“Discerning the Signs of History”

I am convinced that what human life, man-centered, has torn down, human life, God-centered can build up

1 He who oppresses another will ultimately suffer as a results of such oppression
2 Whenever the secular super-structure is cut alose from religious foundations disintegration sets in
3 A breakdown in the moral structure of a society leads to the utmate breakdown of the physical structure

AD CSKC Sermon file, folder 79, "Discerning the Signs of History"

“Discerning the Signs of History,” Sermon notes

[26 June 1955]
[Montgomery, Ala]

The following three versions of this sermon include a brief outline written on a notecard, a handwritten draft, and a typed manuscript. King cites numerous examples from world history demonstrating that "evil carnes the seed of its own destruction."

"Discerning the Signs of History," Sermon notes

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“Discerning the Signs of History,” Sermon outline

[And]
Luke 12 54, 55

“ye can discern the face of the sky and of the earth, how is it that ye know not how to interpret this time?" What is Jesus’ indictment? He was is saying that these people had an amazing awarness of the the trends of astronomy and an appalling ignorance of the trends of history They could read the face of the sky, but they could not read the face of the past They had mastered the art of noticing the succession in the natural world They were so ingnious that they could apply the law of cause and effect to the natural order If a cloud appeared in the west they knew that a shower would soon emerge If the south wind blew they knew that the tropical heat would soon appear The sequence was certain They knew that one was the harbinger of the other [Three pages are missing]

1 According to a 26 June 1955 Dexter program, King preached a sermon with this title. Reinhold Niebuhr’s book Discerning the Signs of the Times, Sermons for Today and Tomorrow may have inspired King’s title for this sermon (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1946) King wrote “discerning the signs of the time” above the passage Matthew 16 3 in his copy of the Bible
2 “And he said also to the people, When ye see a cloud rise out of the west, straighthway ye say, There cometh a shower, and so it is And when ye see the south wind blow, ye say, There will be heat and it cometh to pass”
3 Cf Luke 12 56
He started underestimating the power of his opponent. He invaded Russia in 1812. The Battle of Leipzig in 1813. His ultimate doom was the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. Waterloo is but the eternal symbol of the doom of every Napoleon. He lived by the sword and died by it.

(b) Hitler set out to rule the world. Cite how he invaded Ethiopia and Halla Sillassi had to flee his throne. But today Hitler is dead and Halla Sillassi still holds his throne.

(c) Mussolini tried the sword, and ended up being killed by the very people that he once ruled.

This is the ever present story of history.

A third lesson that history teaches is that whenever the secular superstructure is cut alose from religious foundations disintegration sets in. In other words whenever a civilization looses a moral and religious consciousness, it is headed for doom.

(a) Toynbee teaches that 26 civilizations have risen and all but 10 have fallen. They did not fall because of armies without but because of inner decay. Whenever ephemeral institutions and techniques are raised to absolute-ness decay sets in.

(b) Gibbon reports of what immorality meant in the fall of the Roman empire.

(c) I am worried about America because of its materialism. We affirm God with our lips while denying him with our lives. The white man is gradually repenting. He becoming more churchy. He has come to see the futility of materialism. But I am still worried about the Negro. He emptying his churches while the white man is filling them.

(D) Cite what religion meant to the Negro in the past.

(E) Place God back into the center of your lives.

I do not mean to leaves a message of doom this morning. This is hope if we will but read the signs of history and profit by its mistakes. I am convinced that what human life, man-centered, has torn down, human life God centered can build up.

Conclude with story of wise man in Virginia.

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4 Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Russia and captured Moscow on 14 September 1812. The Russians, however, set the city ablaze, leaving the French army with no place to stay during the winter. This led to the French army's retreat on 19 October 1812. At the battle of Leipzig, Russian, Austrian, Prussian, British, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish forces defeated Napoleon's troops on 19 October 1813 and forced the French army to flee Germany. Napoleon's final defeat at the battle of Waterloo on 18 June 1815 ended the Napoleonic Wars.

5 Cf Matthew 26:52

6 Italy, not Germany, invaded Ethiopia in 1935 and annexed the country in 1936. King refers to Haile Selassie I (1892–1975), the last emperor of Ethiopia, who fled to England when the Italians invaded. After the British liberated Ethiopia in 1941, Selassie reclaimed the throne. He was deposed in 1974.

7 Benito Mussolini was executed on 28 April 1945.


9 King refers to Edward Gibbon's The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.