

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

The expression *the signs of the times*, writes Anthony Hoekema, is commonly used to describe certain happenings of situations which are said to precede or point to the Second Coming of Christ.¹ On this view the primary orientation of these signs is toward the future, particularly toward the events surrounding the Parousia.² It should be noted, however, that in the one and only passage where the above-named expression is used in the Bible, the *signs of the times* refer primarily not to what is still future but to what God has done in the past and is revealing in the present: “You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times” (Matthew 16:3). The Greek words here used are *ta sēmeia tōn kairōn*. Though the word *sēmeion* may have a variety of meanings, here it probably designates a meaningful God-given token, indicating what God has done or is doing or is about to do. *Kairos*, commonly meaning point of time or period of time, here must refer to a period of divine activity which should have brought the people to whom Jesus spoke (Pharisees and Sadducees) to a decision of faith in him, but which obviously had not done so. The Pharisees and Sadducees had just asked Jesus to authenticate himself by giving them a sign from heaven. Jesus replied in the words of verse 3, quoted above. He rebuked them for not being able to discern the signs that the Messiah predicted by the prophets was indeed in their midst. Jesus had already indicated to John the Baptist what some of these signs were: “The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and poor have good news preached to them” (Matthew 11:5). On the basis of these *signs of the times* the Jewish leaders should have realized that the great, decisive event in history had occurred with the coming of the Messiah. Their refusal to discern these signs was their condemnation. It is true, of course, that the *signs of the times* about which Jesus spoke also pointed to the future. If these leaders were to continue to fail to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, future judgment would await them and all who followed them. So we may grant that these signs did indeed point to the future. But their primary reference was not to the future but to the past and the present. One of the problems we have to consider in connection with *signs of the times*, as traditionally understood, is this: If these signs point to certain events which must still occur before Jesus comes again, how can we be always ready for that return? Does not a consideration of these signs carry with it the danger of pushing off the return of Christ in the far-distant future, so that we no longer need to be concerned about being always ready? Is not the lack of a lively expectation of the Parousia among many Christians today perhaps due to an excessive emphasis on the doctrine of the *signs of the times*? We shall have to face this problem as we go on to discuss these signs. Before we do so, however, we should consider some mistaken understandings of *signs of the times signs of the times*.

- I. One such mistaken understanding is *to think of the signs of the times as referring exclusively to the end-time*, as if they had to do only with the period immediately preceding the Parousia and had nothing to do with the centuries preceding the Parousia. That this is a wrong view of the signs is obvious first of all from Jesus’ use of the expression in Matthew 16:3, where the *signs of the times* clearly refer to the past and present rather than to the future. It is obvious also from the fact that both Jesus and Paul spoke of these signs when they were addressing their contemporaries. Surely Jesus and Paul were not speaking over the heads of their hearers or readers when they referred to these signs! In the so-called “Olivet Discourse” recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21, Jesus gives a number of signs which had their initial fulfillment at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem; since this discourse exemplifies the principle of prophetic foreshortening, however, the signs mentioned in them will have a further fulfillment at the time of the Parousia. In the meantime, all the signs of the times described in the New Testament characterize the entire period between Christ’s first and second coming, and every decade of that period. The *signs of the times*, therefore, summon the church to constant watchfulness.
- II. Another mistaken understanding of these signs is *to think of them only in terms of abnormal, spectacular, or catastrophic events*. On the basis of this view, which has affinities with the mistaken view just discussed, the signs are thought of as spectacular, interruptions of the normal course of history which irresistibly draw attention to themselves. But if the signs of Christ’s return are of such a sort, how can we be continually watchful? Jesus himself warned against this understanding of the signs when he said to the Pharisees, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Lo, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Luke 17:20 - 21). Berkouwer’s comment on this passage is to the point: “The words Christ uses are obviously not directed against ‘seeing’ the signs but against an expectation of the Kingdom oriented to the spectacular and unusual, and thus neglecting the element of personal decision.”

NOTE: A further word of warning is in order here. Spectacular signs are specifically associated with the kingdom of Satan; they could therefore be quite misleading. It is said that the coming of the man of lawlessness will be “with all power and with pretended signs and wonders” (II Thessalonians 2:9). And of the beast rising out of the earth described in Revelation 13, it is said that he

“works great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of men; and by the signs come down from heaven to earth in the sight of men; and by the signs which it [or he] is allowed to work in the presence of the beast, it [he] deceives those who dwell on earth” (vv. 13 - 14). Instead of looking for spectacular signs, therefore, God’s people should be on the alert to discern the signs of Christ’s return primarily in the nonspectacular processes of history. That there may be catastrophic signs like earthquakes is not denied, but to limit the signs to the category of the unusual and the abnormal is a mistake.

III. A third wrong understanding of the signs of the times is *to attempt to use them as a way of dating the exact time of Christ’s return*. Such attempts have been made throughout Christian history. In 1818, for example, after a two-year period of Bible study, William Miller concluded that Christ was coming back some time between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844. More recently Harold Camping pinpointed September of 1994 as the date of Christ’s return. When that did not come to pass he revised his calculation and now assures us that May 21, 2011 is the correct date. Christ himself, however, condemned all such attempts when he told us that no one knows the day or the hour of his return, not even the Son (Mark 13:32; Matthew 24:36). If Christ himself did not know the day, who are we that we should try to know more than Christ? The *signs of the times* tell us about the certainty of the Second Coming, but do not divulge its precise date.

IV. A fourth wrong use of the signs culminates in *the attempt to construct an exact timetable of future happenings*. This attempt has been characteristic of many eschatologically oriented sectarian movements; it continues to be characteristic of certain types of dispensationalism.³ But, as Charles Hodge indicated many years ago, this is not the purpose of biblical prophecy: “The first point to be considered [in the interpretation of prophecy] is the true design of prophecy, and how that design is to be ascertained. Prophecy is very different from history. It is not intended to give us a knowledge of the future analogous to that which history gives us of the past.”⁴ By way of example, Hodge notes that, though many prophecies were given by the Old Testament prophets about the First Advent of Christ, no one knew exactly how these prophecies would be fulfilled until Christ had actually come: “Christ was indeed a king, but no such king as the world had ever seen, and such as no man expected; He was a priest, but the only priest that ever lived of whose priesthood He was Himself the victim; He did establish a kingdom, but it was not of this world.”⁵ One might conceivably reply that the reason why many of Christ’s contemporaries did not recognize him as the one who fulfilled Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah was that they failed to look upon him with eyes of faith. This is indeed true. But it is also true that many of those who did believe on Christ had difficulty in seeing *how* he fulfilled Old Testament predictions. For example, John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, who had earlier introduced him as the promised Messiah, later began to have his doubts. After John had been imprisoned, he sent his disciples to Jesus in order to ask the latter, “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (Matthew 11:3). Why did John now have his doubts? Because he had pictured the Messiah he was introducing as one who was about to cut down the non-fruit-bearing trees and to burn the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:10, 12), whereas the Jesus he was hearing about did none of these things. Jesus replied by calling attention to his healing miracles and to his preaching of the gospel to the poor (vv. 4 – 5), which Isaiah had predicted the Messiah would do (Isaiah 35:5 – 6; 61:1). John was expecting Jesus to fulfill at his first coming the judging activities which he would carry out at his second coming; until he received Jesus’ corrective message he failed to realize that the healing and preaching activities of the Messiah were to be carried out at his first coming. In other words, John confused Christ’s second coming with his first coming; though he believed that all the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah would be fulfilled, he did not properly understand the *way* in which they would be fulfilled. If believers like John the Baptist could have problems of this sort with predictions about Christ’s first coming, what guarantee do we have that believers will not have similar difficulties with predictions about Christ’s second coming? We are confident that all predictions about Christ’s return and the end of the world will be fulfilled, but we do not know exactly how they will be fulfilled. Having looked at some wrong understandings of the *signs of the times*, we go on now to ask, How should we think about these signs? What is their proper function?

A. *Though we commonly think of the signs of the times as pointing to the future, these signs point first of all to what God has done in the past.*

This, as we saw above, was the primary meaning *signs of the times* to which Jesus referred in Matthew 16:3, “You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.” The *signs of the times* reveal that the great victory of Christ has been won, and that therefore the decisive change in history has occurred. They reveal that God is at work in the world, busy fulfilling his promises and bringing to realization the final consummation of redemption. They reveal the central meaning of history: the Lord rules, and is working out his purposes. Discerning the *signs of the times*, therefore, has important implications for our daily conduct. It means “making the most of the time, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:16). It means to “walk as children of light” (Ephesians 5:8). In Romans 13 Paul appeals to his readers to show by the quality of their lives that they know what time it is on God’s clock: “Besides this you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day” (vv. 11 – 13).

B. *The signs of the times also point forward to the end of history, particularly to the return of Christ.*

As we have already seen, these signs do not tell us the exact time when Christ will return and when the events accompanying his return will take place, but they do assure us that these things will certainly occur. Jesus more than

once used expressions such as “and then the end will come,” after having indicted what some of the signs would be (Matthew 24:14, 29, 30), Paul told the Thessalonians that “that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed: (II Thessalonians 2:3). So the *signs of the times* also point forward. But they point forward on the basis of what God has already done in the past. Eschatological preaching bears witness to the future from the point of view of the salvation which has already come. The *signs of the times*, therefore, point both to the past and to the future. They underscore the already—not yet tension in which the New Testament church lives: already we bask in the light of Christ’s victory, enjoy the firstfruits of the Spirit, are new creatures in Christ—but we are not yet what we shall be, and therefore look forward eagerly to the glorious return of our Lord.

- C. *The signs of the times reveal the continuing antithesis in history between the kingdom of God and the powers of evil.*
According to Jesus’ Parable of the Tares, the wheat and the tares grow alongside each other until the harvest at the end of the world. This means that we can expect the struggle between the forces of God and the forces of Satan to continue throughout the history of the world. The *signs of the times* continue to bear witness to that struggle. Some of the signs, particularly the sign of the preaching of the gospel to the nations, indicate that the power of God is at work in the world and that his kingdom is growing. Other signs, however, like the presence of antichristian forces, the growth of apostasy and lawlessness, and the repeated occurrence of wars and rumors of wars, indicate the presence of the powers of evil. Thus the *signs of the times* reveal the continuing presence both of the grace and longsuffering of God and of the wrath of God. These signs tell us in, other words, that the one whom we await will come both as Saviour and as Judge.
- D. *The signs of the times call for decision.*
Jesus rebuked his contemporaries because they did not properly discern the *signs of the times*. By means of these signs God continues to summon men to believe on his Son and be saved. For the unbeliever who does not heed the *signs of the times*, therefore, they only serve to increase his condemnation. But though unbelievers ignore these signs, believers pay attention to them. When they do so, the signs become for them joyful tidings: indications that the Lord is on the throne, and that his return is near. Even when he sees the unpleasant signs, therefore (like apostasy, false prophets and false Christs, persecution and tribulation), the believer is not discouraged. For he knows that antichristian forces are always under God’s control, and can never defeat God’s ultimate purpose. He knows, too, that even these unpleasant signs are to be expected, and are indications that Christ’s return is on the way.
- E. *The signs of the times call for constant watchfulness.*
As we have seen, both Jesus and Paul indicated that certain things must happen before the Parousia. But both also teach that the exact time of the Parousia is unknown. This means, then, that continual watchfulness for the Parousia is required. There is therefore no contradiction between observing the *signs of the times* and constant readiness; the very nature of the signs requires such watchfulness. As Jesus said, “Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (Matthew 24:42). Earlier it was observed that one of the mistaken understandings of the *signs of the times* is to think of them as referring exclusively to the end-time. From the development of the meaning of the signs just given, it will be evident that these signs have been present throughout the Christian era. They were present at the time the New Testament was written, they have been present through the intervening centuries, and they are present now. Thus the *signs of the times* have a continuing relevance for the church of Jesus Christ. It is quite common, particularly in dispensationalist circles, to say that the Second Coming of Christ is “imminent.” If by “imminence” is meant that no predicted event needs to occur before Christ comes again, this view gives us difficulties—since, as we have seen, the New Testament teaches that certain things must indeed happen before the Parousia occurs. Pretribulational dispensationalists divide the Second Coming of Christ into two phases. In the first phase, often called the “coming for his saints,” Christ raptures the church off the earth and takes it to heaven for the “wedding of the Lamb.” During the seven years which follow, all the commonly accepted climactic *signs of the times* occur on earth: the great tribulation, the appearance of antichrist, and the like. After this seven-year period Christ returns to earth for the second phase of his Second Coming, the “coming with his saints.” In a subsequent chapter this view of the Second Coming will be more closely examined and criticized. At the moment it is sufficient to note that according to this view no predicted happenings need to occur before Christ’s “coming for his saints.”

CONCLUSION: There is no sound biblical basis for dividing the Second Coming of Christ into these two phases. Although the *signs of the times* are indeed present throughout the entire history of the Christian church, it would appear that before Christ returns some of these signs will assume a more intense form than they have had in the past. The signs will become clearer, and will move on to a certain climax. Apostasy will become far more widespread, persecution and suffering will become “the great tribulation,” and antichristian forces will culminate in “the man of lawlessness.” As we shall see when we look at the individual signs more closely, the Bible does indeed point to such a final culmination of the *signs of the times*. To say therefore that no predicted events need to happen before Christ

returns is to say too much. We must be prepared for the possibility that the Parousia may yet be a long way off, and the New Testament data leave room for that possibility. On the other hand, to affirm with certainty that the Parousia is still a long way off is also to say too much. The exact time of the Parousia is unknown to us. Neither do we know exactly how the *signs of the times* will intensify. This uncertainty means that we must always be prepared. Instead of saying that the Parousia is *imminent*, therefore, let us say that it is *impending*. It is certain to come, but we do not know exactly when it will come. We must therefore live in constant expectation of and readiness for the Lord's return. The words of the following motto put it well: "Live as though Christ died yesterday, arose this morning, and is coming again tomorrow."

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ A. Hoekema, *The Bible and The Future* (Eerdmans, 1979), p. 129 – 136. This entire outline is adapted from chapter 11 of Hoekema's work.
- ² PAROUSIA. Greek for "coming," "presence." Used in the NT as a □ common noun, e.g., "comforted by the *coming* of Titus" (II Corinthians 7:6), but primarily as a technical term for the return of Christ. *Greek*: "Concerning the *coming* (*parousia*) of our Lord Jesus Christ" (II Thessalonians 2:1). F. B. Huey, Jr. and Bruce Corley, *A Student's Dictionary For Biblical & Theological Studies* (Zondervan, 1983), p. 144.
- ³ Cf., e.g., this statement by Hal Lindsey, a dispensationalist writer: "They [the Hebrew prophets] predicted that as man neared the end of history as we know it there would be a precise pattern of events which would loom up in history"; *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Zondervan, 1970; 42nd printing, 1974), p. ii.
- ⁴ C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* III (rpt. Eerdmans, 1963), p. 790.
- ⁵ *Ibid* p. 791.