



Discerning the Signs of the Times

“They understand the winds of earth, but not the winds of God.”
(Morris 1984:220)

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The phrase “the signs of the times” is relatively commonplace in Christian circles, including evangelical churches and missional communities. This seemingly straightforward phrase is actually packed with nuance and is being interpreted – and applied – in different ways. This article

outlines two main interpretations of the signs of the times and explains the importance of trying to discern such signs. We then explore how to understand the signs of the times and the main implication of doing so, namely that Christians are called to act in response to what they discern.

What is “Discerning the Signs of the Times”?

In Matthew chapter 16, Jesus admonishes the Pharisees and Sadducees by observing “You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky [weather], but you cannot interpret the signs of the times” (v.3b).



In a similar passage in Luke chapter 12, Jesus' comments are addressed to a crowd: "You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?" (v.56). Other translations use 'discern', 'recognize', 'analyse' or 'understand' instead of 'interpret', but the point is the same – a level of insight is required to know what is happening on a deeper spiritual level.

Tom Wright (2001:160) points out that each generation, and each era, must read the signs of its own particular time; Jesus' expectation seems to be that interpretation of the signs of the times is not to be limited to the duration of his own earthly ministry.

Within mission circles today, many would probably interpret the "signs of the times" in the following way: these are either key global events (e.g. the fall of the Berlin Wall) or key cultural trends, processes or forces (e.g. globalisation) that can be analysed, and reflected upon, to help us better understand what is happening in the world. Such understanding is crucial for good missiology and effective mission, which benefit from the insights of sociology, anthropology, globalisation studies, postcolonial studies and many other disciplines, which help us discern important trends.

This is the approach of Goheen and Bartholomew (2008:107-126), for example, in their article ask, "What Time Is It?" and discern four key trends (postmodernity, globalisation, the rise of global Christianity, and the resurgence of Islam). A brief survey of recent missiological literature identified more than 30 events and trends that were reported as signs of our times, including the end of colonialism; the election of Donald Trump; consumerism; secularisation; migration; environmental destruction, and so on. This approach is based on cultural analysis that helps to shape missional responses suitable for specific contexts. The signs it interprets may be good or bad.[1]

The other main approach is to be much more explicit in terms of recognising God's engagement with the world, and interpreting signs of the times in this light. As Bosch (1991:428) described it, Christianity must intrinsically "take history seriously as the arena of God's activity". Certain signs will, therefore, "reveal God's will and God's presence". The 14th World Conference on Mission and Evangelism emphasised the role of the Holy Spirit in discernment: we should



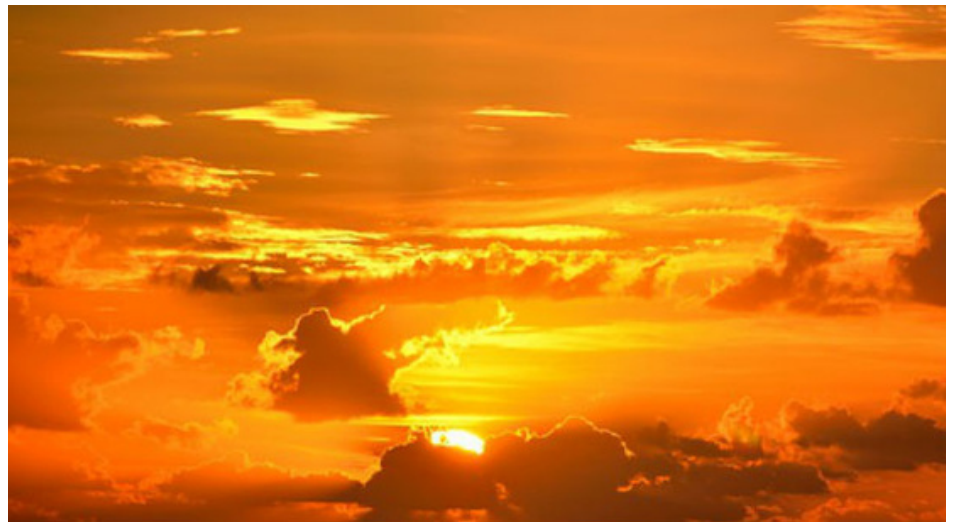
[1] For other contemporary examples, see Goheen (2014), Goudzwaard and Bartholomew (2017), Moreau and O'Rear (2009), Myers (2017) and elsewhere.

“join in with the Spirit” and, under his guidance, “we will discover in what ways God is already at work in the world and the various situations in the world that still need transformation by God’s grace” (WCC 2016:338).

Returning to our passages from Luke and Matthew, we can see the validity of both approaches. The signs of the times, when Jesus was speaking, included the religious, political, historical and other background factors in Israel at that time – but also included divine action such as the incarnation of Jesus and the Kingdom which his coming inaugurated.

The Importance of Discerning the Signs of the Times

There are several reasons why it is important to discern them. Firstly, such discernment is expected of mature Christians, who listen to the Spirit and recognise God’s work when they see it. Secondly, such discernment enables the church to



speak truthfully about what is happening in the world and, thereby, fulfil its prophetic role in society. Thirdly, interpreting our times in tune with the Spirit can reveal the full significance of what is happening in the world. One example might be Christians who discern behind the process of economic globalisation oppressive powers rather than, say, a supposedly neutral “invisible hand of the market.” And finally, discerning

the signs of the times means that we are in a proper position to be able to act; to respond to what God is doing in the world, and to participate faithfully in his mission.

How to Discern the Signs of the Times

This brings us to the crucial question of how to discern them. How are we to make sense of the times we live in, and God’s present action in the world?



Firstly, through the lens of Scripture: the Christian community must always read the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel. Any claimed interpretation should be harmonious with Scripture, asking is this trend or event consistent with how God relates to his creation? Is the discerned 'reality' compatible with Jesus' teaching on, for example, the Kingdom of God and its related values?

Secondly, to discern the signs of the times we must allow ourselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit. In recent years, cross-cultural missionaries have been increasingly urged to identify how God is already at work in a particular area, before initiating anything new themselves. Similarly, we must trust the Holy Spirit to reveal to us how God is at work in the world nationally or globally; or how other powers are ultimately at work.

Irish theologian Donal Dorr (2008:550) wisely answers the question, How are we to discern the signs of the times, with the word "tentatively". Whilst stressing that such discernment should be done from a position of faith, Dorr reminds us of the fallibility of our

interpretations, with church history containing many examples of Christians misinterpreting the signs of the times, or falsely claiming their own political, social or religious preferences to be God's. Discerning the times, therefore, should be done cautiously; it is what Bosch (1991:439) describes as "an extremely hazardous venture."

Conclusion

The ultimate purpose of discerning the signs of the times is so that action may be taken. For Jesus' audience, in the passages above, that may have been acknowledging him as Christ and recognising that the Kingdom of God had broken into their reality. For us today, discerning the signs of the times means we are empowered to take action, based on a truer and deeper understanding of reality than was previously the case. Depending upon what is discerned, it may be that we are being invited to participate in a particular aspect of *missio Dei* (the mission of God), or to respond positively to a global development, or to denounce and resist other developments. But action that is missional, transformational and prophetic should be the fruit of our

discernment of the signs of the times. God's missional people are to be the spiritual descendants of the people of Issachar (1 Chron. 12:32), who "understood the times and knew what Israel should do." [2]

[2] This comparison is made by, amongst others, LICC <https://licc.org.uk/resources/what-is-a-whole-life-disciple/> [Accessed 17 January 2022]

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