

Discerning the Times: Inspired by Hope in the Present Age

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Teachers should have a sensitivity for their cultural context.

They work with young people and are called to give some guidance.

Orthodox Christians tend to be conservative

1. Concerns about developments...
2. Ideas about a golden Christian Age ~ though Christians back then thought their time was much worse / difficult than ever before...
3. Against general superficial optimism

We should also be 'progressive', however, inspired by hope and with a positive attitude towards the future. The best is yet to come.

Still it is important to reflect on our present context. I want to contribute to this conference by answering three questions:

1. What do we mean by 'the spirit of our times' or the 'Zeitgeist'?
2. How should we discern the times?
3. What should our attitude be in our present context?

For the second & third question we will turn to the Scriptures, especially to Romans 13, where Paul says: 'you know the time...'

What do we mean by 'the spirit of our times' or the 'Zeitgeist'

The Christian use of the term *Zeitgeist* seems to lead to a rather negative attitude towards the given cultural context because the term fuels an antithetical attitude to culture that is not always helpful for Christians to understand the calling within that culture. Still the term is useful to discern some specific cultural elements to which we all must relate to.

Although the German term *Zeitgeist* – and the Dutch *tijdgeest* – originated in reflection on the French Revolution, the concept is much older. The idea of a spirit that characterizes a certain era emerged in early modernity together with the birth of terms like Renaissance and Middle Ages. People tried to find out what made a historical period distinctive. It is always easier to discern that from hindsight, then to trace the spirit of the time in which you are living yourself. This might make us a bit cautious. How do we understand and experience our context and how will future generations interpret our times and especially our attitude as Christians. To make it very specific, how will your students remember you over 50 or 60 years. Reflecting on the *Zeitgeist* means that we are aware of the fact that one day others will judge us...

In Christian circles, at least in The Netherlands, the term *tijdgeest* has a negative tone. The 'spirit of the age' in modernity stands for the revolutionary and secular results of the Enlightenment, perceived as an anti-Christian movement, characterized by 'Ni Dieu, ni maître' ('no God, no master'). The most outspoken and well-known example of this attitude in Dutch literature is the pamphlet written by the poet Isaac da Costa (1798-1860) *Objections against the spirit of the age* (1823)

With this publication he wanted to draw attention to the 'unfounded and dangerous character of the proud sentiment of the Century' while 'the *Zeitgeist* with its complete composition of vain wisdom and deceitful enlightenment had raised the world in rebellion against the Omnipotent One.'

This attitude is understandable and sometimes necessary. Scripture warns us that we can expect persecution in this present evil world, but, beware, that is always the case and we should be careful not to leave the impression, at least not to young people that our own days exceptionally difficult. Moreover, this present evil world, is always also the world that God has created. It is evil because and only in as far as it is occupied territory. The evil spirits do not have any right. "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." (1 Cor. 10:26)

In any case, it is questionable whether it is possible to characterize a specific historical period by emphasizing certain cultural aspects. There is a risk that these aspects will be absolutized, leave alone

the cultural bias of a specific Western perspective on the world and its history. The Christian use of the term seems to lead to a rather negative attitude towards the given cultural context because the term fuels an antithetical attitude to culture – Christ against culture – that is not always helpful for Christians to understand the calling within that culture.

Still the term seems to be useful to discern some specific cultural elements to which we all have to relate and to express that there is a spirit, a *Geist*, a certain hidden force behind cultural expressions. As Christians we may connect these driving forces to the spiritual principalities and powers, ‘we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places’ (Eph. 6:12). There are not only negative forces, however, there are also restraining forces in any culture, due to God’s common grace. Discerning the *Zeitgeist* is a prophetic insight in this spiritual war behind the curtains of the visible reality. Discerning the *Zeitgeist* means knowing which powers and forces might be a matter of common grace or even of the general work of the Spirit over against a flood of spiritual evil...

How should we discern the times?

When Christians nowadays reflect on discerning the times, they often either think of the signs of the end-times as Jesus spoke about them with his disciples or perhaps of some kind of prophetic insight into what is happening in the world around us. Much could be said about the mutual weight of several signs of the times – events like ‘wars and rumours of wars’, ‘earthquakes in various places’, and ‘famines’ will always take place and as such are only wakeup calls, while ‘the end is not yet’ (Mark 13:7-8). These signs might even be misused by false prophets to manipulate the faithful and lead the sheep astray. The progress of the gospel of Christ’s kingdom is a more important sign than exceptional events in world history. Any study of eschatological expectations in the history of the church will reveal that Christians have always thought that their time was the final round before Christ’s return. The *Nah-Erwartung* is a mark of the true church.

Prophetic discernment of what typifies a specific time and how to respond to that *Zeitgeist*, however, is even more important than anxiously watching world history to see if it is already almost twelve o’clock. I tend to call this kind of discernment ‘prophetic’ because of the difficulty to discern one’s own time compared to past era’s and because of the fact that the truth of these spiritual analyses always only reveals itself in the further unfolding of history while the ‘prophets’ are often despised in their own days.

You don’t have to be a prophet to discern that the great issues of the present Western culture are 1) the problems we have with the changing climate and our own responsibility for these changes in former days and at present for the future, 2) the way in which we as a society deal with relationships, especially regarding men and women in marriage, and 3) the growing polarization in society, that expresses a fundamental distrust in truth, expressed in doubts about the media, conspiracy theories, and a hyper critical attitude towards those that who are called to govern.

Without causing a ‘hermeneutical circuit’, it is striking that these aspects can be related to Romans 13, not only because of what the chapter says about the authorities having been instituted by God as his servants for our good, but also when he makes the spiritual warfare concrete.

8 Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

11 Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. 12 The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. 13 Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling

and jealousy. 14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Paul mentions six issues, admonishing his audience to 'walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy'.

Though there is no direct connection between Paul's three pairs and our three contemporary problems, but the underlying analysis – formulated positively – is that the readers in Rome should walk 'properly' by 1) being sober or moderate with respect to food and drink, 2) being modest and chaste with regards to sexuality, and 3) being confidential and faithful towards others, loving the truth.

The three problems of our present age are caused by 1) extreme immoderateness in our use of the natural resources, 2) a promotion of licentiousness with regards to sexual ethics, and 3) a fundamental criticism of authority and relativization of truth. Are we reaping what the Zeitgeist of (post)modernity has sown? If so, what is the calling of the church and of Christianity in this respect? Are we called to follow Da Costa and unmask the Spirit of the Age or is this a pitfall that will hinder us to fulfil the law of love because we become too antithetical and part of the problem of polarization, rather than its solution?

It is striking that Paul does not focus on these practical issues, without first making a fundamental statement. He writes: 'you know the time (καιρός), that the hour (ώρα) has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night (νύξ) is far gone; the day (ἡμέρα) is at hand.' (Rom. 13:11-12).

This is what he also emphasizes elsewhere when he reflects on 'the present (evil) age' (αἰών), he always places this world or age in the overwhelming light of the 'one to come' (Gal. 1:4, Eph. 1:21). The term 'age' also occurs in the introduction to the paraenetic part of Romans (chapters 12-15), where Paul encourages the faithful not be conformed to this world (αἰών) but rather to be transformed in the renewal of their minds.

This transformation is made more specific in the final verses of Romans 13. The contrast between both ages or worlds runs parallel to the day and the night. The day is almost dawning and the night is almost over. The faithful live in the tension between both periods.

The 'day' is the Old Testament 'day of the Lord' and the accompanying judgement inaugurating an age of peace and blessing. In Christ this day has already started and the faithful participate in his resurrection in glory. In that sense the day or the new age has already come for them. Still they are awaiting its full dawn in Christ's Parousia.

This confronts us with three personal and serious questions:

1. Are we truly, by faith part of that blessed new reality. This is not self-evident. It is a gift of grace. This is what we need... Some of us might be struggling with the question regarding their relationship with Christ. It is either or: Either day or night?

Paul says elsewhere that the day (ἡμέρα) will disclose or reveal each one's work (1 Cor. 3:12-13) and calls it the day of Christ, (Phil. 1:6, 10; 2:16) or the day of the Lord (1 Cor. 1:8; 5:5; 2 Cor. 1:14; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Thess. 2:2); on 'that day' the dead will be raised (1 Cor. 15:23).

2. If so, do we truly live in this reality? What does it mean for us to be children of the day and to participate in the age to come?

3. Do we inspire the young people entrusted to our care to live a life like this? How can we do that? Or, the third question:

What should our attitude be in our present context?

The twilight between day and night, or rather the last part of the night is a metaphor to typify the position of the Christian as a 'citizen' of the world to come, while living as a stranger in the present evil world. In the ancient Roman context people would rise early, before daybreak, to be able to make maximal use of the daylight, even if someone would lay abed pretty late. Paul's audience was familiar

with this daily morning rhythm. 'Paul compares his and his readers' position in the chronology of God's saving purposes to the hour of the morning after waking and before dawn. The time to get out of bed and to spring into action has arrived'.

The apostle not only states that the believers know that they live in this specific 'eschatological' time (καιρός), but also that 'salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed'. Here the word salvation (σωτηρία) has the meaning of the future completion of their redemption, whereas it refers to the effect of the gospel elsewhere in Romans (1:16, 10:1, 10 and 11:11).

The essence of the discernment of the times from a Christian perspective, is the acknowledgement of the tension between the already and the not yet. Specific attention given to a particular *Zeitgeist*, might distract us from what is really essential and always the same, namely the fact that we participate in the world to come as citizens, while we still live in the present evil world as strangers.

It is also striking that Paul uses terminology that refers to the spiritual warfare of the believers, who are encouraged to 'put on the armour of light' (13:12). This might help us to discern our participation in Christ. If we truly belong to him, we will also know of the spiritual warfare.

In 1 Thessalonians Paul encourages the children of light and of the day to put on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of hope (5:8-9). In Ephesians he gives well-known exhortation to put on the whole armour of God (Eph. 6:10-17). This underlines that the intermediate time where day and night approach each other – and where Christians already participate in the day, while they still live in the night – is a time of struggle.

This strife is also a spiritual war against principalities and powers, which remind us of the *Zeitgeist* as a form of social and cultural consensus that plays a powerful role in human societies. As said, there is a driving spiritual force somewhere behind and in cultural developments and we are called to discern the good from the evil in culture. The good powers by which we are surrounded (Dietrich Bonhoeffer) ultimately come from the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Western Christians seem to lack an antenna to discern the spiritual reality that Jude for instance refers to when he describes the struggle between the archangel Michael and the devil. Of course, we should be aware of the pitfalls of identifying specific cultural wars with the conflict between the celestial city and Babylon, but on the other hand we might also have become dumb and numb for the fact that God the Father is also the Maker of all things invisible (Nicene Creed). Elsewhere Paul claims that the faithful once followed 'the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience'; that seems to refer literally to an evil *Zeitgeist*.

Therefore the reference to love as the fulfilment of the law is essential. Whatever form the spiritual warfare might take, we 'owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law' (Rom. 13:8). The commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves is the Old Testament text that is most often quoted in the New Testament.

The evil *Zeitgeist* might arouse justified rejection from the Christian and indeed radical countercultural movements in the history of the Church – the Christ against culture model – often have been more influential on culture than other approaches, think of the Modern Devotion, the Great Awakening and the Dutch Revival. Nevertheless, Christians are in the first place called to walk in love for God and their neighbours. It is a great challenge to maintain the Spirit of love in the context of the spiritual warfare.

But, to draw this to a close, how can we do so? The apostolic admonition to 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ and to make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires' (13:14) directs us to our core-business. Essential for the three fields of contemporary problems – and perhaps of all potential problems – is the underlying desire to fill our emptiness by selfishly providing for ourselves whatever we want to have, to be, or to think. The Christian message is eccentric: we do not belong to ourselves, but to Christ Jesus, our Saviour. Putting on the Lord Jesus means acknowledging him as Lord – and not only as Saviour – for the real fulfilment of our lives. The great challenge of our time is to communicate that countercultural message as the real good news for any time, but especially for people, 'on whom the end of the ages has come'.

The main question is not how to discern the Zeitgeist, but how to relate to this present evil world, that still is the world created by God, the world that he so loved that he gave his only Son to redeem that present evil world.

The Pauline admonition to know or discern the time, as the 'critical moment' of the life in this present age that is characterized by the age to come through the participation in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, implies a) an awareness of the tension between the two ages as a position of struggle and strife, b) a radical preparation for the dawning day of Christ, by a life in accordance with the will of God revealed in the law fulfilled by love through the renewal of the mind and c) a faithful recognition of Jesus Christ as Lord as the cloak of righteousness and the fulfilment of all desires.

We live in this present age.

We should not give our children / students the impression that we feel more comfortable with the past ages... - The world might say that orthodox Christianity is old-fashioned / outdated, belongs to previous ages, but we know better. Christianity means living in this present evil world or age and still participate in the world / age to come.

Jesus has said, that 'there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.' He is faithful. he will fulfill his promises. Don't be afraid. He will fulfill his purposes.