

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, August 23, 1992, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MATTHEW 16:1-3

“The Pharisees & Sadducees came to Jesus and tested Him by asking Him to show them a sign from heaven. He replied, ‘When evening comes, you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,” and in the morning you say, “There will be a storm today, the sky is read and threatening.” Yes, you know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.’”

INTERPRETING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Those Pharisees and Sadducees of Christ’s day were weather-wise, just as we are. Indeed, they recited the same weather couplet that we ourselves use:

“A red sky at night is the shepherd’s delight;
A red sky in the morning is the shepherd’s warning.”

They knew that when the evening sky was tinged with red, it meant fine weather for the morrow; whereas a red sky in the morning was a warning of an impending storm.

But they were blind to “the signs of the times.” They could not interpret the presence of Jesus Christ in their midst as the coming of God, Himself, to our planet. They could not interpret His presence as the beginning of a whole new era in man’s understanding of God and of God’s purposes for His world. Jesus reminded them that the Queen of Sheba had responded positively to the wisdom of Solomon; and the people of Nineveh had repented as they heard the preaching of Jonah. How much more should these people, who were listening to the message of the Son of God, have responded to Him who is infinitely greater than Solomon or Jonah! Instead of foolishly looking for some “sign from heaven”, let them look upon Jesus, Himself, as God’s sign. It is as if He said to them, “In Me you are confronted with God and with God’s truth. What more could you possibly need? But you are so blind that you cannot see it.”

Jesus Christ is God’s last word to us; and if people cannot see God in Jesus and hear God’s Word to them through Jesus, then they cannot see or hear God in anything or anyone else. When we are confronted with Jesus Christ, we are confronted with God’s last and final word, and God’s ultimate appeal.

Now, of course, this conviction is in diametric opposition to the prevailing sentiment in this country where the majority of people today believe that one faith is as good as another. But as the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. George Carey, said recently -- “Let us not have any truck with bland theology that says Jesus is just one option among many. Dialogue with other faiths is very important, but I can respect another faith and a believer of that faith by saying, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation. I owe it to you to share that with you. Do with that truth what you may, but my job is to say that to you.”

We know, don't we, that any claim that salvation is through Christ alone will cause howls of protest in the elite circles that Americans call the "politically correct." Indeed, many people in the liberal mainline churches consider evangelism controversial because they see no need for anyone to change his religious beliefs.

But let me tell you something – If America is truly a pluralistic society, then no one should be offended if we Christians stand up and make a case for what we believe. People can then accept what we have to say or reject it. But their blood will not be upon our heads if they reject God's truth.

So, if we are to interpret "the signs of the times" correctly, we can do so only as we relate the events that are transpiring in our nation and in the world to God's revelation to us in Christ. But the people of the world would never dream of doing that, and so it is a case of "the blind leading the blind." And, when the blind lead the blind, they always end up in the abyss.

Carl Sandberg, the biographer of Abraham Lincoln, once observed, "When a society or a civilization perishes, one condition can always be found -- they forgot where they came from."

That's what happened to Israel long ago. Joshua had the joy and privilege of leading the children of Israel out of the desert and into the Promised Land. And God blessed them and prospered them because they obeyed His commandments. But then, Joshua and his generation died, and as Judges 2:10-11 tells us, "another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord, nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served heathen gods." Spiritual and historical ignorance combined to corrupt Israel's culture. They forgot where they came from.

You see, the past is to a nation what roots are to a plant. Destroy the roots, and the plant dies. Today, America is destroying the roots of her culture. Our roots are unequivocally Christian in nature, but to hear our godless "intellectuals" describe them today, you would think America was founded by the American Civil Liberties Union, rather than by Pilgrims who came to America to establish in freedom a Christian commonwealth. Just 23 years after the Pilgrims reached Plymouth, those early colonists expressly declared what motivated them. In the New England Articles of Confederation (1643) they said, "We all came to these parts of America with one and the same end and aim, namely, to advance the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to enjoy the liberties of the gospel in purity with peace..."

All the charters for the colonies contained Christian mandates. These were Christian communities which set up civil governments because the Bible mandated civil governments -- the Bible was their blueprint. Every State Constitution of the United States in some way has paid tribute to God as the author of our liberties. For example, the Preamble to the Constitution of Illinois states, "Grateful to Almighty God for the civil, political and religious liberty which He has so long permitted us to enjoy..."

Many of the states also have religious seals and mottos, like Colorado's "Nothing without Deity". The Declaration of Independence four times declares "the Creator" to be the Source of our liberties. Our national motto, "In God we Trust" is placed on every coin, and in

our Pledge of Allegiance we affirm that we are “one nation under God”.

In response to a petition to Congress in 1853 to remove its chaplains from the House and Senate and from the military, the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee noted, “We are a Christian people... what is to be expected but that we should pay a due reverence to Christianity?” But today we can’t even have prayer at a High School graduation!

Do you know that 104 of the first 119 colleges and universities in America were founded by Christians? Harvard was 100 years old before it had any professors who were not also ministers. Harvard’s founding charter states the following: “Let every student be plainly instructed and earnestly pressed to consider well, the main end of his life and studies is to know God and Jesus Christ, which is eternal life.” These words are still in Harvard’s charter today, but they are now completely ignored. Do you know that the Professor of Christian Morals and Chaplain to the University, Peter J. Gomes, is a practicing homosexual? He had an article in the New York Times last Monday, August 17, in which he trots out all the old tired and disproven arguments in an attempt to convince people that homosexuality is not really condemned in the Bible; and that the sin of Sodom was not homosexuality; it was merely failure to show hospitality! Well, so much for the downfall of Harvard.

Dartmouth College was founded as a Christian missionary outreach to the American Indians, but today 17-year-old freshmen are given so-called “safe sex” kits when they arrive on campus. Among the condoms and all sorts of sexual devices contained in these kits is a pamphlet with explicit pictures of both heterosexuals and homosexuals, showing the “right way” to have sex. We know, too, that most colleges and universities now have abortion clinics right on campus.

Do you know that of the first 40,000 college graduates before the Civil War, 10,000 of them entered the Christian ministry; but today our universities fund Satanism and the New Age religion and just about every outlandish philosophy. Only Christianity is scorned and ridiculed and deemed unacceptable. Right now, Christians are under the most ferocious and vicious attack ever on American college campuses.

Professor Phillip Bishop, at the University of Alabama, was ordered in a letter from his department chairman to stop referring to God and Christ in his classes: But at Southern Methodist University, a professor brought a witch to his class to conduct Satanic rituals as a way to “broaden” his students’ horizons!

Penn State University recently denied student activity funds to Christian students who asked to show a documentary on the dangers of Satanism. The university denied the funds because the film would “offend” Satanists, and it did not present the “good points” of Satanism! Penn State, however, sees no problem with funding gay and lesbian activities on campus, no matter how much their ungodly lifestyle may offend Christians. And the sad litany could go on and on.

Our young people are being lost because, as Dr. James Dobson puts it, Christians have failed to understand that “nothing short of a great civil war of values rages today throughout

North America. Two sides with vastly differing and incompatible world views are locked in a bitter conflict that permeates every level of society.” This war is between two world views. One side believes in God as the source of all life. The other side denies God’s existence, and they are winning the war for the hearts and minds of our young people because they control the universities.

Today one out of every four Americans is influenced each year by some 600,000 professors, the vast majority of whom are openly hostile to Christianity. These professors teach 13 million students each year, including 2 million teachers who are now teaching 49 million school children. Surely if the well is polluted, the water is dangerous to drink and will prove fatal to those who drink it.

Let me mention sex education in our schools. Schools claim to be offering biological and medical information in such programs, but in reality, they spend most of their time trying to replace the values, traditions, and inhibitions the children receive from their homes with radically different views from advocates of the “sexual revolution”. Those parents who happen to learn what is really going on are often astounded. But the schools treat this as merely a tactical problem, to be dealt with by public relations. As far as the zealots behind sex education are concerned, they are the anointed and parents are the benighted because they adhere to that horrible belief in traditional Judeo-Christian moral values!

At one time, not so long ago, there was no question that families had the right to decide what values their children were to have, and parents had the right to make a whole spectrum of decisions about how best to deal with the inevitable problems of childhood and adolescence. But today the public schools carry on unrelenting guerilla warfare against the traditional values that made this nation great. And that is the reason why every born-again Christian in this country should work, in every way possible, to support our President in his attempt to get tax relief for parents who want to send their children to a Christian school.

Now, I could go on and talk about Murphy Brown and the breakdown of the traditional family, about abortion and homosexuality, and a host of other hot issues that confront and challenge us as we endeavor to interpret the signs of the times, but time forbids this. Suffice it to say that these evils are upon us because we have forgotten where we came from.

I believe we are to interpret “the signs of the times” in the context of two great theological realities -- SIN and GRACE.

1. **SIN**. Two years ago, Dr. Glenn Tinder, a professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts, wrote a controversial best seller entitled, “The Political Meaning of Christianity,” in which he blames most of the nation’s problems on America’s loss of faith; the decline of the family; the disappearance of civility; the spiritual emptiness of most cultural products from films to novels; and the rush to find solace in ephemeral things such as possessions and physical gratification.

“Sin is real, and to deny its existence is fatal,” he says. All the horrible crimes, the destructive wars and prison camps of the 20th Century came in an era when many people -- most

of whom prided themselves on their abandonment of faith -- believed themselves superior to their believing ancestors in behavior and morality!

Dr. Tinder reserves his deepest wrath for those who think they can build the perfect society on earth, while at the same time ignoring the Christian message of man's fallen state. When men dethrone God, then they, themselves, try to become gods; and whoever tries to become a god, ends up a monster.

We have only to look around us to see how sin, in a thousand different forms, flaunts itself unashamedly in our society. I believe that every Christian, every day, as we confess our individual sins to God, and ask His forgiveness, should also confess the sins of our nation, pleading with Him to be merciful to us as a people, and to withhold His righteous judgments upon us -- judgments which we so richly deserve.

2. But we must also emphasize GRACE because God is long-suffering and merciful, and He never leaves Himself without a witness to His truth; and I believe He will spare and continue to bless America because of the millions of believers across this nation who have not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:18). No nation on the face of the earth has done more in this 20th Century to spread the Gospel to every land than has the USA. Is this, perhaps, why God has sovereignly ordained that we should be the only "superpower" remaining in the world in 1992? Think about that.

There was a time when King David was facing the army of the Philistines; but the divine command was, "Don't attack until you hear a sound of movement in the tops of the mulberry trees. But when you hear that sound, said the Lord, "then launch your attack for I will have gone before you to rout the Philistine army." (1 Chr. 14:14-15)

Today we are hearing the winds of God's Spirit blowing through the tops of the mulberry trees; and the Lord is calling us to spiritual warfare in His name; and He is promising that we will be victorious!

I have mentioned the spiritual chaos on university campuses today. It is reckoned that perhaps 20 percent of college professors are Christians, So Campus Crusade for Christ has launched a venture to equip, train, and motivate 32,500 college professors to share their faith with all 13 million students on campuses every year.

Campus Crusade also hopes to organize these Christian professors to stop the persecution of Christians on campus; and to defend, in courts of law when necessary, the right of Christian professors and students to speak openly about their faith on campus. Isn't that effort worthy of our prayers and practical support?

The tops of the mulberry trees are waving in the wind as we see wonderfully effective Christian ministries like Dr. James Dobson's "Focus on the Family", and the Family Research Council, as they attempt, under God, to redeem and restore the American family.

Or think of Charles Colson's "Prison Fellowship", ministering to hundreds of thousands

of inmates as they serve out their sentences. And we see evangelical churches being planted by the thousands all across the nation; in many cases growing to huge proportions.

And Mr. Wood told me just this week that he sees a renewed spiritual mindedness among young people that he has never witnessed before. How we ought to thank God for our Christian teenagers who are living their faith in purity of life and witnessing to others most effectively. Incidentally, there is a student-led crusade across the nation called, "See You at the Pole". Once a year, Christian high schoolers are asked to meet at the flag pole at their school, and there pray for their school, their teachers, their non-Christian friends, and their country. In 1991 more than a million students participated; and the event this year is scheduled for September 17; and they expect two to three million students to take part. Do pray for this amazing movement of the Spirit amongst our Christian teenagers.

Folks, this is no time for despair. We do not tremble for the Ark of the Lord (1 Chr. 13:9). God is in control, and I believe that He ordains spiritual revival and national renewal at the precise moment when, from the human standpoint things look the blackest.

Especially in this election year, let us be zealous in the cause of personal and national righteousness; and above all, in proclaiming our Lord Jesus Christ as the only Savior, and the only hope of the world!

AMEN.