

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

Early in WWII, baseball broadcasters were forbidden to give information about weather conditions over the air for fear it might be of aid to enemy bombers. On one St. Louis broadcast, Dizzy Dean was trying to fill in a rain delay with about an hour of aimless talk, never mentioning why there was no action on the field. Finally he just ran out of words, and said, "If you folks don't know what's holding up this game just stick your heads out the window."

Sticking your head out the window is one sure way to determine the weather. But determining the signs of our time may be a bit harder. Do you understand how God is moving today?

Matt. 16:1-3 "The Pharisees and 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, today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast. You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times."

Many people respond to change in a negative way. A reporter once approached a hundred year old man in a small town in Maine and said, "Boy, I bet you have seen lots of changes in this town over the years." The old man replied, "Yes, and I've been against every one of them."

Change is a natural part of life. The question is not IF change will occur but HOW will we respond to change when it does occur? Do we recognize it, accept it and adapt to it or do we ignore it, dig in our heels and try to resist? I want to look today at the story of a group of men that responded in the right way to change when it happened. As a church we need to follow their example if we are going to connect and be relevant with our culture today.

1 Chr 12: 23 These are the numbers of the men armed for battle who came to David at Hebron to turn Saul's kingdom over to him, as the LORD had said: ... 32 men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do

1. Know Where God is Moving – they understood the times (get smart)

Our culture is defined by change but often the church is not. In fact, I would say without any hesitation that the church in large does a terrible job when it comes to change. Because of this we as Christians often become irrelevant to the world around us.

It is interesting that when I have given people our personality profile (DISC) test during leadership development, most people (over 60% of the church) are shown to be the high S temperament. One of the major indicators for this temperament is that they respond slowly to change. They like consistency and they want things to stay the same.

The only person who likes change is a wet baby. -- Mark Twain

It says in this passage that the men of Issachar understood the times. This means that they understood that it was a new day and that God was moving in a different way than he had in the past. The context of this passage is that in 1 Chr 10 King Saul had died in battle along with his son Jonathan. For many years Saul had been king but a growing movement had begun which recognized that God had appointed David king.

1 Chr 10:13 Saul died because he was unfaithful to the LORD; he did not keep the word of the LORD and even consulted a medium for guidance, 14 and did not inquire of the LORD. So the LORD put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse.

The men of Issachar saw that God had selected a new king and they aligned themselves with David. How about you? Are you following God's anointed direction or are you stuck following a dead king? Do you understand how God is moving today or are you stuck in the past?

It is easy to become stuck in your ways and trust only in things that have worked in the past. You just assume that the way God has moved and used you in the past is the way He will continue to move and use you tomorrow. We assume that since God does not change His methods don't change either. It is true that God does not change. However, the way He responds to each generation does change because the needs of each generation are different.

One night when we lived in Kuwait our family went out to eat. Afterward I drove home. It was only as I was parking the car that I realized I was at the house we had moved out of 2 months before. I had just gone there out of habit. I was on autopilot mode - doing what I had so often done before without thinking. I think sometimes the church is like that. It moves forward not with vision but on autopilot mode, simply repeating what it has done in the past.

Psalm 137:1 By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. 2 There on the poplars we hung our harps, 3 for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" 4 How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?

The children of Israel were beaten and captured. They couldn't see what God was doing. They did not understand how God was using the Babylonian captivity, the Persian diaspora, the Greek language and Roman roads to set the stage for the coming Messiah.

It was autumn, and the Indians on the remote reservation asked their new Chief if the winter was going to be cold or mild. Since he was a new Indian Chief in a modern society, he had never been taught the old secrets, and when he looked at the sky, he couldn't tell what the weather was going to be. Nevertheless, to be on the safe side, he replied to his tribe that the winter was indeed going to be cold and that the members of the village should collect wood to be prepared. But also being a practical leader, after several days he got an idea. He went to the phone booth, called the National Weather Service and asked, "Is the coming winter going to be cold?" "It looks like this winter is going to be quite cold indeed," the meteorologist at the weather service responded. So the Chief went back to his people and told them to collect even more wood in order to be prepared. A week later he called the National Weather Service again. "Is it going to be a very cold winter?" "Yes," the man at National Weather Service again replied, "it's going to be a very cold winter." The Chief again went back to his people and ordered them to collect every scrap of wood they could find. Two weeks later he called the National Weather Service again. "Are you absolutely sure that the winter is going to be very cold?" "Absolutely," the man replied. "It's going to be one of the coldest winters ever." "How can you be so sure?" the Chief asked. The weatherman replied, "Because the Indians are collecting wood like crazy!"

So often we fail to see where our society is going and adapt our presentation of the gospel message to meet the needs of the people around us. To be effective in witnessing we have to understand the people around us that we are sharing with.

2. Know What God's Word Says - as the LORD had said (get right)

In order to understand the times you have to be able to differentiate between what in our Christian experience is truth and what is simply tradition or part of our own cultural bias. You must be able to differentiate between biblical principles and preferences.

One of golf's immortal moments came when a Scotchman demonstrated the new game to President Ulysses S. Grant. Carefully placing the ball on the tee, he took a mighty swing. The club hit the turf and scattered dirt all over the President's beard and shirt, but the ball didn't move from the tee. Now distracted by his mistake the Scotchman swung again and still missed. The President waited patiently through six tries and then quietly stated, "There seems to be a fair amount of exercise in the game, but I fail to see the purpose of the ball."

Often we do things as Christians that require great effort on our part. We start programs and keep them going but fail to understand why we are doing them in the first place. We must understand the differences between:

a. Precepts – you obey it

The bible gives us many precepts or truths which are commands that we must obey. These things are absolutes and are not open to cultural interpretation. You do not have to ask God if you should commit adultery or not. You just don't. You don't have to ask whether you should pray and read your bible. You just do. A precept is something you obey.

b. Principles – you interpret it

A principle is the underlying truth of a precept that must be applied to the situation you are in. Many times in the New Testament Jesus took an Old Testament command and gave a new approach to it by explaining the principle of the truth it was based upon.

Matt 5:21 You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder'

Matt 5:27 You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.'

Matt 5:33 Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath'

Matt 5:38 You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'

Matt 5:43 You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

One example is keeping the Sabbath. This is something all us are told to do. However, Israel had, over the years, interpreted this precept into many rules and regulation that missed the underlying principle. I saw this so clearly when I visited Israel a few years ago. There are hundreds of rules about keeping the Sabbath but all miss the principle of why it is so important.

Cooking in most all forms (boiling, roasting, baking, frying, etc.) is forbidden on the Sabbath, in particular when the temperature is raised above 45 degrees centigrade (113 Fahrenheit). If the hot water tap is accidentally left on, it cannot be turned off on the Sabbath. Escaping gas can be turned off, but not in the normal way. One must turn off the tap of a gas burner with the back of the hand or the elbow. The preparation of food is greatly affected by the Sabbath. One cannot squeeze a lemon into a glass of ice tea, but one can squeeze lemon on a piece of fish. You cannot light a fire on the Sabbath according to Old Testament law. Strict Judaism views this to prohibit turning electric lights on or off on the Sabbath. The problem can be solved, however, by using a timer, which automatically handles this task. So, too, an air conditioner cannot be turned on by a Jew on the Sabbath, although a Gentile might be persuaded to do so. One cannot bathe with a bar of soap on the Sabbath, but liquid detergent is acceptable.

These rules and regulations were established to define what keeping the Sabbath means. Unfortunately they missed the point. The principle (take one day in 7 to rest and reflect on God) was great but religion had made something designed to be a blessing into a burden for the people.

Mark 2:27 Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

Neil Marten, a member of the British Parliament, was once giving a group of his supporters a guided tour of the Houses of Parliament. During the course of the visit, the group happened to meet Lord Hailsham, then Lord Chancellor, wearing all the regalia of his office. Hailsham recognized Marten among the group and called out, "Neil!" Not daring to question or disobey the "command" they were given, entire band of visitors promptly fell to their knees! A friendly comment became a command because it was misunderstood.

c. Personal preferences – you enjoy it

A personal preference is something which you do because you have always done it or were told it is the way to do it. These are not things the Bible clearly says you must do or not do – simply things that have been interpreted as truth over the years and applied to Christian truth. It includes all sorts of things from style of worship to which version of the Bible you read. This is unfortunately what usually causes divisions in the church.

Often we think that the more mature we become in our faith the more dos and don'ts you get. The reality is actually different. Often a sign of spiritual immaturity is a legalistic mindset.

Colossians 2:21 Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch! 22 These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. 23 Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

One preference is related to how we dress for church. Many were told when they were young that you have to dress up when you go to church. After all, you would not go and visit the Prime Minister in your jeans. Others see that dressing up for church is more a matter of the heart. After all, you don't have to wear a suit to visit your best friend.

In 1 Corinthians Paul addressed the issue of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. There were some that had grown up under idolatry that viewed this as a form of worship.

1 Corinthians 8:9 Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. 10 For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? 11 So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. 12 When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.

Do I think that everyone should wear a tie to church on Sunday? Absolutely not. In the summer people wear shorts to church. If you have ever wondered if I am mad at you for wearing shorts the answer is YES! I wish I could wear shorts as well. I wear a tie because there are still many who expect that of the pastor. I would hate for someone to miss hearing God's word just because I did not wear one. I don't like ties. When I was growing up I always had to wear a suit. To this day you can see me shrugging my shoulders as a habit. That comes from years of wearing suits! If and when the elders of this church decide that in order to reach a younger generation that me wearing a tie is getting in the way of outreach then I will gladly get rid of it.

Preferences become principles which become precepts we violate God's law to love one another.

3. Know How to Move Forward – they knew what Israel should do (get going)

The men of Issachar not only understood what God was doing but they knew how to respond to what God was doing. They had a plan. We can understand the times and even understand what the Bible says but this means nothing unless we can also then act upon that information. We have to be able to respond and apply the truth in a way that the world around us can understand. So often the world sees the church as irrelevant, not because they do not have the truth but because they have failed to communicate it in an understandable way to the world around it.

We are called to be a people of integrity. The message of the Gospel is a stumbling block to many but our presentation of the Gospel does not always have to be. There are many Christian public figures today who, even though many do not agree with them, they still respect who they are.

We are also called to be a people of courage. This means that we need to step out in faith and try new things. I remember in Kuwait when the idea of starting a Christian school in a Muslim nation came up it was initially rejected. Everyone said the same thing – you CAN'T DO THAT HERE! When we thought about building a new church without permission from the government people said the same thing. The only way to find out if you can do it is to TRY. We must be willing to take risks, try new things – even if that means we may fail in the process. The only churches that never fail are the churches that never take any risks!

We are not as a church like a hot air balloon – driven by the winds of opinion and unable to choose our course. We are more like a sailboat. We have a rudder that lets us take the power of the wind and uses it to go in the direction we choose.

Elton Trueblood wrote, "It used to be that Christianity was a revolutionary faith that turned the world upside down. But today Christians sit in Sunday morning church services looking at their watches, wondering what time dinner will be served, or thinking about the kickoff. And we hope that church won't interfere with the things we would really rather be doing."

God is doing a new thing in the world today. The world is changing, and while these changes bring many challenges they also provide opportunities to witness like never before.

Some years ago a terrible railroad accident occurred, killing many people. A commuter train had stalled on the tracks just a few minutes before a fast freight was due to arrive. A conductor was quickly sent to flag down the approaching "flier." Being assured that all was well, the passengers relaxed. Suddenly, however, the speeding freight came bearing down upon them. The crash left a ghastly scene of horror. The engineer of the second train, who escaped death by jumping from the cab, was called into court to explain why he hadn't stopped. "I saw a man waving a warning flag," he said, "but it was yellow, so I thought he just wanted me to slow down." When the flag was examined, the mystery was explained. It had been red, but because of long exposure to the sun and weather it had become a dirty yellow. Have we become yellow over time? Has the urgency of the situation faded in the sunlight of this world and we are waving a yellow faded flag of redemption while our neighbors, family and coworkers and those who live around us sit idly by as the destruction of a Godless eternity come rushing toward them?

It is time to get smart. We need to see where and how the Lord is moving today and to embrace the fresh movements happening all around the world. It is time to get right. We need to make sure that we are biblically driven and not measure ministry by past successes or denominational culture. We need to get out and get going because there is a world that desperately needs to hear the good news about Jesus.

Fritz Kreisler, the world-famous violinist, earned a fortune with his concerts and compositions, but he generously gave most of it away. So, when he discovered an exquisite violin on one of his trips, he wasn't able to buy it. Later, having raised enough money to meet the asking price, he returned to the seller, hoping to purchase that beautiful instrument. But to his great dismay it had been sold to a collector. Kreisler made his way to the new owner's home and offered to buy the violin. The collector said it had become his prized possession and he would not sell it. Keenly disappointed, Kreisler was about to leave when he had an idea. "Could I play the instrument once more before it is consigned to silence?" he asked. Permission was granted, and the great virtuoso filled the room with such heart-moving music that the collector's emotions were deeply stirred. "I have no right to keep that to myself," he exclaimed. "It's yours, Mr. Kreisler. Take it into the world, let people hear it."

Our love for the Lord and the Gospel is what motivates us to reach out to the lost world around us. Let's engage our culture and this community with the wonderful truth of God's great plan of salvation.