

## **The Changing Face of Christian Responsibility Over Time**

By Walter Hampel\*

### **Introduction**

The site of Westminster Abbey in London, England has served as a place of Christian worship for over a thousand years. Originally founded in the 10<sup>th</sup> century as a Benedictine monastery on the Fleet River's Thorney Island, the Abbey has seen the coronation of every English monarch (except for Edward V and Edward VIII) since the year 1066. God has been praised in chanted Psalms from the Abbey's beginnings, up to the present time.

Consider how those Christians participating in worship a millennium ago have much in common with us. We each would look to Christ's atoning death on the cross for our redemption. We each would find the very definition of our Christianity in our common belief in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.<sup>1</sup> We each would praise God and pray to Him for our needs. We each would hear the words of Scripture and be moved by the same Holy Spirit to confess 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism.'<sup>2</sup>

While we have very much in common with the Christians, who over the centuries have worshipped in Westminster Abbey, there are significant differences. Some of these differences are denominational or theological in nature. Yet, there are differences which exist independent of whether the worshipper in the Abbey was a 13<sup>th</sup> century Catholic, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Anglican or a 21<sup>st</sup> century Evangelical.

There would be differences of language, of literacy and countless other factors. These differences are dependent on things such as the economy, history and nuances of culture. What is difficult in one time and circumstance may be very easy in another. For example, an 11<sup>th</sup> century Christian worshipping at the Abbey would have had to spend a fortune in his era to obtain a copy of the Bible in his own language. His 21<sup>st</sup> century counterpart would have to spend no more than an hour's worth of his wages to obtain the same goal.

The responsibilities and privileges of a Christian can and do change with the passage of time. Our responsibilities and privileges as Christians have a constant factor across the years of church history by our belief in the core

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\* Walter Hampel (MA, Ashland Theological Seminary) is an instructor in Christian Studies at William Tyndale College in Farmington Hills, Michigan.

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essentials of the faith, our freedom in Christ and being obedient to God's unchanging commands. Yet, much of our responsibility and privilege is found in a Christianity which has remained true to its unchanging core and has developed flexible practices that operate within our cultural environment and change with the passage of time.

The dynamic nature of our privilege and responsibility over time can be seen in the pages of Scripture itself. The Bible clearly shows that God engaged in relationship with numerous persons over the years, starting with Adam and Eve, and then others such as Abel, Enoch and Noah. Centuries after Noah, God engaged in a personal covenant with Abram, a migrant from the land of Mesopotamia. Over four centuries after Abraham, God revealed Himself to Moses and disclosed to him an aspect of his nature previously unknown and unrevealed, namely his being the ever present 'I AM.'<sup>3</sup>

The progressive nature of biblical revelation can be seen in the promise of a Messiah. In Genesis 3:15, the verse often referred to as the Protoevangelium, God offers the promise of an offspring, born of a woman, who would crush the serpent's head. No other details are given. Yet, as Old Testament history progressed, more detail is revealed and discerned. It was understood that the Messiah would be a descendant of King David, born in the town of Bethlehem.<sup>4</sup> In the time after the return from the Babylonian Exile, the prophet Zechariah was shown that the high priest Joshua, who bore the same name that the Messiah would bear centuries later, was 'symbolic of things to come.'<sup>5</sup>

The ministry, passion, death and resurrection of the Lord showed how Jesus taught a superior position on the Old Testament Law. The Law, under Him, was to be fulfilled completely and not simply abolished.<sup>6</sup> According to Paul, the incarnation of Christ happened at just the right time in history.<sup>7</sup> The promise of the Messiah is testimony to the fact that even the contents of the Bible, especially those texts pertaining to Messiah, became more detailed as time went by.

### Limited Comparison

This exploration of the constantly changing scope of Christian responsibility looks at the church on Earth throughout history. In some senses, the church's growth is comparable to the growth and development of an individual human being. Normally, a person will progress through distinct stages of development. One's base of knowledge should, ideally, increase over time. In

the post-apostolic times in which we live, this does not mean the existence of an open-ended canon of Scripture. That canon was closed as the apostolic era was ending. It does mean that the capacity for wisdom, namely the proper application of knowledge, should also increase over time. While the Bible will not increase in size over time, one should expect the development of Christian theology and spirituality to naturally increase as a function of time.

However, as with most analogies, the 'church/human body' analogy breaks down in certain areas. The Lord Jesus promised that his church on Earth would never go extinct.<sup>8</sup> Yet, individually, death has been one constant linking every human together in a common fate.

### **Framework**

The exploration of how Christian responsibility changes over time can be viewed through a specific framework characterized by fixed principles and dynamic practices. For our purposes here, a principle will be defined as an unchanging element of the Christian faith. A practice is a way in which the principle is expressed. It must be applicable to the time and circumstance in which it is expressed. A practice thus will and must be subject to change over time.

### **The Biblical Case for Principle and Practice**

The Bible makes a strong case for recognizing certain unchanging principles and for practices that derive from those principles. Such principles must be readily adaptable to changing times, cultures and circumstances. One example is that of Sabbath-keeping in Israel during the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. Keeping the Sabbath was a God-given principle. The Pharisees of the early 1<sup>st</sup> century developed distorted practices based on a misunderstanding of the principles of the Sabbath. They established detailed regulations for keeping the Sabbath despite the fact that the Misnah stated that

rules for the sabbath are like mountains hanging by the air, for Scripture is scanty and the rules many.<sup>9</sup>

One example of a Sabbath rule which developed over time was that of the Sabbath's day walk. Everett Ferguson writes that

Exodus 16:29 was understood as prohibiting travel on the Sabbath. The effort to define what was a person's "own place"

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and what constituted "going out" led to the limitation of two thousand cubits on a Sabbath's day's journey.<sup>10</sup>

These rules began to take on a life of their own. Observing the non-biblically delivered rules for Sabbath-keeping came to be considered as important as the Sabbath itself. Practice had become as important as principle.

The Lord Jesus delighted in keeping the Sabbath as a principle as well as going out of his way to break the man-made rules that crept up around it. In distinction to the legalistic Sabbath practices of the Pharisees, the Lord Jesus reminds us: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."<sup>11</sup> Ironically from the perspective of the Pharisees, the Lord did something novel by getting back to the original intent of the Sabbath. Ben Witherington remarks that the function of the Sabbath is to restore and renew creation to its full capacity...<sup>12</sup>

The Gospels tell us that attending synagogue service was Jesus' custom on Sabbath.<sup>13</sup> On numerous occasions, Jesus healed on the Sabbath.<sup>14</sup> Contrary to the Pharisaic view of healing as a work best left for any day other than the Sabbath, the Lord points out that these same Pharisees would not think twice about coming to the aid of a helpless animal on the Sabbath.<sup>15</sup> The healing and restoration which Christ brought was something to be particularly done on the Sabbath<sup>16</sup>, a day not only commemorating God's rest after creation but a true rest which embodies restoration with God.<sup>17</sup>

### **Biblical Examples of Principle and Practice**

A prime example of principle and practice is found in the biblical treatment of God's edict: 'Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.'<sup>18</sup> The original context is the presentation by Moses of a number of various laws to the people of Israel just prior to their entry into the Promised Land. The command seems to stand alone in its context. The prior commands deal with the laws regulating how severely a criminally guilty individual may be beaten. The command immediately following addresses the requirements for levirate marriage.

Not muzzling an ox during threshing was a binding law to be followed in Israel. Yet, centuries after this law was given, the apostle Paul understands this practice as having a much deeper principle underlying it. He discusses this in 1 Corinthians 9 as he explores the material benefits to which a preacher of the Gospel is entitled. Paul wonders about the compensation that he is allowed for

his work in the ministry. In the midst of this discussion, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 25:4 and adds

Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest.<sup>19</sup>

While this specific law, in practice, is intended to protect oxen, its principle is not limited to threshing oxen but includes humans in their work as well. Here we have a clear case of one text of Scripture commenting on another to demonstrate the validity of both a practice and its underlying principle as well.

A second biblical example is found in the account of the Lord Jesus washing the feet of His disciples at the Last Supper.<sup>20</sup> Right up to the present day, many Christian denominations and sects practice a foot washing ceremony during the Maundy Thursday service. There are some who hold the foot washing ceremony as an ordinance of the church and regard this in sacramental terms.

The purpose of this article is not to undermine the theology of those who practice a foot washing ceremony and may even hold it as a sacrament of the church. The purpose here is to demonstrate that there is an underlying principle which the Lord presents to each generation of believers. The Lord Jesus indicated that what He was doing was to provide an example to His disciples. The Greek word rendered as 'example', 'υποδειγμα' bears the meaning of something to be imitated.

To follow Jesus' practice of foot washing in a modern context, apart from its commemorative or sacramental dimensions, would be considered by the recipient of the foot washing as an odd and possibly offensive practice. For a 1<sup>st</sup> century, sandal-wearing traveler in a dry and dusty Palestine, foot washing was regarded as a courtesy. Over the centuries, changes in climate, customs and clothing have rendered the need for foot washing obsolete in Western culture.

The Lord Jesus intended to do more with His actions that night than only preserve them as an enduring ordinance for the church. He provided an example and model of humble servant leadership. Concerning this and every other biblical model and example, David Wells reminds us that

It is the task of theology, then, to discover what God has said in and through Scripture and to clothe that in a conceptuality which is native to our own age. Scripture, at its *terminus a quo*, needs to be de-contextualized in order to grasp its transcultural content, and it needs to be re-contextualized in

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order that its content may be meshed with the cognitive assumptions and social patterns of our own time.<sup>21</sup>

The Christian of this and every era must understand what it means to show humility and a servant's heart and mind in the role of leadership. To do this, one must learn to de-contextualize the principles of Scripture and re-contextualize them in one's own time, culture and circumstances.

Christians must keep unchanging principles and changeable practices in balance. Sometimes, it's easy and straightforward. Yet, in more instances than we might expect, it can be a difficult task. For example, all Christians would see the statement:

He (Christ) was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification<sup>22</sup>

as a fixed principle. The truth of this statement remains true through all of time. The changing practice is manifested in how Christians have applied this unalterable truth to differing cultures and times. Some have proclaimed it in the setting of a church service. Others, like John Wesley, broke with custom and preached Christ in open fields and in the front of mine shafts as miners were waiting to start their workday. Wesley saw this as the most effective way to bring Christ's good news to his fellow Englishmen and Englishwomen.

Sometimes, it is difficult to know when a principle is being changed or a practice is being kept fixed. One's culture and pre-suppositions can blur the lines of distinction between principle and practice. C.S. Lewis ably pointed out:

Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes.<sup>23</sup>

One historical example of a practice being kept unchanged was the recitation of the prayers in Latin through much of the Middle Ages. The everyday language of the peoples in Europe started to shift away from Latin as the First Millennium progressed. The development of monasticism spurred an increase in the use and knowledge of Latin among the clergy, which in turn, acted as a further wedge between them and the laity. This was especially true when it came to prayer. Adriaan Bredero points out:

The laity's ignorance of doctrine and religious experience was mainly in regard to the prayers offered by the clergy. The clergy prayed in Latin and their prayers remained untranslated. Even "Ave Maria" did not become "Hail Mary." Active lay participation in the liturgy was out of the question. The laity went to church mainly as spectators.<sup>24</sup>

A distinct shift happened during the time of Charlemagne. This shift had to do with how prayer was perceived. The biblical examples of prayer portray the act of praying as conversation with God. It is a means of deepening relationship with Him. By the time of his reign in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century, Charlemagne thought that the split between clergy and laity was

desirable because of the distinct task of a literate clergy, who needed to strive for the purest possible use of Latin to avoid answers to prayers that were the opposite of what they intended to ask of God. The fulfillment of one's desires, it was thought, depended on enunciating the correct formulas.<sup>25</sup>

The unchanging principle of prayer remained. However, the practice of prayer involved the forced use of Latin, long after it ceased being the everyday language of the people. Worse yet, the practice introduced a deep and artificial split between the clergy and the laity. The laity ceased from active liturgical prayer and became mere onlookers. The clergy were charged with being those who prayed. Yet, those prayers were formulaic. They bore a closer resemblance to magic than a biblically defined conversation with God.

Perhaps worse than treating a practice as a principle is when a practice is kept fixed but its corresponding principle is changed or compromised. Over the last two centuries, there have been a number of churches which have zealously preserved the practice of the format of their worship service, whether that liturgical format is high-church, low-church or something in between. Yet, in many of those churches, foundational beliefs which, from the start, have defined what it means to be a Christian, have been implicitly or explicitly denied. The virginal conception and birth of Christ and His physical resurrection are only two examples of core-beliefs of Christianity which have come under attack.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth wrestled with this balance of principle and practice. He respected the work of the theologians who had preceded him throughout church history. Yet, he did not treat their theology as unchangeable but subject to adjustment and refinement over time. Their theologies were an application of biblical principles. Even the then time-honored, 16<sup>th</sup> century Heidelberg Catechism was subject to revision since

This catechism also was an attempt at Christian doctrine. We live no longer in the sixteenth but in the twentieth century...If we concern ourselves today with Christian doctrine, there is no point in staring spellbound at the sixteenth century and holding on to what was said then and there as unmoveably and unchangeably as possible.<sup>26</sup>

### The Development of Doctrine

The shape and state of Christian doctrine is dependent on developments occurring with the passage of time. In his Bampton Lectures delivered at Oxford in 1864, Thomas Bernard observed

The developments of doctrine thus originated were the joint product of the revealed truth [of the Bible] and the condition of the mind which received it. The revealed truth was one, but the conditions of the human mind are infinitely various, and hence an endless variety in the developments themselves.<sup>27</sup>

Bernard emphasized a time dependency within the writings of the New Testament itself. He said:

The doctrine of the Gospels not only looks as if it were to be followed by another stage of teaching, but declares that such is the fact. I come to my second proposition, the personal teaching of the Lord is *a visibly progressive system, which, on reaching its highest point, declares its own incompleteness, and refers us to another stage of instruction.* (Emphasis in the original)<sup>28</sup>

Those teachings, given by the Lord Jesus were indeed the teachings of God given by God the Son Himself.<sup>29</sup> Yet, those teachings were a foundational beginning which were more fully developed by the church in its first generation. The account in the Book of Acts as well as the writings of Paul, Peter, James, etc. reflect not a change but a further development of the words of Christ. Just as the Law and the Prophets were the foundation for Christ and His teachings, Christ's proclamation of the Gospel message is foundational to the later-written epistles and Acts, in which the principles of the Gospel were applied in practice to the everyday world of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman Empire.

Thomas Bernard concentrated on the study of the development of the church's understanding of the Gospel within the framework of the New Testament. James Orr, a generation later, centered his attention on the developments of doctrine and dogma throughout church history. In his 1897 lectures on *The Progress of Dogma*, Orr made the case that theology, the queen of the sciences, like any other science will exhibit a natural, cumulative progress over time. Orr pointed out that while theology and natural science are ongoing efforts, certain findings have been made which will not be overturned with further discoveries. He said that



while its advance has not been without much conflict, much error, much implication with human sin and infirmity, and is yet far from complete, that advance has in the main been onward, and has yielded results which further progress will not subvert, any more than the future developments of science will subvert, say, such discoveries as the circulation of the blood, or the law of gravitation.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, when Orr speaks about the 'new theology' of his time, he demonstrates that such an approach is as invalid and counter-productive as medical science continually re-inventing itself and abandoning the solid findings and knowledge found in past generations.

James Orr believed that theological work did indeed proceed on the foundation of Scripture but certain emphases in theology would naturally develop and accumulate over time. The field of apologetics is cited as the first major branch of Christian theology to develop in the church era. It was natural for Christians to think through the unique claims of the faith as well as developing arguments which demonstrated the reasonableness of Christianity to a skeptical Roman Empire. Orr cites what he sees as the logical progression of the theological effort, namely, apologetics, the doctrines of God, the doctrines of Man, Christology, Soteriology and Eschatology.<sup>31</sup>

In light of Bernard's and Orr's reflections and observations about the cumulative nature of theological work over time, modern attempts to 'get back to the New Testament church' must be analyzed carefully and acted upon with caution. Much of the contemporary desire to get back to the 1<sup>st</sup> century church stems from the desire to rid the ship of the church of its barnacles and encrustations picked up on its more than 2,000 year voyage through history. Such an effort must be applauded. However, just as Orr had to confront the 'new theology' of his time which tried to cut itself off from the historical development of Christian theology, we too face a time and circumstance in which many think of the sound doctrines of biblical theology as being 'barnacle-like' in and of themselves and therefore must be removed. This approach is a dangerous one. To appeal once more to the comparison of the church's growth with that of human growth, it is expected that a human being will mature with time. When growth does not happen, it is regarded as a dangerous 'failure to thrive' condition. In terms of the church, the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot be the church of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. It is not supposed to be. The attempt to do so would be to ignore 2,000 years of history and development. It would signal the church's 'failure to thrive.'

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Christianity of any given era will have available to it the Scriptures as well as a collection of devotional and theological works which have grown over time and the amount of which are unique to their time. A 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian should not act as if she has no more theological reflection and wisdom available to her than a Christian of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Consider how Luther in the 16<sup>th</sup> century would have access to the works of Anselm and Aquinas but not those of the English Puritans, Jonathan Edwards, Thomas Bernard or James Orr. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have access to all of them. In addition, 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians have far greater abilities to access these works and those of current writers than our predecessors had in accessing the works that were ancient and contemporary to them. Obviously, 21<sup>st</sup> century Christianity does not have access to theological and devotional writings of the 22<sup>nd</sup> century as they have not yet been written. The works being written in this century will become a part of the theological treasure of the church of the 22<sup>nd</sup> century and beyond. The surviving works of individuals such as Perpetua, Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, Edwards, Tozer and a host of others, both ancient and modern, both east and west, northern hemisphere and southern, are a truly a treasure to the church. They must not be regarded as a quaint but disposable part of church's treasure of collected wisdom found in writing.

### Theology in the present moment

A theologian must always be mindful of the times in which he lives. Good theology will balance the principles of a never-changing Scripture with an ever-changing culture. David Wells makes this point clearly:

I have also insisted that part of the theological task must always be to ask what it means to have this Word in this world at this time.<sup>32</sup>

To do good theology, one must be committed to knowing the Bible and also to knowing one's time and culture. Much of the treasure of devotional and theological writings over the last two millennia owes its existence to a writer recognizing a changed condition in society that needed addressing in the light of Scripture. Such works reflect a reaction to cultural thought. One example is *On the Incarnation*, penned by Athanasius in the 4th century. As questions about the nature of Christ were raised by the church at that time, Athanasius sought to address the errors of the prevailing Arian view of Christ and correct them by pointing out Jesus' two natures, both fully human and fully divine.

Changes in culture are the result of developments in the many fields of human knowledge and endeavor over the ages. Changes in any area of culture may force the church to think through issues which would never have required reflection and addressing during a prior period in history. While it is not always obvious at the time, the theological exploration of an issue may end up being done well or done poorly. An exploration which is faithful to the unchanging principles of the Bible leaves a useful legacy to future Christians. One that is done poorly can, conversely, leave a questionable legacy that can hinder the spiritual and theological growth of future generations of Christians.

An example from two centuries distant shows how difficult the theological task can be. In the 19th century, the field of medicine was making tremendous strides. Along with these came the development of safer and more reliable forms of anesthesia. To an early 21st century mind, such a development is seen as a tremendous blessing for those undergoing various forms of surgery or medical procedures. Yet, in the early 1800s, there were those who thought that anesthesia should not be used on a woman in the process of giving birth. The concerns were not medical but theological. The question arose in light of the Genesis 3:16 passage in which God told Eve: 'I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, in pain you will bring forth children.'

Imagine being a theologian of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century who is wrestling with the possibility that a new development in medicine could be used to subvert God's will. You could even look to the experience and wisdom of the past and find a precedent for this concern. In 1591, Dame Euphanie Macalyane of Scotland had secretly requested a form of anesthesia from her mid-wife to alleviate the pains of the process of childbirth. When King James VI of Scotland learned about this, Fülöp-Miller writes that:

he took the strictest measures: a pyre was erected on the Castle Hill, and there the lady was burned alive as a warning to all women who might endeavor to evade the curse of Eve.<sup>33</sup>

Ironically, the Scottish doctor who developed anesthesia for childbirth, James Young Simpson, had to 'wear a second hat' to provide the theological basis for a defense of his discovery. This action was not without precedent. Over 200 years earlier, Galileo Galilei, in his 1615 work *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina of Tuscany*, took up the task of doing theology to defend his astronomical observations and findings against the Aristotelian, geocentric-based theology of the time. Simpson pointed out that the same word used for the pains of labor in Genesis 3:16 is also used for Adam's toil in tilling the ground found in Genesis 3:17. Unfortunately, the issue at that time was regarded as resolved

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by the example of national leadership and not through theological reflection. The issue was 'settled' when Queen Victoria opted to use anesthesia for her birthing experience. Simpson then became a national hero after being earlier vilified by the clergy of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Scotland. For Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we see this as a settled issue. We understand God's words to Eve as descriptive (i.e. the birth process is a physically painful process) rather than prescriptive (i.e. when one gives birth, it must be kept a painful experience). Coming to this understanding took time and the conclusion was not an easy one to reach.

A dual caution must be kept in mind when working through theological reflections and explorations in a new area. The first is to be cautious in naming something as sinful. In the case of the development of anesthesia for childbirth in 19<sup>th</sup> century Scotland, the clergy of Edinburgh were quick to decry it as a terrible evil. Yet, as James Simpson himself pointed out, the theology upon which they based their conclusion was faulty. There was a view which other Christian thinkers were able to correct over time.

The other caution is the need to be faithful to Scripture where it speaks clearly on sin. The cumulative nature of Christian theology does not give one the right to defend as good, those things which the church in all generations has considered sinful. Just as there are those who treat any level of doctrinal development as "barnacles" to be removed from the church, there are those who believe that most if not all past definitions of sin are inherently wrong. However, Christians must not think it valid to attempt to define sin out of existence. The cautions must be heeded to avoid the extremes in regard to sin. Scripture summarizes these arguments best: "Everything that does not come from faith is sin."<sup>34</sup>

We too have issues of our time which require serious thought and theological reflection. As terrorism has become a national concern for many Western nations at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Just War theologies, some dating back to the time of Augustine in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, are being re-appraised by many theologians. The development of technology which may possibly lead to human cloning presents us with the very real need to more deeply examine our biblical and theological understandings of what it means to be a human, made in the image of God.

The changed times have also given us changed responsibilities to face those issues resulting from the passage of time. For example, one of the primary audiences of the New Testament writings was slaves who had little economic or

political power in the Roman Empire of the 1st century. The average adult in early 21st century Western culture is a political and economic powerhouse compared to our 1st century Christian counterparts in the Roman Empire. Those changed conditions force us to think in different categories. How do the Bible's injunctions to rulers, which virtually never applied to our 1st century counterparts, apply to us now as those who participate in the political and governing process of our nations by voting and are able to be elected to positions of government leadership? What are our responsibilities to our fellow humans around the world, whose economic plight we can see, in real time, over satellite-based news reports? What is our responsibility to know and proclaim our faith in Christ, when for the first time in history, through either print or electronic means, without leaving our house, we can read and access multiple translations of the Bible as well as a vast collection of theological and devotional writings that we literally could not finish reading within our own lifetime? How will this affect, and how should this affect, our prayer life? Our devotional practices? Our 'redeeming the time' of our present moment?

The answers to these, and other questions raised by the conditions of culture in the present moment, are in the process of being thought through and reflected upon. It is not in the scope of this article to answer these questions. Posing them becomes necessary in light of world circumstances in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. To be a good theologian, one must not neglect the unchanging Scriptures. However, to customize the application of the Bible to our own time and circumstances, we also cannot neglect an awareness and understanding of ever-changing current events. It requires prayer for the wisdom to use the resources of our time to fulfill the responsibilities of our time in a manner that glorifies God. If, in God's timing of history, He permits the centuries to roll on, the Christian faithful of the 21st, 22nd, 23rd centuries and beyond will rely, in large part, on the wisdom and writings of those in this present time.

This understanding of the progressive nature of Christian theology provides us a real sense of the communion of saints. We have been given a legacy in the work and teachings of Christ and the apostles. They have laid the foundation on which all things done in the name of Christ must be built.

We have a real connection to the saints whose work is built upon the foundation of Christ. We are the recipients of their legacy. Contributions have been made by writers such as Athanasius and Aquinas who with their pens wrote so eloquently of their Savior. Others have been made by artists such as Michelangelo and Rembrandt who portrayed biblical images with beauty and insight as well as architects such as the cathedral builders of Europe who praised

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God in stone and desired to build embassies of Heaven here on Earth. Most profoundly, there have been mothers and fathers who have prayed with and for their children and modeled for them "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints."<sup>35</sup>

In this sense, to quote Sir Isaac Newton, we stand "on the shoulders of giants."<sup>36</sup> There are millions of these giants who have inhabited history. It must be understood that because of the cumulative nature of the Christian legacy, we too will have the opportunity to be giants to whom future generations of Christians will look for guidance and for wisdom. We will be building on the one and only foundation just as our spiritual ancestors did. They, like us, will have their works of legacy judged by God. With this in mind, we must add our layer of the building wisely, knowing that we leave a spiritual inheritance to our own generation and those yet-to-be-born in Christ.

### Talents

The time, culture and circumstances in which we live are like the talents mentioned in the Lord Jesus' parable of the talents.<sup>37</sup> Not everyone in the parables received the same amount. In the same way, not everyone in human history has been given the exact same opportunities. We have been called to be faithful with what we have been given. But, as in the parables, the amount with which we have been entrusted has not been exactly the same for each individual in human history. Plainly, such things as gender, race and ethnicity have, over the centuries, been determining factors for social status, political power and economic success. In the realm of technology, a Christian living in a post-Gutenberg society would have easier access to the Bible in its printed form than a pre-15<sup>th</sup> century Christian would have access to the Bible in its hand copied format. A Christian living in early 21<sup>st</sup> century would have access to the Bible in ways that would be the envy of those living only a generation earlier (i.e. affordable paper texts, electronic storage on computers, the Internet and on personal digital assistants (PDAs)). While these factors may be difficult to quantify, there is a sense that those Christians at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been given a greater number of talents than those in prior times.

However, there is another factor which must be considered. While the nature of the Christian legacy is cumulative, not every development has been positive. The effects of sin on a culture can act as a negative talent. Too often, sin within a culture has the effect of producing moral blind spots, not only among the general population but within the Christian community as well. In an

example from American history, we are reminded of those who in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries bore the name of Christ and yet enslaved those also made in His image. These effects can and do hinder one's walk with Christ. Clearly, a society which openly promotes Christian virtue and truth acts as a support for a believer while a society which openly scorns Christian virtue and truth is one in which a faithful life in Christ is that much more difficult.

### Conclusion

It is the role of the church through its leaders, teachers and theologians to recognize the continual and on-going need to preserve biblical principles unchanged and to customize how those unchanging principles are applied to those living them out. As cultural changes continue at a remarkable pace at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the church is faced with a daunting challenge. The very nature of careful reflection is that it takes time. A way of responding and addressing the changing aspects of culture must be developed so that the church does not fall into the trap of providing rapidly produced but shallowly developed theologies. Nor can we take so much time for reflection that the concern being addressed has, in the culture's perspective, come and gone. This will require a wisdom fine-tuned and unique to our times.

At the time when Israel's first king, Saul, died in battle, it was unclear to the people what they should do. Should there be a dynastic succession which placed a descendant of Saul on the throne? Should David, the hero and warrior par excellence become king? In the midst of those circumstances, God provided that there would be

men of Issachar, who understood the time and knew what Israel should do.<sup>38</sup>

In light of a culture in which events seem to be going in 'fast-forward', we must strive for the type of wisdom and insight which the men of Issachar possessed in the time of David and apply that same type of wisdom to our time as well.

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Lewis, "The Experience of Christian Faith: A Phenomenological Exploration", found in *The Bulletin of the Evangelical Philosophical Society, Volume 14:1, 1991*, p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 4:5 NIV.

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<sup>3</sup> Exodus 6:3 NIV.

<sup>4</sup> Micah 5:2.

<sup>5</sup> Zechariah 3:8 NIV.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5:17.

<sup>7</sup> Galatians 4:4.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 16:18.

<sup>9</sup> Quotation of Hagigah 1:8 (Misnah) in Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990, 441.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 441.

<sup>11</sup> Mark 2:27 NIV.

<sup>12</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Christology of Jesus*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990, 68.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 4:16.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 12:9-14; Luke 13:10-17; Luke 14:1-4; John 5:1-14.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 12:11-12.

<sup>16</sup> Luke 13:16.

<sup>17</sup> Hebrews 4:1-10.

<sup>18</sup> Deuteronomy 25:4 NIV.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:9-10 NIV.

<sup>20</sup> John 13:1-20.



<sup>21</sup> David Wells, *The Nature and Function of Theology* found at [http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/research.dll/showarticle?item\\_id=10](http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/research.dll/showarticle?item_id=10).

<sup>22</sup> Romans 4:25 NIV.

<sup>23</sup> C.S. Lewis, Introduction to Saint Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, translated & edited by a religious of CSMV, Crestwood: Saint Vladimir Seminary Press, 2002, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Adriaan H. Bredero, *Christendom and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, transl. Reinder Bruinsma, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, 16.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> Karl Barth, *The Heidelberg Catechism for Today*, Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Bernard, *The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament*, Minneapolis: Klock & Klock Publishers, 1978, 35.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 90-91.

<sup>29</sup> John 6:45.

<sup>30</sup> James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma*, Vancouver: Regent College, 2000, 9.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

<sup>32</sup> David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue – Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Rene Fülöp-Miller, *Triumph Over Pain*, trans. Eden & Cedar Paul, New York: Literary Guild of America, 1938, 335.

<sup>34</sup> Romans 14:23 NIV.

<sup>35</sup> Jude 3 NIV.

<sup>36</sup> Sir Isaac Newton, in a letter to Robert Hooke, dated February 5, 1675, found at [http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Isaac\\_Newton/](http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Isaac_Newton/).

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<sup>37</sup> Matthew 25:14-30.

<sup>38</sup> I Chronicles 12:32 NIV