

## Needs of Our Times<sup>1</sup>

I Chronicles 12:32

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*“Men who had understanding the times...”*

As I put pen to paper, I do so with a heavy heart and I really do not know what to say. What will my few words do? Will they be helpful to any soul? I pray so. The text that heads this article is one that describes the men of Issachar. This was during a time of indecision in Israel after the reign of Saul. “*Under which king?*” was the question asked round about. Evidently, the people were of different opinions. Some thought of rejecting David and following Saul’s lineage, while others were indifferent or undecided (Ryle, 1992, p 283). The third group decided boldly to follow David, and the men of Issachar were among those who had clear minds and “*had understanding of the times*”. Thus the Holy Spirit gives them this special description of praise. It is true that all Christians who have left an indelible mark on the world have been people who have “understood the times” and acted wisely.

Our lot is cast in an age when there is more profession than ever. In our land (i.e. Zambia)<sup>2</sup> today<sup>3</sup>, it is almost fashionable to call oneself “*Born Again*” when there never has been any genuine work of grace in the heart at all. I fear that our age is one in which there has been much profession and yet so little practical out living. Oh, what a dark spot! Oh, what sad times! In our land today, the moment one declares that they are “*BA*” it immediately implies that they are morally “*not really bad*” and are on the road to “*getting better*”. It is assumed that they have some good ethical morals about them and in a little while they are dubbed “*brother*” or “*sister*” in the Lord. But alas, after a little while, the “chained old lion” suddenly breaks loose and the old man comes out boldly, worse than before (2 Peter. 2:20), energetically catching up with the “*syllabus*” of sin. After all, the Republican President is Born Again<sup>4</sup>, so it must be part of the “*new culture*” to be dubbed converted! But I contend that for one to ever dare to call themselves

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<sup>1</sup> I have adapted this title, with a little modification to JC Ryle’s immortal volume “Holiness” pages 283-299. The thoughts and inspirations came from a reading of that book in the 1990s. I am also indebted to John Gillies’ book and Bonar for some parts of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Zambia was constitutionally declared a ‘*Christian Nation*’ in 1991 by late President FTJ Chiluba.

<sup>3</sup> As at 1990-1999

<sup>4</sup> Current President as at 1993

Christians, there must be a work of grace (Titus 3:5) wrought by the Holy Spirit from spiritual death (Ephesians 2:1 – 3).

Dear reader, do you know anything of having turned from sin radically? Do you remember a day or a period when you were under the heavy conviction of sin and then, having turned to Christ, you were set free (Matthew 11:28 – 30) and strangely, you felt light, joyful, and free? If not, I question salvation (2 Corinthians 13:5). I dare say that never has the Church in all history been as active as now. Despite all the grand activities, religious rallies and all the rest of it, the world seems to be continuously and progressively sinking deeper into sin. On the one hand, infidelity is high among the unbelieving and wickedness is waxing bolder by the day. On the other hand, sin has invaded the Church ranks. There are many 'Achans' within the church (Joshua 7). The true gospel is rarely preached, but only emotionally, charged egocentric stories and newspaper headlines sermons abound on all sides (2 Peter. 2:3).

But what ought we to do? What is the remedy? Who will spiritually fight for us? Certainly the Elijah's of our times are exceedingly few and far outnumbered. Would you be useful in our times? In the ensuing parts of this paper, I offer what I think should be the recourse, of course relying on the anciently trained spiritual eyes<sup>5</sup> from the past.

The times desperately need people whose profile we briefly and not exhaustively attempt to describe below:

### **1. The diligently earnest about the Master's business**

For one to be greatly used of the Lord, they must be earnest about the work of the Master. They must talk with great urgency and directness as though talking for the last time. In short, they redeem the time. (Eph. 5:16) "*Night cometh when no man can labour*" (John 9:4) is their motto, are you earnest?

### **2. Those all out to succeed**

To change the world or indeed turn the tide requires individuals burning with genuine zeal burning within their bones to have God char their context with his Holy fire. Passionate Christians are all out to succeed, subject to the energising power of the Holy Spirit. The words "*Attempt great things for God and expect great from Him*" ring true to them, as said one faithful missionary years ago<sup>6</sup>. When they go out, they determine to preach Christ and Him crucified! Nothing is about themselves! Like Whitefield, they resolve to have their names perish while

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<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to the Puritans and their heirs.

<sup>6</sup> William Carey – First missionary to India. Sketches PP 204 "*Expect great thing from God; Attempt great things for God.*"

Christ's name exalted. Successful saints are unflinching and not easily discouraged. Faint heartedness is not their portion, always resilient after a fall. If the world is against them, then they are against it too!<sup>7</sup>

### **3. Those that fully believe in and trust the Lord to use them for greater good**

The desperate need of the times entails total trust in God. The times dictate that effective Christians are people of faith that "*plough and sow in hope*". They may sometimes go forth shedding bitter tears while sowing precious seed, yet these are tears of sorrow and compassion, not of despair. They know that in due season, God will make the seed grow. For it is God who makes regenerate (Eph. 2:5). This is the great curse of our times: we want instant results! O, for faithful patient men and women!

### **4. The times demand industrious servant leaders with unfettered self-exertion**

Our lot is cast in times which Ryle would have called an age of '*costless Christianity*,' a kind of boneless Christianity! "*Just believe*", they say, and they do not care to produce fruit. But doesn't the Bible instruct us to prove our repentance by our works? (Acts 26:20) Those that have been mighty in the faith have been most industrious, laborious and determined people. They have been mighty in word and deed. Are you laborious, or do you just delight in having a good time?

### **5. There is need for saints of singular boldness and determination. Nothing deflects them from their goal!**

Foes, Adversaries might contend and oppose, timid friends hesitate, but the faithful courageously invade enemy territory, in nothing terrified by difficulty or opposition. Ryle said it well when he stated that: "*Timidity shuts many a door of usefulness, and loses many a precious opportunity! It wins no friends, while it strengthens every enemy*". Nothing is lost by boldness, nor gained by fear. '*Political correctness*' is the currency of the times, even relatively religious contexts like Zambia. Ah! How sin raises its ugly head in our times! Many a saint shrinks back so as to retain "*a good reputation*" in a sinful infested civilized world. They sinfully remain silent. I deliberately hover around this point because there is no age, I believe, like ours which needs people who have a holy boldness against the world, the flesh, and the devil, that horrible wicked trinity.

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<sup>7</sup> One famous defender of the Trinitarian Doctrine called Athanasius is said to have been alone "against the world". This was about 324 AD. Ref to "Sketches in Church" S.M Houghton, Banner of Truth, pp 21, 1980 edition.

## 6. The need for mighty prayer wrestlers<sup>8</sup>

It has been rightly said “*They that want education get what education can give; they that want wealth get what wealth can give; but they that pray get power from God*”<sup>9</sup>. In other words, a prayer less Christian is a power less Christian. Scan through the scriptures and Church History; what has been the characteristic mark of all the eminent saints? I boldly assert that it has been prayer. How sad is it that the powerhouse, the closet, is neglected in our times! Even where it is crowded, no much authentic deep genuine prayer arises from the hearts of utterers. Many a professing Christian are more willing to be seen of men as “*prayer warriors*” in public, but their closets are full of dust layers due to prayer neglect, the prayer rooms are seldom visited. Peep into the closet of the Apostle Paul, what will you see? I believe you will notice the bold saint on his knees with eyes full of tears and sighs for the lost and the elect. How much time do you spend in prayer? Are you given to prayer? Do you constantly send ejaculatory prayers to God?<sup>10</sup> Do you trade with heaven over souls? Most, if not all the saints God has effectively used over the centuries have always daily risen early – “*a great while before dawn*”<sup>11</sup>. No wonder our lives are joyless! No wonder the sermons go into thin air! No wonder we are so much of arm chair critics rather than of a Berean spirit! (Acts 17:11) Oh, for men like David Brainerd<sup>12</sup> in our day!

## 7. The times demand people whose doctrines are most clear, exact and biblical

Many a professing Christian in our land ignorantly delights in the plausible phrase of “*doctrine divides but love builds*”<sup>13</sup>. This sounds wise and smooth at first sight but actually a troubling sign. As a result of this defective view, the evil one capitalizes on our ignorance. Thus, when inconsistent and the world maligns the faith, we are shocked at what has hit us! But if you will be useful, know what you believe, read the scriptures daily and often. Go further and study them! Be prepared to go to the deepest pit in order to get the best jewels. Dear reader, soak yourself in word, for how can you use your weapon skilfully if you do not know it? In like manner, know the sword of the spirit (Ephesians. 6:17) so as to fatally pierce the prince of darkness. Away with a lazy approach to the scriptures! Those are seeds of evil one!

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<sup>8</sup> Some prefer the phrase “*Prayer warriors*”

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous

<sup>10</sup> I Thessalonians 5:17

<sup>11</sup> Mark 1:35

<sup>12</sup> David Brainerd is a historical character greatly used in converting the American Aborigines. It is said of him that he would at times spend more than 12 hours in prayer and when he opened his mouth to preach, thousands responded to the gospel call. Some argue that there is a correlation between intense genuine prayer and conversions. That is debatable an argument but one wishes it were true!

<sup>13</sup> Anonymous but was a common saying in the years 1990-1999 in the religious world.

## **8. The times need people of deep spirituality, humility and consistency**

Their lives and their lips accord with each other. Their daily walk furnishes the best confirmation and illustration of the truth they preach. No variance is evident or actual between their private and public lives. It may be said that “*they are walking Bibles*”. At every turn, they are ministers of Christ. Be it in Church, at home, on the train, bus or aeroplane, Christ comes first. No frivolousness, no flippancy, no gaiety, no worldly acquaintanceships or companionships neutralizes their public preaching/speaking, or mars the work they are seeking to accomplish. At this point, many of us fail. We have two extremes. The one is content to have “*knowledge only*” very well tucked away in the “*catacombs*”<sup>14</sup> of their minds and no practicality! The other extreme is bankruptcy of knowledge but only an emotionally centred life, which life is erratic and not guided by God’s truth and Spirit. No wonder they cannot tell us apart from them! After all, we grumble, gossip and slander alongside them! But I boldly assert that if you will be different in our times, be filled with the spirit (Ephesians 5:18). What is the sure evidence of this? (Ephesians. 5:19, 20). Is this your description? Oh, dear friend, it is possible to be different in your generation!

## **9. Single minded and never detracted by the snaring trappings of fame, money or ambition**

Many a professing saint claims to genuinely follow Christian without conditions or expecting any pay back. In time however, it becomes evident that they are not immune to external unchristian influences. Starting off simple, humble, kind hearted, sincere zealous, loving and bearing the fruit of the Spirit, and in some cases coming across as genuinely passionate saints ready to die defending the truth but with time however, this sharpness withers and replaced by the attributes of the old man. Pride, pomposity, self-importance, self-promotion, attribution of success to self, sitting on past laurels, boasting only about past exploits, the quest to amass wealth or fame seems to cripple the once eminent exemplary saint. Suddenly, they begin to give unwarranted concessions even on clear Biblical orthodox teaching or even orthopraxy. They soon hurl away their first principles in the name of “*growing wiser and mature over the years*” when in fact they will have backslidden. This subtle shift, mission drift and declension is sadly all too common in these degenerate days among many saints<sup>15</sup>, especially in the postmodern<sup>16</sup> global context. Liberalism<sup>17</sup> has crippled many a once useful and

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<sup>14</sup> Catacombs were underground worship places in Rome used and built by the primitive/early Christians. About 6 million graves are said to have been there. Refer to: “Sketches in church History” by S.M. Houghton Banner of Truth Trust pp 18 – 20, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Including some well-meaning Christian leaders

<sup>16</sup> Although postmodernism has some strong and good positive sides to it worth exploiting, it often tends to weaken the deontological nature and interpretation and application of scripture. Stanley J Grenz (1996) has written a primer on postmodernism worth reviewing. That said we may define

promising warrior. I say this with a heavy heart. However, God in His providence, always retains a remnant in every age, people that refuse to succumb to the subtle soul corrupting influences from the world and the Devil. It may be said of them, as was once commented of Martin Luther that '*Not even gold can move this fool from his principles.*' God has such people even in our day. Do you fit in that bracket?

I am persuaded that the world needs such effective mortals in our days again. They are lethal weapons for the master. For now we know not when the next set of such people come round, unless you and I are ready to become vessels of noble use (II Timothy 2:21).

Are you like the men of Issachar who understood the times?

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'post modernism' as: *that movement in thought and practice that abhors absolutes or the fixed, inflexible absolute standards.*

<sup>17</sup> Often making its entry at times through good/useful theological (rather than Biblical) constructs such as the Theological Triage (note that the Triage addresses the urgency not importance of scripture. Some well-meaning saints swap these.

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