like a holy God, conviction of sin, judgment, salvation, divine grace, upright living, and absolute standards are affected by the absence of a biblical worldview. Each new generation, increasingly ignorant of these matters, leaves society more secular, hedonistic, amoral and apathetic. It makes a hearing for the Gospel that much harder. And it makes us sympathise with Samuel Rutherford’s words, “I find it hard to be a Christian.” The recent series on Worldliness showed how easily we could be cowed and rendered ineffectual by these conditions.

2. Times in which a *spiritual* revolution has taken place

Logically, this should have come first, because the state of the church usually determines what society will be like. However, I put it in this order because we are seeing today *the world affecting the church* – and to an alarming degree.

We can sum it up by a loss of the fear of God. It belongs to the previous point: “Fear God and keep his commandments” (Ecclesiastes 12:13). This fear is a healthy, restraining quality. It is a sense of God, a tender conscience, a recognition of accountability. It morally sensitises people. In unbelievers, it is “Common Grace,” and has historically made our nation distinguished for so much that is good and great. In believers, it is a covenant blessing, “I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me” (Jeremiah.32:40). Godly fear has been defined as the believer reckoning “the smile of God his greatest delight, and the frown of God his greatest dread.”

Now, where would we expect to witness the fear of God most? Surely, in the place where we are most conscious of God’s holy presence: the Christian assembly. Back in 1950s and early ‘60s, this largely characterised the worship and demeanour of Christian churches. Perhaps this was not always biblically worked-out. Yet, Christians never thought of being casual and irreverent in church, far less of worshipping God in any other way than seemed according to the Bible. This was due to a healthy sense of what is pleasing to God: godly fear.

Tragically, this ethos has all but disappeared in our day. And we have to go back to the same decade, the 1960s, to see why. It was then that the Charismatic Movement hit the church scene, with its breaking free of God-fearing, biblically-disciplined worship. Multiple musical instruments, catchy songs, emphasis on emotions, man-centred and experience-centred praise were declared evidences of “the Spirit.” Anything else needed “liberating.”

What really happened was this: the moral revolution of the 1960s was paralleled by a spiritual revolution. “The Swinging Sixties” in the land entered the house of God. What the permissive society did for lifestyle *outside* the church, the Charismatic Movement did for worship and life *inside* the church. Far from being the Holy Spirit, it was simply the spirit of the age.

It is interesting to look back at what evangelicalism made of this phenomenon.

a] For a time, traditional evangelicals and charismatics remained separate. After all, there was a parallel movement in Romanism, with Roman Catholics “speaking in tongues.” Anglo-catholic churches also received the “gifts.” Ecumenism had a fillip from the Charismatic Movement because “the baptism in the Spirit” became the uniting experience for those in the apostate denominations.

b] As time went by, however, the movement began to spread beyond its borders. Anglican churches and house groups tended to be the confines at first. However, when Brethren assemblies, FIEC-type churches and other respectable bodies succumbed, this gave more credibility to the charismatic position.

c] Churches of Reformed persuasion, however, still gave it a wide berth. Their Reformation heritage ensured they evaluated this movement according to the Scriptures. Doing so, they found it wanting (Isaiah 8:20). Cessationist convictions safeguarded many assemblies at that time.

d] Then, in the 1980s, even Reformed churches began to move. We began to hear of strange things happening in church services, such as the introduction of the new worship songs and multiple musical instruments. Those once known for their adherence to the Reformed faith were openly uniting their heritage with elements from the charismatic movement. Before long the label “Reformed Charismatic” was coined.

e] Now, in our day, we witness a capitulation. While many reformed churches still reject charismatic teaching, they nonetheless are affected by its mindset. Not scripture but other factors control their thinking. A defining issue is the need of the times. “If we are to bring people from outside under the Gospel,” so runs the reasoning, “we must adjust our services to try to accommodate them. We must be more relaxed, informal and less off-putting. We should include the kinds of things to which the world can relate: musical instruments, modern worship songs, interaction, fun, easy-to-understand-Bible translations.”

Now, what is this philosophy? Nothing but *charismatic assumptions*. Not its teaching, admittedly, but its approach to worship and evangelism. This is the shift that has taken place in our times. Churches exist where reformed (even cessationist) preaching is heard from the pulpit, and yet charismatic-influenced worship goes on in the pew. This is implicit in the *Praise!* hymn book, where 34 songs are by Graham Kendrick, an ecumenist and charismatic, and many others are of the same ilk. A revision of *Christian Hymns* is under way, and, according to a press release, material by Graham Kendrick will be included in that. This movement, or its mindset, has travelled further than we are prepared to acknowledge.

Yet, either the charismatic movement is erroneous delusion (at best of the flesh, at worst of the devil) – or it is biblically sound. It cannot be both. If it is erroneous delusion, we should have none of it (“have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them” Ephesians 5:11) – if it is biblically sound, we should have all of it (“Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” 1 Thessalonians

5:21). Mixing and matching is leading to confusion, and concessions to the world in the church.

We need to say this loudly and clearly: judged by biblical and historic standards, charismatic worship is worldly worship. It has the hallmarks of the way the world behaves: sensual and undisciplined, feelings and fun, mind-neutralised and satisfaction-centred. If the average worldling could choose how he would like to worship, charismatic style worship would be it. What kind of witness to outsiders is it then, when they find worship styles redolent of their own degenerate culture? How does this point them to divine and heavenly things? In the 19th century, Rabbi Duncan once said, “Conformity to the world is one of the most besetting sins of the professing church at the present day.” One can only imagine how aghast he would be in the 21st century.

Here, surely, is the bottom line for all biblical worship: “God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him” (Psalm 89:7) And also for the effect our worship should have upon unconverted visitors: “And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth” (1 Corinthians 14:25 cf Isaiah 45:14).

Our times, then, are those of a revolution in the moral and spiritual realm. “Revolution” implies upheaval and change, and this is certainly what has happened. We live and serve as Christians in a climate where biblical norms have almost disappeared from society and the church. The spirit of pragmatism and willingness to go with the times is everywhere. So few with convictions and prepared to make a stand and give unflinching leadership.

“Understanding the times” in which we live, we must now consider what we should “do.”

a] Let us remember God’s sovereignty in this.

It is no accident that we find ourselves here in our day. This is what He has appointed for us. We could have been favoured to live in Reformation times, Puritan times, during the 18th Century awakening, in the Victorian era or in better times more recently. However, the Lord has chosen us for now. We must accept this calling, for are we not “come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14).

b] Let us not be guilty of an unhealthy relationship with the past.

We can learn from the centuries gone by, but we must not live in them. The danger is of making depressing comparisons. This is what the returned exiles did when the foundation for the second temple was laid. Ezra.3:12,13 tells us that, while the younger generation rejoiced at this new beginning, the older ones could just remember Solomon’s temple, and wept to see the difference. That put a damper on the occasion, and was not to God’s glory. Haggai 2:1-5 addresses the same problem.

Older Christians, who can look back to better days, must be careful not to discourage those who seek to be believably optimistic. Ecclesiastes 7:10 warns us, “Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not

enquire wisely concerning this.” We are not so much to bemoan the changes, but remember that the past represents what God *did* - and can do again.

c] Let us remember that Scripture is sufficient.

When God inspired it, He had all the features of our times in mind: “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope” (Romans 15:4). There is no modern issue or problem that eludes the wisdom of God in His word.

d] Let us remember that times have been very bad before.

Church history tends to go in peaks and troughs. It is a graph of highs and lows. Some periods in the Old Testament have been dark, long and very depressing: for instance the Judges, the Kings, the time prior to the coming of our Lord, the Middle Ages, the early 18th century, etc. Throughout those times the church has suffered obscurity, persecution, discouragement - yet the Lord appeared and revived His work. Though a remnant, the Lord preserved His church and fulfilled His work in and through her.

e] Let us not despise what the Lord *is* doing today.

God through the prophet says, “For who hath despised the day of small things?” (Zechariah 4:10). This is in the form of a question to challenge our attitude, which is more of a problem than the smallness of God’s work. Even though it is advancing by small steps these days, it *is* advancing. Let us give ourselves to it with all our hearts. Better to have what is small and *real*, than what seems greater but is not of God.

f] Let us remember that *quality*, not quantity, will count in the Day of Christ.

Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 likens our works to either “gold, silver, precious stones” or “wood, hay, stubble.” The fiery scrutiny (Revelation 1:14) of God’s Son will manifest the nature of these when we stand before Him. Faithfulness is what counts and will pass the test, securing a gracious reward. Compromise and disobedience will be burned up, and will lose believers the full reward they might have had (2 John 8). In the light of this, what can matter more than doing God’s work in God’s way? Let our zeal for truth and the furtherance of the gospel only run in biblical channels.

g] Let us keep the Faith.

It is not only our generation that needs the faith kept entire, but also the generations to come. What is lost now cannot easily be recovered; but what is maintained can be built upon in the future. If the time comes when the Lord is pleased to revive His work, our contribution will count.

May the Lord thus help us to understand our times, like Issachar did, that we might do the will of God, serve our generation, and leave behind us a blessing forever.