

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

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As Ron called and asked me to be a part of this program, I apologized and told him that I would not be able to attend very much, if any, of the program. He told me to come on but as I do I extend my apologies to you for not being able to sit with you and hear the presentations made in prior or following sessions.

I further apologize that my inability to be with you has not allowed me to understand whether what I have been lead to prepare fits in at all with the presentations to date. Nonetheless and believing that I have prayed about this matter in depth and feel lead of the Holy Spirit to share with you these few prepared remarks, I march forward to share.

Lastly I apologize to you, both those who would do much better in presentation of this matter as well as those of you who will be disappointed in this presentation for any of several reasons.

Signs of the times has been a favored and cherished subject for study in this fellowship. For many of us, who have grown up in a portion of the Christ-following faith community that appreciates the prophetic portions of the Bible, we have looked with prophetic anticipation and prophetic appreciation at the culture and environment in which we live. We have taken the prophetic insights revealed in the Word and examined our world in light of prophecy.

For years in so doing we have come to believe we are living in the last days. I have lived all of my life in the last days. I can recall teachers at PCHS telling me in grade school in the early 60s that they did not see how times could get worse and they said that surely the last days were not only upon us but that Jesus' return was more than imminent. They referred to the signs of the times which they saw in the days of prayer and Bible reading being removed from the public schools, the feminist movement, the women's rights movement, the free sex movement, the Viet Nam war on the heels of the Korean Conflict which was on the heels of World War 2, the extreme Cold War tension, the tensions in the middle east, the popularity of marijuana drug explosion, the loss of reverence for things sacred and even on occasion a reference to the popular music of the Beatles and other British invasion bands, all as signs of the times.

Yet things have only gotten worse in our culture and if we were living in the last days in the 60s, then we are truly living in the last of the last days in this new millennium, century and decade.

When asked to consider the Signs of the Times at this conference with you, Ron Flora suggested that all I would need to do was to look at the Courier Journal and it would validate the signs of the times revealed in Holy Writ. I am sure what he really meant was not the Courier Journal but rather whatever news source each of us has on our smart phones and tablets and multimedia devices which in itself is probably a sign of the times. How right he was and is, for the news of today is simply the colorful reality of God's revealed end time scenarios.

I will not rehearse with this learned group the passages of scripture which give insight to the signs of the times. Unlike many other groups in which I have been allowed to teach, there is great ignorance about this subject and often little desire to learn.

I will make the assumption that such is not the case with this audience. As a learned fellowship with a heritage of appreciating the signs of the times, we surely recognize the following end times signs all around us. Who among us has not seen?

- 1.) **The explosion of Knowledge?**
- 2.) **The hedonism of the day with people intimately gorging on pleasure as its lover?**
- 3.) **Wars and rumors of wars and great violence in nearly every corner of the world and now in the streets of most cities even this city to the extent that you cannot get people to come to the West End of Louisville for a Christian Education?**
- 4.) **Signs in creation-earthquakes, volcanic activity, super storms, etc?**

- 5.) **True faith in Christ is rejected at unheralded levels and ridiculed in almost every sphere of life as the gospel which is no gospel, the gospel of tolerance spreads its evil tentacles without remorse for or respect of person?**
- 6.) **Has there been a day before now when the rate of pure evil has increased faster?-forgive me for inviting you to family court in the middle of the Bible belt to see the depth of depravity in which we live**
- 7.) **Has there been a day before now when evil was appreciated and honored by the unbelieving world more on a wider human scale (shall I mention the Kardashians?)**

But you and I are aware of these signs. I do not intend to look at this subject in this way. Rather I want to look at this subject with you and ask a hard question as we consider the signs of the times. I would like to narrow the scope of our inquiry and ask whether the state of the restoration churches in this premillennial, accapela fellowship in America, in our community is a fulfillment of and a sign of the times or at least evidence of the last days?

In the past few decades, we have all seen the demise of the local restoration churches and particularly among the churches of Christ who gave birth to this conference. I speak of churches which were once vibrant and strong or am I remembering it all wrong and guilty of historical revision?. In the 70 years of this conference, we have closed over 50 churches in this fellowship group from Indiana to Texas to Tennessee to Florida and certainly in Kentucky. We have closed at least two churches of the few remaining churches in the last 12 months and there are very few churches in this fellowship which have a sustainable ministry currently, i.e. a ministry which will be alive and vibrant if the Lord tarries another decade. Most churches in this fellowship have limited youth programs and or young couples in their midst and only the death of one or two key people away from closing their doors. A few churches are doing better than this but not many have sustainable ministries and the vast majority are on life support. There are a number of para-church ministries and mission efforts related to this fellowship which are also on life support and near death.

This truth is not only a reality in our fellowship but also true in many other conservative fellowships. I have the privilege of representing many church fellowships and many suffer from the fate which accompanies failing attendance and the lack of outward bound ministries, the wide spread failure gives me no comfort for that which is happening in this fellowship.

Years ago, I came to this consideration as I looked again at Matthew 24 and 25. I was impressed those many years ago as never before how much of Christ's teaching and insights to the last days were directed to the activity or inactivity of his closest followers. I am not referring to people who express faith but have no saving faith, I am talking about the faith-filled and "faithful". Jesus was never shy about calling out the Jewish religious sects, the Jewish religious leaders, these insiders to the things of God who were truly far from God. He often referred to the spiritual lifelessness of the Pharisees and Sadducees and scribes and other temple leaders.

Yet these words seem to be aimed at more than the religious faithless and blind. In talking to His nearest and dearest insiders, He frequently refers to "YOU" which I take to also include those like the Disciples who would come after the disciples. Be careful that YOU don't fall or fail and these words of warning resonant with the implications of the possibility of such failures and falls.

Therefore and with this consideration of these words, I came to this personal question: Have I as one who has historically loved the last days prophecies, failed to consider these warnings and insights in and to my own life of faith and in the life of the churches into which I was birthed? Likewise, have the churches who blessed me so mightily in my youth failed to consider wisely or appropriately these words of warning from Jesus directed to "YOU", the true believers? I could ask this in many fellowships but I am with you today and must ask it of YOU and US

I then considered how I have heard many teachings and many sermons where the signs of the times were properly declared to be the true words of Jesus but the focus of the application was to others who are not a part of the "YOU" so frequently used by Jesus. The others upon whom the focus fell in these teachings included the secular world and world governments and worldly trends and cultures. I have heard these prophetic words applied to other church groups, both protestant and non-protestant, particularly those who have abandon apostolic faith in favor of ecumenical camaraderie. I have heard teachings applied even to other conservative church groups. But I recall precious few teachings or sermons directing the application of these words to our

churches and its leadership in a meaningful and or instructive way so as to ward off the fulfillment of the very prophecies tendered within our midst. Our churches have died and are dying and one begins to wonder whether we have missed the application of very words of Christ about the end times which we have held so precious.

I know there is general ignorance of these enlightening prophetic words among many in the church populace of our fellowship, that is the general membership (RECALL THE LADY WHO COMPLIMENTS DAD AT THE END OF HIS SERMON AND SAYS SHE HAS NO IDEA WHAT HE SAID BUT IT SOUNDED SO GOOD) but I am considering this today with leaders and not the general populace of the churches. You and I are those who know or should know these words of warning and insights well. The question I have for myself is whether these words of warning and insight have shaped my actions in Christ in any way as it regards the flocks in which I have ministered and or lead.

May I ask you to turn with me to these two chapters, Matthew 24 and 25 and let's consider whether there are words of warning for practical application for the conservative, premillennial accapella churches of Christ? Let me once again frame the inquiry. I am asking us to consider whether the experience seen within this fellowship in the last few decades is in itself a sign of the times or at least confirmation of the times. I am not suggesting that Jesus mentioned the premillennial accapella churches of Christ by name or even mentioned the restoration movement by name but rather the question is whether this fellowship has failed to truly learn from these words and therefore succumbed to the times, which in and of itself is to become a part or at least confirmation of the signs of the times.

Allow me to read the words of Christ in chapter 24 which are directed directly or indirectly to the believing world to the YOU audience which Jesus defined.

Matthew 24:3-6, 9-13, 22-26, 42-51 **As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"**

⁴ **Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. ⁵ For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and will deceive many. ⁶ You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.**

⁹ **"Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. ¹⁰ At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, ¹¹ and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. ¹² Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, ¹³ but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.**

²² **"If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. ²³ At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. ²⁴ For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵ See, I have told you ahead of time.**

²⁶ **"So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the wilderness,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it.**

⁴² **"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. ⁴³ But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.**

⁴⁵ **"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. ⁴⁷ Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.**

⁴⁸ **But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' ⁴⁹ and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. ⁵⁰ The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. ⁵¹ He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."**

I add to these words the words of Jesus in the following chapter which come in the form of a parable and I draw your attention to the parable of the talents, certainly a parable which is addressed to believers and not the unbelieving world. Matthew 25:14-30 **"For it is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own**

slaves and entrusted his possessions to them. ¹⁵ To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey. ¹⁶ Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same manner the one who *had received* the two *talents* gained two more. ¹⁸ But he who received the one *talent* went away, and dug *a hole* in the ground and hid his master's money.

¹⁹ "Now after a long time the master of those slaves **came and *settled accounts with them.* ²⁰ The one who had received the five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, 'Master, you entrusted five talents to me. See, I have gained five more talents.' ²¹ His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

²² "Also the one who *had received* the two talents came up and said, 'Master, you entrusted two talents to me. See, I have gained two more talents.' ²³ His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

²⁴ "And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no *seed.* ²⁵ And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.'

²⁶ "But his master answered and said to him, 'You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no *seed.* ²⁷ Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my *money* back with interest. ²⁸ Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.'

²⁹ "For to everyone who has, *more* shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. ³⁰ Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Let me suggest a few things I see in these chapters and other parallel passages which I believe may have been played out and is still being played out among our fellowship:

1.) Fear rather than Godly strength and love has been a great Motivator of how the local church operates on a practical basis-almost behind the safety of the 4 walls, fear of change, fear of the communicating in new ways, fear of leaving comfortable traditions, etc

Our churches have too often operated out of fear because of the things which are happening in the world. There has been the deadly playing of the game at the leadership level "But what will happen if we do this or do that?" We have become afraid of the unknown which often lead away from Godly opportunities and experiences by faith as God directs.

We are afraid to open our doors to new and unique ministry, these buildings which lie idle for most of the week. Do we not have homeless or hungry or sick who need a place to come even for a few hours? What about drug rehab clinics or AA or whatever is needed in the community?

Do you recall days when the church ran the hospitals and the schools and universities and public charity? But fear drove us out or at least caused us to fail when confronted by the godlessness that wanted God and the church out of social justice and righteous social advocacy and servant-hood in the name of Jesus.

2.) Cold love-little practical experience of the sacrificial love of Christ outside of the church community and even inside the church community there are difficulties in and among the membership. Where is the love for a lost and dying world? For the neighbor? Is your local church known by its neighbors for how much it loves

I am now a part of a project with other lawyers who are meeting the needy to address their legal needs. Yet we have found that many people will not come to churches because they do not trust the church. Maybe wrongfully so but maybe not so wrongfully

3.) Hatred in that we have emphasized what we are against and often in unloving, un-strategic ways instead of who we are for. For example, I have a suggestion for those who are marching against abortion. Please know that I believe abortion is murder but why not march with a sign that says "I will pay for your housing and meals until the baby is born and if you don't want the baby I will adopt or find someone to adopt".

4.) The failure to stand for Christ much less stand firm-where was the church when prayer and Bible reading were before the Supreme Court –not one friend of the Court brief was filed by any church in the major cases which sent our country in a godless direction. Where were they? Have there not been similar failures in the local church when culture changing issues were being implemented in our communities?

5.) Reliance on false Messiahs-how many times have we heard people in our churches say something like “If only this person or that person is elected, we will have greater life and faith assurances.” Is that not to have relied upon a false Messiah? I have my political preferences but when did we come to believe that so long as a certain party or person would be elected then America would be safer? Why don’t we hear the truth that revival of faith in Jesus is the true answer for our political and social ills? This country will never be safe or secure until Jesus is once again KING

6.) Intense failure to promote and use talents/skills/gifts of those in our churches-absolute failure to promote and raise up appropriate leadership if there has been leadership at all, particularly visionary leadership, in our churches.

Can I ask a question about our fellowship and the works we have done recently? Would we start a PCS or a Maple Manor today? When was the last missionary sent out from among us?

Let me take this exploration further. Have we abandoned the practical grace of God in our churches? Titus 2:11-14 **“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, ¹²instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, ¹³looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, ¹⁴who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.”**

Did we lose the grace to be zealous of good works as we wait for the return of Christ? I have seen these same issues played out in other Jesus honoring fellowships but that gives me little comfort as I think of the faith community into which I blessedly was born. Oh the talent that has been wasted and squandered

Jesus is coming soon and if He does not cut the days short will there be any congregation in our fellowship left? Jesus is coming soon and as for me, I intend to use my given talents for His glory even if this fellowship dies.

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