

## THE SIGN OF THE SON OF MAN IN HEAVEN (NOMINAL HEAVEN)

(This talk was delivered by Bro. Gene Burns at the Paterson convention, April, 1967.)

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: and then shall appear the sign [singular] of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” (Matt. 24:29, 30) In Dan. 7:13 we read: “I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.” Dan. 7:13, 14.

Mark records, “But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars of heaven shall fall, and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory.” (Mark 13:24-26) “And there shall be signs [plural] in the sun, and the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; men’s hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth; for the powers of heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”—Luke 21:25-27.

The crowds of Jesus’ day who desired a sign to prove Jesus’ Messiahship received none from Jesus, except as he said, “There shall no sign be given... but the sign of the Prophet Jonas. For as Jonas was 3 days and 3 nights in the whale’s belly, so shall the Son of man be 3 days and 3 nights in the heart of the earth.” (Matt. 12:39, 40) Jesus had no desire to show the world signs, but when his disciples inquired for a sign of presence he gave them a long and important answer—probably longer than they really expected touching their question.

But before going onward with this discussion let us emphasize that the burden of the whole discussion rests in the fact that the Son of man is present. That he is invisibly present bringing the necessary forces to bear to accomplish the overthrow of Babylon. Those are war clouds he comes with. His presence in the heavens must force the powers here into a situation that they were not forced into before Christ’s presence. And things are not continuing as they were in the heavens. The evidence proves that our Lord is here and that the hour of triumph and glory are shortly before us. The days of defense and flight are history and now under the banner of the King of kings and Lord of lords,

victory and only victory shall attend those fully enlisted under his banner. By this I do not mean that personal loss and suffering are not yet before us, but the conflict of the age is preparing for its final hour the results of which are glorious for the faithful, but dark and dismal for those under the banner of error and Satan. This is the time for lifting up our heads and renewing our allegiance to the Kingdom that cannot fall.

Matthew speaks of “the sign of the son of man in Heaven,” (singular), Luke identifies them in the plural saying, “There shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity” and Mark does not mention the word “sign” singular or plural, but simply depicts the same information telling us the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars of heaven shall fall, and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken. We believe they are not three different events referred to but the same event described is clarified by the three gospel writers. Hence we may speak of a sign, or we may speak of signs, or simply of evidence of our Lord in heaven. The word sign is *SEEMIEN* in the Greek and has the significance of proof or evidence.

To see the evidence of the Son of man in the heavens we do best to contrast the conditions before and after and then observe events as they shape into the patterns prophesied. Notice, the vantage point of our Lord’s great prophecy. Actually, the whole chapter is not a sign of his presence but rather traverses the whole Gospel Age and there in broad strokes Jesus depicts the conditions that prevail during his absence. They were to be characterized with false teachers, apostasy, wars and rumors of wars, persecution for the faithful, famine, betrayal, pestilence, upheavals and nations and kingdoms rising in battle. It is after the tribulation of those days, the Gospel age tribulation and particularly the 1260 years of the Papacy’s ruthless rule.

Pre-1799 the Catholic Church sat in prominence and power. Not that she had no problems or that certain losses had not been occasioned throughout her long and evil reign. The Reformation had brought Papacy many problems and a wound that might have been fatal, but somehow she emerged as belligerent and high-handed as ever. Papal infallibility was her response to the Reformation. Unashamedly she announced this to the world. In our day however, this Papal dogma is a cause of considerable embarrassment and there is regret that they had been so rash. Nobody wanted any more Papal Infallibility. But in her time no proclamation was thought too extravagant and no one dared to ridicule her claims. While the church of England left the authority of the Papacy to Europe, yet by copying the tactics of the Papacy, both in her lust for power, love for splendor, and her ability to exercise all the powers of the Papacy in her own domain, it did not make the Catholic Church look much worse. Both beasts were terrible and it brought little respite to the faithful church. The Reformation in Europe started out but corruption ate quickly into the gains of the Reformation so that shortly the evils of the Catholic Church crept into Protestantism. There were differences of course but church

and state was the pattern and religious rule was a tremendous power in political fields, in schools, and in all the avenues that controlled the men, as well as the pocketbooks of the people. The same evil conditions gradually prevailed in Protestantism as is attested by the emigration of our forefathers to this country to seek relief from religious oppression.

After 1799 things began to change. Not only was the power of the Papacy broken, but the French Revolution broke the spell of the Church over the minds of men. Men began to think freely and to breathe freedom. Not that this freedom brought all advantages, for freedom creates problems as well as blessings. But now the Church was faced with the new problems of controlling the minds of men and the politics of the world at a time when values were changing. The papal “do’s” and “don’t’s” were not effective anymore. Even more dramatic, was the fact that in Nov. of 1799, France began to moderate its views toward the Papacy. It immediately began to fraternize with the Papacy which led to the restoration of the Papacy as the state religion of France. This system which had suppressed the Bible was not being set aside, but was receiving recognition again. It seemed that the Bible was doomed and that the two witnesses would not rise again. In May, 1803, however the first Bible Society was formed, 3½ years following the breaking of the Papal power and from there the Bible Societies emerged and within a 60 year period they flooded the world with Bibles. Paralleling this came compulsory education making the man behind the plow a man who could read and who could own his own Bible. Strange coincidence! Ah, no, this was all to be done before the end came. The end then came. Jesus said, the end of the age is the harvest and Jesus would be present in the time of harvest. All this was preparatory to the harvest and essential to the new conquest of the mind that has characterized the day of the Lord.

Here we observe the stayed religious bodies still secure in their control over the minds of man and still very much at home in its evil environment. The Papacy still exercised power, even though she had been humbled, her power after 1799 was and is considerable, and above all she still had the people supporting her—this is the most important factor. The churches changed little from 1799 to 1878. The first efforts of more Bibles and more education and more freedom, you see, did not jeopardize the church’s position. Maybe, it is like automation, its first effects do not create joblessness, but job rates remain constant, but the day of reckoning comes. So, with the Bibles and education, the religious fervor remained constant, and the church remained secure.

The first work of the present Lord was to send out the message that Babylon is fallen from favor and is become the hold of every foul spirit and every unclean bird. (Rev. 18) Like the message of John the Baptist, it was a voice crying in the wilderness, but somehow that message seeped back into all quarters of the Christian world. It was an annoyance to the comfortable repose of the Church leaders, but they could afford to be patient for the message was not especially significant in turning away church membership or in affecting the influence of the churches in the world. The message of truth was a

nuisance they felt they would do better to live with than to openly suppress. This still is their attitude toward the truth. And anyway, if you wait long enough, the movements that preach the message of God's rejection soon come to have internal problems and splinter into ineffective voices, or they nominalize and become a likeness of the stayed churches. Hence, the churches bore up well, under the Lord's message of rejection. She was still rich and increased with goods, still sitting a queen and still boasting she would see no sorrow.

With the return of the Lord, political unrest swept Europe. Modern ideologies were emerging and being voiced. Europe was seething with socialism, bolshevism, anarchy and the cry of the restless masses for equality, social justice, and reform. The church, was troubled here, because they were squarely on the side of the kings and rulers of Europe with whom they were living deliciously. The church, at first had added importance to it, for they now could be a hedge against this restless uprising and they could serve the kings and rulers well in keeping the peoples pacified. They know from experience in the French revolution, that these restless forces, could be dangerous and they kept a constant vigil upon events. Whatever else, the churches had no sympathy with the rule of the common people. They feared the terror of the French Revolution and by all and every means sold out to strong Monarchy and subsequently to strong Fascist dictatorship.

World War I was a frightful story. The armistice of Nov. 11, 1918 did not bring peace as we sometimes think. It brought anarchy to Europe. This anarchy followed the overthrow of the three dynastic empires which had been the chief pillars of the old world, but in their day, despite their evils, managed to dam up and keep control, a centuries-old mass of group hatreds, fears and greeds. The collapse of the Imperial dams released upon Europe a fearsome flood of conflicting national ambitions, of inflamed minority particularism, of irreconcilable social aspirations and of rival political fanaticisms. Says John Gunther, in the *"Fall of the Dynasties"*: "By the time the Peace Conferences, faced with the giant task of liquidating the Old World's heritage, held its first meeting in Paris on Jan. 18, 1919, Europe east of the Rhine, and parts of Asia, were a seething welter of civil and local wars. In some areas this bloody chaos, multiplied by hunger and plague to a medieval pitch of horror, lasted for nearly four years after the Armistice bugle had sounded in the clearing at Rethondes [France]." (Page 358)

The Russian Revolution awakened the Church to its peril. Having lost its champions in the Kings, and having the Revolution at their backs, and Revolution seething everywhere among the masses, Europe might have turned into a bloody massacre that would have overshadowed the war. The churches saw the danger and so did the west, and a white counter-revolution got underway supplied by the west, which nearly succeeded in stemming the Red Revolution within Russia. However, once the Bolsheviks won in Russia, it presented a challenge to the repose of the churches, for the rest of Europe was

in turmoil. For instance, between January and May, 1919 events that transpired in parts of Germany are likened to those of the Paris Commune in 1871. A communist revolution had arisen and broken out in Berlin. Between March 3 and 14, 1,200 people had been killed in Berlin and 10,000 wounded in the revolution. This was called the “bloody week in Berlin.” Gradually, however, the red forces lost ground in Europe. The monarchies were gone and Republics were to become fashionable for a season.

This was a time when the Churches had to sit tight. They did not know who or what to back because things were boiling and seething. Reading over the records it is easy to see that the world was in desperate straits. Plainly, the Republics were not acceptable to the Church. The Spanish Republic was undermined by the Catholic Church, which succeeded in enlisting the Fascists and the resources of the reactionary forces to overthrow the government and install a ruthless dictatorship. Soon the German Weimar Republic was replaced by the insane Fascist powers. Although weak and insignificant to start with, with the help of the Church and the Devil, soon Europe began to look as medieval as when the Church ruled in the day of her glory.

You are thinking by this time, that I have lost sight of my subject. No—it is against this background that we must consider the nominal Heavens, their actions and reactions to world affairs. The Catholic Church never had any purpose with the Protestants nor with the Church of England. They were hated competitors. There was no reason for the Church of England and the Catholic Church to get together and there was no reason to hope for any Protestant fraternity with the Catholics. As long as the Mother Church had hopes, designs and ambitions to reign as the queen over Europe again as she did in the days or old she was most intolerant with the daughter churches.

Then World War II came and went, leaving its awful scars on the face of Europe. Gone were the Fascists, the darlings of the Catholic Church, and ominously present was the giant red bear, more powerful and menacing than ever. Not only so, but Russia had taken Poland, Hungary, and the Balkans, leaving the Church partly swallowed up by its avowed enemy. She justified her unholy alliance with Hitler on the grounds that this was necessary to help put down communism. This alliance with Hitler, while it was an outright betrayal of all the loyal Catholics in Poland, Hungary, and the Balkans, she excused as necessary to secure preservation of Christianity. Europe has turned democratic. There are no totalitarian governments left to speak of except Franco. Twenty years have passed since World War II and the Catholic Church has at last conceded that she cannot stem the tide alone. She has no champions for her cause with any power left in countries that she controls or has hope of controlling. While she is not without influence in Europe, democracies are harder to control, harder to predict, and not very efficient for a very efficient church. With 80 to 100 million Catholics already under the red banner, with the Communists spreading in Italy and popular in Europe, the

Catholic Church had to call the Ecumenical Council to set the stage for a new look and a redecoration job on the heavens or ecclesiasticism.

Not only has the world political events brought alarm and consternation to the churches, but the rise of intellectualism and science has superseded the Church in splendor. It offers the life that now is, while the Church can only talk of life to come and that unintelligently. Science brings material wealth while the Church is the beggar, the poor that we always have with us. When you are used to being first, it is hard to play second. While religion still has a strong hold on all humans, the Churches are aware they are becoming irrelevant in the world. They do not want to be purely religious—they want to rule and dominate the minds of men.

PROTESTANTISM: Since 1910, some 69 Protestant denominations have been involved in 22 mergers, and informal merger meetings are presently recurring. But the mergers are in themselves not a means of attaining goals of unity and strength. More important than mergers of Church groups, has been the World Federation of Churches, that seeks cooperation between different Church groups and is now succeeding to have a large and impressive membership. These are different from mergers in that the Churches need not agree religiously and they may still maintain their identity but they unite for common cause. The Evangelical Alliance started in 1846, but nothing much came of it. The World Council of Churches was first organized in 1948 at Amsterdam. It really was the fulfillment of what the Evangelical Alliance started out to be. The Archbishop of Canterbury was the presiding Bishop at this council. This was significant because the Church of England had never recognized the ordination of other religious groups. But their presence and support of this world organization meant that they were ready to recognize the ordination of other groups. In 1954 the World Council met at Evanston and then again in 1961 in India. Gradually membership has grown. When the Eastern Orthodox Church joined, it jumped into bigness. The reason for the Eastern Orthodox Church entering was the position of that Church. It was headquartered in Greece outside the Communist world, but the vast majority of its adherents were behind the Iron Curtain. It was a head without a body. It needed a source of strength and supply outside of its sphere of influence. Dr. Eugene Carson Blake is now the president of the World Council of Churches. He is a dynamic leader and man of action. He will bear watching. There have already been arguments for Church unity. But spiritual reasons never brought about unity. What brings the efforts toward unity in this: The Christian Church today lives in a hostile world. They are beset by powerful forces of materialism. Also, less than one third of the world's population is Christian. The Church leaders must venture from their temples and participates in the world. It must be the answer to the big social, political and cultural questions of the age, says Dr. Alexander Schmemmann, professor of Church history at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Church. Did not Mark say, "The stars of heaven shall fall?"

There are two kinds of stars. True luminaries such as the apostles who are pictured as twelve stars and also the seven messengers of the seven Churches are also called stars. Then there are false stars, the messengers and the false apostles. These shall fall from heaven, in the sense that they no longer concern themselves with spiritual values, but are interested in the social, political and cultural affairs of earth, and wish to monopolize this field by a large unified Church movement. They confess this ambition. It is more than an ambition, it is an obsession with them.

Protestantism has had many segments who previously had preoccupied themselves with the social gospel, with practical religion. But they have never been effective. For instance on the race issue, the churches are only bringing up the rear. The government, and other agencies, really led the war for race equality. The Church was a “Johnny come lately” appearing after the legal battle was virtually won. Not only so, but so ineffective is the Church influence, that it is known that the schools will be integrated long before the Churches. The modern church leaders have lost all interest in Biblical search for truth, they have lost all interest in the Bible, they have lost all interest in having Christians live Christianity, and it becomes increasingly apparent they have lost interest in God. It is the world that they want to influence and control and be important in. Their divisions have hampered their effectiveness. It is against this passionate desire that they are willing to stop quibbling over theological matters, and give themselves over wholly to the conquest of the Kingdoms of this World and their glory. Always of course with a good motive, after all the Church is a good institution with good intentions.

“The sun shall be darkened and the moon shall not give her light.” (Mark 13:24-26)

Since 1874, when the first light bulb was made till now, light has filled the world. Typical of the Lord’s lightnings that enlighten the earth. Knowledge is multiplied so rapidly in every field. In medicine great strides have been taken forward. In the sciences man has made his greatest progress. Every year now discoveries and new uses for discoveries are made. This is so true that the obsolescence rate is the only thing that hinders man’s progress. By the time he designs and builds his newest aircraft or spacecraft, it is already obsolete by reason of new advances in technology. This is true in nearly every field, and everywhere men are panting as they run to keep up with the changing times. But not the field of religion. They have recruited intellectuals into the religious field but no light shines from any school of divinity or school of theology. Not one significant truth have they turned up in either the Old or New Testament. Not one intelligent communication have they received from God. Not one insight into the mind of God have they given to the world. Not one page of the Old Testament, not one passage from the Old Testament—not one page from the New Testament, not one verse from the New Testament. They are painfully aware of the inadequacies of their old theology, but in truth no school of theology strives for Biblical truth, and unless truth is a goal there can be no progress. While archaeologists are digging up more old manuscripts and the Bible becomes more accurate and more established, yet it is all to no purpose to

the theologians, because few remain who are not full-fledged agnostics of God's Word, and this is leading to full-fledged agnostic clerics. Here is a dramatic sign of the Son of man in Heaven. The Gospel Sun and Mosaic Moon are dark, while the Church stars have fallen to the earth. A darkness that can be felt. The Son of man is here in the dark clouds of heaven which are ominous and threatening, upon the earth distress of nations with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring.

In Revelation we are told how the two-horned beast of England and Ireland that causes them that dwell on the earth to make an image of the Papal beast. Here again we see the Protestant beast is earth-centered. The church of England initiated the World Federation of Churches. We all saw this last March as Archbishop Ramsey met officially with the Pope and began to rebuild the bridge between Canterbury and the Vatican. The churches are at a time and place when they are ready to lay aside their personal animosities for the common cause. The Church of England and Ireland is said to give life to the image of the Beast, and perhaps we shall in the days to come see a further fulfillment of the vitalizing of the image. When this occurs we may look for the Protestant World to close down upon our liberties for a season. With the Pope and Canterbury making peace, and with the dynamic leadership of Eugene Carson Blake at the head of the World Council of Churches, we may witness more activity and life in the Image of the Beast. His first ambition is to unite his own Presbyterians with the Methodists, Episcopalians, and three other denominations in a vast Protestant superchurch. He claims little knowledge of theology and could not care less about theology. He is an "organization man" and we therefore may expect more Protestant organization with power.

In conclusion, John mentions another sign in heaven, great and marvelous "Seven angels having the seven last plagues; for in them is filled up the wrath of God. And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire; and them that had gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark and over the number of his name, stand on the sea of glass, having the harps of God. And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and marvelous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of the ages. Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for all nations shall come and worship before thee; for thy judgments are made manifest."—Rev. 15:1-4.

This is the Lord's answer to the imposing and dreadful religious coalitions, to the ecclesiastics who ally themselves in earthly power. Strong is the Lord who judges her. Those who shall be accounted worthy to get the victory over these institutions of darkness, these shall have the privilege of representing the temple class from whom come these seven last plagues that fill up the wrath of God against the evil nominal heavens. Yes, the last plague is poured upon the air, and there the evil powers of spiritual control came to their unhappy end. Amidst these fearful plagues the Lord adds these words, "Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he

walk naked, and they see his shame ” (Rev. 16:15) While the nominal heavens is casting off the whole idea of atonement preferring instead to be unclothed, this is an evidence of the Lord’s thief-like coming and presence. As at the first advent the test was the cross, so at his second presence it is also true. In this Scripture the Lord warns that his second advent would be secretive and accompanied with a massive denial of the ransom. “Blessed is he that watcheth.”

The alliance of the Churches for power is the most conclusive evidence of our Lord’s presence in the heavens. They are mustering their forces to meet the challenge of the King of kings who in righteousness judges and makes war against them. How anyone can believe the Lord returns after Babylon falls is a mystery to me. The Lord gathers the vine of the earth and casts then into the winepress which he in turn treads alone. It is he and no other that harvests the vine of the earth. It is he who casts the Papal beast and the false prophet alive into the lake of fire.

Being awake to events is the joy of being able to read the signs as they lead up to the magnificent triumphal entrance of our King and Lord.