

What is God saying?

By Bob Young

Think with me. The question is not whether God is saying something in the midst of this pandemic. God is always saying something. In the Old Testament, there was no word from God for extended periods of time. In the New Testament, under the new covenant, God has revealed himself and his will through both the living word (Jesus Christ) and through the written word. There is always a word from God.

The question is not whether God is saying something, the question is what he is saying and how.

God provides strength and guidance in the midst of every crisis. The danger we face is the temptation to go with the flow of the media and cultural agenda without seeking insight, without prayer, without listening to God. God wants us to discern the times and the seasons and not just float merrily down the stream without knowing where we are heading.

Spiritual leaders have the big, at times almost overwhelming, responsibility of guiding God's people to live in confidence and victory in difficult days. When we study Bible history, we also see that leaders have a responsibility to stay alert, discern the times, and sound the alarm. Leaders who lead God's people astray will be judged. Leaders must develop biblical insight to discern where we are heading, praying for wisdom and developing the knowledge necessary to lead God's people.

In the midst of the current pandemic, I have been impressed with how disoriented many Christians seem to be. The Bible speaks to this need. Thirty years ago, when my academic studies were focused on the role of Baby Boomers in the emerging church, I often cited 1 Chron. 12:32, seeking to empower people to be "as the men of Issachar who knew the signs of the times and what to do." The need to speak clearly and boldly, calling attention to the biblical insight in this verse, is perhaps greater than ever. Only when we listen to God's word and clearly read the times will we know what to do.

MY "READ" ON THE PRESENT SITUATION – THE BIBLE, THE TIMES, WHAT TO DO

I share five observations.

-1- God called the church (assembly) together for a purpose, a purpose that is fulfilled not in the gathering but in the going. Many churches have focused so much on the gathering that they have done a poor job in the going, failing to send forth members from the assembly as kingdom workers. What happens in our gatherings and assemblies should prepare us for going – going forth on behalf of the mission of God's kingdom.

-2- In recent years, the work of the church has been largely focused on the gatherings—worship leaders, Bible class teachers, small group leaders, ministers whose primary responsibilities are internal. Even the primary Sunday gathering has become focused internally on the needs and desires of the members.

-3- During the pandemic, the church that has spent so much of its energy in gathering has now been given the opportunity to redefine its identity -- not in its gathering but in its scattering.

-4- Many churches have simply sought new ways of gathering and are still failing to go. It is easy to say that the church now exists in every neighborhood, but the truth is that the neighbors are not flocking to these new expressions of the church, and in most cases, they are not being invited and do not feel welcome.

-5- Technology is wonderful, but its primary use in the church should not be self-feeding.

Integrating Scripture and the times helps us understand what God is calling us to do.

The biblical mandate to the church is to make disciples.

The pandemic and its challenges could be a help to the church in fulfilling its mission. Virtual gatherings are more available to unbelievers, the church can more easily go and share the Good News as more people become accustomed to receiving information via new technologies. The church is being called to look beyond itself; the church is being called away from the temptation to make the primary focus internal during difficult days.

The pandemic and its challenges could help the church reestablish priorities. Suddenly the building, the fixtures, classrooms, and weekly assembly are not priorities. The church is not the place, the church is not the accessories. The church can exist if there are no accessories—no building, no location, no property, no preacher. While the gathering helps identify the church, the reason for the gathering is to enable the going.

The pandemic and its challenges could help focus the primary message of the church. If the churches are to remain open and vibrant while the buildings are closed, believers must be nurtured in the way of discipleship so that they live out the presence of Jesus in their own little community, being light, sharing the gospel, bringing unbelievers to the Lord. The message received by and shared by church members must have new urgency for outreach in the very moment when outreach is easier and more possible than it has been during the last 50-60 years.

The pandemic challenges the church to differentiate essentials from non-essentials. God's word is lasting, God's word will make and mature disciples. God defines what is essential; the church's role is to respond to God and to advance what God says is essential. The church went from a handful on the day of Pentecost (120 who quickly became 3000), then to more than a million believers by AD 250, according to church historian, Rodney Stark. The early church spread the Good News without phones, technology, Zoom, and the Internet. The early church stayed focused on the goal, God's essential, God's purpose, God's purpose for the church, and it responded by sharing the message of salvation with outsiders.