

“LET’S TAKE A ‘TIME OUT!’”

II Timothy 3:1

“But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come.”

Sherlock Holmes and his aid, Dr. Watson, took a “time out” from their work and went on a camping trip. After a good meal they lay down for the night and went to sleep. Some hours later, Sherlock awoke and sensed a problem. He nudged his faithful friend and asked, “Watson, what do you see? Watson replied, “I see millions and millions of stars.” Sherlock asked, “And what does that tell you?” Watson pondered for a minute and replied, “Well, sir, it tells me that there are millions and millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day. And what does it tell you Holmes?” Sherlock Holmes let out a sigh of exasperation and then spoke, “Watson, you idiot. If you can see the stars it tells me that while we slept someone stole our tent!”

Christian leaders must guard the tent while keeping the “big picture” in view. If we understand the times in which we live, I believe we will do just that. So, let us take a “Time Out” to analyze the times in which we live in order to understand what time it is on God’s clock and to do a better job of taking advantage of the vast opportunities for ministry that our times provide.

Let us visit the web site of God’s Word and look at II Timothy chapters 3 and 4. Here we will find information about the times in which we live and directions for ministry that will guide, guard and gear us for service in times like these.

II Tim. 3 opens with a prophecy: *“But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come.”* To understand the times and respond biblically there are at least three considerations that are necessary:

- First, **We need to Contemplate God’s Time Line;**
- Second, **We need to Calculate Our Time Frame;**
- Third, **We need to Concentrate on Time Management.**

CONTEMPLATE GOD’S TIME LINE

We are all on a journey - a journey through time. The journey began in a paradise and it ends in a paradise. Are there any clues that God gave in the “first days” that will guide us in the “last days”? Yes! The map for the journey through time was drawn and the sign posts were erected by God at the outset of the journey. So, before we get ahead of ourselves, let us check our rearview mirror to the past and briefly look at some of the mile-markers in written revelation:

God Has A Plan For The Ages.

The Divine Record reveals a Divine Time Line, God’s grand scheme for all time. God’s basic Time Line is as follows:

1. He is presently gathering His church;

2. He will return for His church at some future date;
3. He will establish His earthly Kingdom;
4. He will judge the wicked;
5. His redeemed ones will live with Him forever.

However, the journey along God's Time Line includes some difficult times because His arch enemy, Satan also has a Kingdom and opposes God at every point which makes it more difficult for us, not God. God and His Kingdom will prevail!

God's Plan Is On Schedule.

God has a plan and a purpose for His creation, His Kingdom and His church and everything is right on schedule. The child of God can say with confidence and assurance, "my Father planned it all!"

It is interesting to note that when Jesus was instructing His disciples about His Time Line He drew upon history. He outlined the conditions in the end times by referring to conditions that existed in the days of Noah and Lot. He said, "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be" and "As it was in the days of Lot ...so it will be.." (Matt. 24 & Luke 17). That's journeying back to the future! Straight ahead lies yesterday! God's decree is, "As it was, so it will be"; terrible times are nothing new.

The conflict did not begin in our day for it is an age-old conflict, but it will end someday and end according to God's predetermined Time Line and on God's terms, we can be sure of that! Eph. 1:11 reminds us that God, "*works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will.*"

God's Plan Known Gives Perspective.

Contemplating God's Time Line gives us God's perspective on our journey through time. We have a distinct advantage when it comes to comprehending the contemporary scene because we can see from the perspective of heaven. Pagans, on the other hand, see from a purely human viewpoint only. Their understanding being darkened renders them incapable of perceiving the divine overview of what is taking place in God's plan.

Thomas Carlyle said: "He who has no vision of eternity will never grasp the meaning of time." God's people have a vision of eternity because they can comprehend God's Time Line as revealed in His Word. Seeing the big picture will keep us focused on the Father who gives us certainty in uncertain times and stability in unstable times. Contemplating God's Time Line will give us God's perspective on our journey through time.

If we would understand the times we need to take "Time Out!" to Contemplate God's Time Line. Furthermore, if we would understand the times we must take "Time Out!" to:

CALCULATE OUR TIME FRAME

Where are we presently located within the big picture? Our own Time Frame is designated as "*last times*" or "*last days*". So, let us analyze this Time Frame called the "*last days*" as described in II Timothy 3:1-5. The writer lists the following characteristics of the majority end-time

occupants of planet earth: *“lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power.”*

These are the neighbors with whom we all live! Paul predicted these conditions almost 2,000 years ago. However, the list is as current as today's newspaper or the latest TV newscast! This list can be divided into at least 3 categories: Moral Degeneracy, Spiritual Bankruptcy and Scholarly Depravity. Consider each briefly as follows:

Condition # 1 - Moral Degeneracy.

Moral degeneracy is not unique to our Time Frame for there have been moral degenerates throughout history. However, the aberrant conduct described in these verses is unique in that it has escalated to the point where it is now society's defining characteristic.

We are often reminded by pagan contemporaries that we are a liberated, educated and sophisticated society unparalleled in history; that moral deviations are seen as “upward mobility”; that traditional values have no place in modernity; that the changing morals and mores of our time are wholesome, enlightening and progressive!

Humanistic views to the contrary, our moral world is not destined to evolve into something better, but to devolve into something worse. Paul's prophetic pronouncement is, *“these evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.”* (II Tim.3:13) That is not upward but downward mobility!

Not only is our Time Frame characterized as one of Moral Degeneracy, it is also a time of:

Condition # 2 - Spiritual Bankruptcy.

The focus in Washington, D.C. and the entire nation is on financial bankruptcy. There is a much worse type of bankruptcy, as the scenario painted in Paul's catalog of end-time characteristics in II Timothy 3 reveals. The malady is spiritual bankruptcy.

The Timothy text's description is as follows: *“unholy”* v. 2; *“lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God”* v. 4; *“having a form of godliness but denying its power”* v. 5 and *“faithless”* v. 8. He further describes these pseudo spiritual ones, in chapter 4 verses 3 and 4, as those *“will not endure sound doctrine”* and *“they will turn their ears away from the truth and be turned aside to fables.”*

We are certainly aware of the reality of that prediction in America. What we presently have is ideological and religious pluralism. In such an environment, anything and everything is accepted. The popular message for the masses is this: “we all have innate and unlimited potential; faith is the exercising of the power of the mind, therefore, mind-power is faith.” However, biblicists reject such a false idea, for mental power directed at God persuasively and forcefully, whereby one can move God to do whatever one desires, is not Bible faith placed trustingly and submissively in God.

We are told that if we learn how to unleash our mind power such things as a better self-

image, success and prosperity will result and the reason we are not rich, healthy and successful is because we have not learned to loose the power within us to our benefit. This teaching has spawned the prosperity theology and self-image psychology that has been labeled the "Health And Wealth Gospel." The body may look good but the patient is dead! An autopsy with the Sword of the Spirit reveals that the cause of death is spiritual bankruptcy!

I said that Paul's list can be divided into 3 categories: Moral Degeneracy, Spiritual Bankruptcy and now, the third,

Condition # 3 - Scholarly Depravity

That sounds like an oxymoron doesn't it? But I assure you that it is an accurate description of another characteristic in Paul's list. He said there would be learning without discerning. Notice v.7: *"always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth"* and this phrase in v. 8, *"these men oppose the truth – men of depraved minds."* (niv)

The battle against truth is a battle against God for, as Psalm 31:5 states, God is the *"Lord God of truth."* This conflict, which has raged from the beginning of time, intensifies in the last times and Paul traces this rebellion against truth to *"depraved minds"*.

You may blink at such a forecast and wonder if Paul overstated his prophecy of this age of intellectual brilliance. However, the fact is that this paradox has already settled into American education. Princeton University philosopher Diogenes Allen declared, "A massive intellectual revolution is taking place that is perhaps as great as that which marked off the modern world from the middle ages."

Consequently, we are told by these "intellectuals" that: there are no absolutes; there is no absolute truth or "true truth" as they term it; truth is relative; truth is what one chooses it to believe; there are no moral standards; nothing is verifiably right or wrong; if it is your custom, tradition or choice it is viable; the only philosophies that are wrong are those that hold to the antiquated idea that there is absolute truth; the only sinners are those who still believe that there is such a thing as sin.

Charles Colson wrote, "This radical relativism took root on college campuses as postmodernism and it has now filtered down to the lower grade schools, where many students are taught to "construct" their own truths and values. Teachers are trained not to offer any direction, lest they hamper a child's autonomy." (*Christianity and Culture*)

It is time that we awakened to the reality of what has taken place while we were arguing over what to eat, what to wear and with whom to fellowship! Do we not understand that our culture has gone through a total philosophical transition? The best way for churches and Christian ministries to go out of business is to keep their heads in the sands of tradition and continue to do business as usual ignoring the environment in which they minister! We must trumpet the truth as never before and give not one inch to the enemies of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But we need to reevaluate our target audience, our manner of communicating and our methodology.

I remind you that the church went though a period like this before. It too was an age of

philosophical relativism and religious pluralism. The climate then too was also one that tolerated sexual perversion, brutal violence and opposition to truth. And when was this? This was the Roman Empire during its decline and fall. This was the setting in which the early church successfully evangelized despite conflict and even martyrdom!

It was at this time and in this context that the Apostle Paul alerted believers in the Roman Empire to the opportunities that their Time Frame provided them. He said, *“Knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.”* (Romans 13:11-14).

Let us not forget that such wicked conditions provide wonderful opportunities for visual and verbal witness! What an opportunity for the church to be salt and light! Salt impedes decay, light illuminates darkness. When the world is at its worst the church should be at its best!

Time Out! Understanding the times requires knowledge of God’s Time Line and of our present Time Frame which is one of Moral Degeneracy, Spiritual Bankruptcy and Scholarly Depravity. There is one last consideration:

CONCENTRATE ON TIME MANAGEMENT

“Time and tide wait for no man” wrote Chaucer. Time flows out of the infinite future, passes through the focal point of the present and moves on into the past. We cannot dam up its flow, stop its passage or halt its progress. All we can do is use it, abuse it or misuse it. The wise person will use it for the glory of God and the good of mankind.

The men of Issachar, we are told in I Chron.12:32, *“understood the times and knew what Israel should do.”* How effective we are on our journey through time will largely be determined by how we manage and use our time. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, *“See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.”* (Eph. 5:15,16)

In writing in II Timothy 3, Paul does not dwell excessively on the “last days” symptoms but shifts the focus to the prescription for “last days” ministry. The symptoms are in v.1-9 but then his prescription begins in v.14-17 and continues into chapter 4 and what he prescribes requires good stewardship of time in order for us to maximize our effectiveness for Jesus Christ in our Time Frame.

How then are God’s servants to manage their time in terrible times? II Timothy 3 and 4 suggests several ways to advantageously utilize time:

Continue To Affirm And Communicate Truth.

“But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy

Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (II Tim.3:14-17)

While others may deny that there is any such thing as truth, we must and do affirm that the Holy Scriptures are truth! God’s Word is truth that provides all that is necessary for faith and faithful living in this or in any age. It is the textbook for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. (II Tim.3:16)

Since it is God-revealed truth as to its nature and consequently sufficient, we need to aggressively declare it. Paul tells Timothy to do precisely that: *“Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.”* (II Tim. 4:2)

Illustration. Two shoe salesmen who went to Africa years ago. One sent a message back saying, “Stop sending shoes, no one here wears them.” The other salesman sent a message, “Send more shoes, everyone here is barefooted and needs them!” We could say, “Stop communicating the message, everyone is against it!” Or, we could say, “Keep heralding the message, everyone needs it!” Heralding the message of truth in this mess age is managing time redemptively!

Yes, there is truth! Yes, there are absolutes! Yes, there is a moral standard! Therefore, we should not roll over and play dead if there is a backlash by society against those who turn the light of truth upon their darkness. Let us continue to affirm truth by clear thinking about it, by confident adherence to it and by consistent communication of it. In addition, good Time Management will mean that we will:

Conduct Ministry With Credibility and Appropriateness.

“But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.” (II Tim.4:5)

How do you do ministry? How we do ministry in turbulent times requires constant evaluation and innovation. What was appropriate 50 years ago may not be appropriate today. There are many books by good men that give an overview of the contemporary scene and suggest new paradigms for ministry. Ministry in this era of cyberspace faces challenges quite different from when we were an agrarian society. The issue is not church growth but church health! If the church is healthy it will be engaged in healthy ministries and growth will occur.

Conducting ministry with credibility and appropriateness may necessitate a change in the Modus Operandi. There are some changes that have been suggested in our approach to ministry that I believe we need to at least consider if we are to have a vibrant ministry in our time. We need to develop:

1. Ministries that are mission based rather than tradition based.

Each church should develop a Mission Statement. The Mission Statement is a definition of the key ministry objectives of the church. It is designed to unite people in ministry for the glory

of God. The church should not be doing what it is doing just because it has always done that. Mission, not tradition should drive the church.

2. Ministries that Promote participation, not observation.

This electronics-focused generation learns differently from their print-oriented parents. We need to provide a new learning environment and encourage and provide for inter-active learning experiences.

3. Ministries that focus not exclusively on the individual but inclusively on the family unit. “The future of the church in America depends largely upon the spiritual commitment of families”. (Barna) For the sake of the future of the church we must integrate families into the mix of goals and activities of the church.

4. Ministries that are built upon relationships not only programs.

Christianity is more relational than organizational. People need better relationships not better programs!

5. Ministries that accentuate audience based worship not performance based worship.

Sit-and-soak worship services create pew potatoes! Worship is not a spectator sport.

6. Ministries that are designed to minister not to entertain.

Let us stop calling entertainment “ministry.” Our ministries must be authentic, credible and spiritually enriching experiences. “Stage shows” are ruinous to congregational participation. Worship services should glorify God not magnify man.

7. Ministries that are decentralized not centralized.

Group studies, networking and team ministries make for a strong ministry. The old adage, “Many hands spoil the pudding” may be true in the kitchen but it is not true in the church’s ministry. The more involved the better!

8. Ministries that empower horizontally instead of vertically.

Unless people are empowered to serve the Lord, each other and the world they will only be serving the organization. Is your ministry introverted or extroverted? Jesus said, “Lift up your eyes and look on the fields...”

9. Ministries with dual focus on Evangelism and Edification not just one or the other.

If we are thoroughly biblical in our ministry we will obey all of the Great Commission in Matthew 28 and both evangelize and stabilize, reach and teach, with equal earnestness.

Your church may have already embraced these and other ideas but for others to implement any of these suggestions will require drastic changes. Change is always risky, often painful and it isn’t accomplished by apathetic men and women. It requires high motivation to break through the rigidities of an aging organization!

When I encourage ministries to be on the cutting edge I am not advocating replacing theology with therapy! Biblical churches with doctrinal integrity should have a stronger ministry than

the “please everyone” congregations that do not stand for anything in particular. The desire to change the character and teaching of the church in order to be more popular with potential members is utterly foolish. The desire to be a “mega church” must not lead to a mega-shift in theology! Changes in style must never be allowed to produce changes in content. Again, I stress that we should strive for church health not church growth! If a church is healthy there may be some healthy changes that can be beneficial.

When Charles Swindoll went to Dallas Theological Seminary as the new President, he said, “To meet tomorrow’s need, I must be willing to leave today’s comfortable familiarities without disturbing yesterday’s essential foundation.” That approach makes for healthy change. Good time management in ministry will require some change as times change.

Conclude Our Journey And Ministry Well.

“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.” (II Tim.4:6-7)

Let us all resolve to finish the journey well. I am determined not to die a critical, negative, caustic, shriveled, withdrawn and regressive person, cursing the darkness, resisting positive change and always verbalizing about the so called “good old days”. That’s a waste of time!

CONCLUSION

If we, like Issachar’s two-hundred in I Chron.12:32, *“understand the times and know what Israel should do”* we must take a “Time Out” to: Contemplate God’s Time Line, Calculate our Time Frame and Concentrate on Time Management.

I conclude with a story which illustrates my concerns. James A. Michener wrote a narrative entitled simply, “Journey.” The story began in Seattle, Washington on July 17, 1897 when the ship named “*The Portland*” docked at a Seattle pier. It had come from the Klondike on the extreme northwestern border of Canada. The newspaper account was telegraphed around the world. It read, “At 3 o’clock this morning the steamer *Portland* arrived in Seattle with more than a ton of gold aboard.” The words, “a ton of gold” evoked wild enthusiasm wherever they appeared and the gold rush was on, attracting adventurers from all over the world.

When the news from Seattle hit London a few days later, it caught the attention of Lord Evelyn Luton. Luton was 31 years old, tall, slim, aloof, unmarried and, as Michener writes, “He had an insufferable patrician manner and whenever a stranger approached him he tended to draw back and lift his nose as if he smelled an unpleasant odor.”

Lord Luton had already explored briefly in Africa and South America and now he set his sights on the Yukon and gold. He enlisted three other Englishmen and a Scotsman to go with him. The five made their plans or I should say, Lord Luton made the plans and the others acquiesced, principally because Lord Luton was funding the adventure. They set sail from London on July 25, 1897. In two weeks they were in Montreal where they boarded a train

and traveled 2,454 miles to Calgary. Along the way Lord Luton remarked that he “feared that Canada had been corrupted by its proximity to the United States.” And he added, “I am sure their effect on Canada has been destructive.”

Little by little it became apparent to the other members of the group that Lord Luton had a deep and strong disdain for the United States. And finally at the end of the train journey when members of the group suggested that they continue on west to Seattle and board a ship to the Dawson City gold mines, Lord Luton’s total abhorrence of everything American came out into the open when he exclaimed, “Under no circumstance would I consider entering the gold field through American territory.”

So, the route was settled. They would buy a boat and paddle north on the mighty McKenzie River, cross the Canadian Rockies and go by a series of rivers to Dawson City and the gold mines. Easier said than done. Outfitters warned them against such a difficult route and some even said they were insane. But Lord Luton was insistent and onward they plunged.

Lord Luton finally reached Dawson City. The hardships, sufferings and obstacles that they encountered were unimaginable. It took him 23 months to get there, 20 months longer than it usually took those who went by ship from Seattle. Of the five men who started with him, three died.

Shortly after arriving in Dawson City Lord Luton departed for London, disillusioned and defeated. Why the failure to get gold? Their fate was sealed back at Calgary. The route that other Canadians before them had taken was to go southwest from Calgary to Seattle and take the coastal route.

But Lord Luton indignantly refused to consider that route for you see, he said that they must travel all the way to their destination on British Commonwealth territory and that they would not enter American territory! He insisted that they not change their minds and they did not for two more years until the journey almost killed them all!

His exaggerated loyalty to British Commonwealth territory and his animosity toward the U.S. resulted in losing sight of the purpose of the journey which was to get gold. What happened? Tradition became more important than the gold.

Does this story remind you of the attitude of many today who are adverse to any change in their ministry philosophy? Never mind the purpose of the journey – hold on to tradition at any cost! We can become so inflexible and fixated on upholding tradition that we never get to the gold mine. We never gather the precious treasure for which we began the journey.

Our goal of glorifying the Lord and gathering a harvest of souls must never change. But maybe its time to reaffirm our purpose, to go back to the map and, if need be, re-route our ministry journey in times like these!

I believe that if we really understand the times in which we live, we will make whatever adjustments necessary to have a more effective ministry before the Lord of the harvest comes and calls the final “TIME OUT!”