

Between the Apostles and the Parousia: Bearing the Burdens of Change and of Knowledge

by John M. Frame

This is the time in which we are now living. It continues and is like the apostolic age in many ways: the already and the not-yet, the empowerment of the Spirit, the Great Commission mandate, looking forward to Jesus' return. It is also different in some ways: the charismatic gifts of prophecy and tongues (I believe) have ceased, being replaced in effect by the written canon of apostolic teaching. The apostles as leaders of the church have been replaced by elders and deacons, officers whose teaching does not have the foundational infallibility of the apostles, but which must be subject to that apostolic authority in the Word. There are also, of course, changes of cultural and social kinds, changes in technology and the like. Through all the changes, however, God is present with his people: in the Word, in the sacraments, in the body of believers, in the Spirit's inward witness.

Historical change is an important part of the ethical situation. As we apply the law of God, we must understand how it applies to each situation that comes before us. That work never ends. We may not assume that the Reformers or the Puritans, for example, finished the task, no matter how great our respect for these great ministers of the Word. The Puritans did not have to evaluate nuclear warfare, genetic engineering, modern science, or the "new age" from Scripture; but we cannot avoid those tasks in our own time.

I must warn you against taking certain popular shortcuts. (1) For example, it is not scriptural to approach ethics with a mere traditionalism, a desire merely to emulate the Christianity of a past age. Whether or not we believe that past ages were "better" than this one, our mandate is not to re-pristinize or recreate a past situation; it is to apply the Scriptures to the situation of today. I fear that some Reformed churches seek to be mere museum pieces: historical artifacts where people can go to hear old-fashioned talk and experience older forms of church life; spiritual versions of Colonial Williamsburg. On the contrary, Christian worship is to be *contemporary* (because it must be intelligible, 1 Cor. 14), and the church's preaching must adapt (insofar as Scripture permits) to the language and habits of the target population (1 Cor. 9).

(2) The task is also avoided illegitimately by people who pit divine sovereignty against human responsibility and therefore refuse to make use of modern technology, demographic studies, etc. All modern tools must be evaluated by the Scripture to determine whether or not we should use them, and how we should use them. But the fact that God is sovereign in salvation does not invalidate human study, strategy, plans, techniques, and efforts. Otherwise, there would be no point in seeking even to communicate effectively. We could walk into a crowd, say any dumb thing we pleased, and wait for God to act. We all know that is not right. We all see the importance of studying the languages and cultures of our target audiences. This same understanding motivates us to take preaching classes to learn to speak effectively. In doing so, we have no thought that such human preparation violates divine sovereignty. Why should we not extend this logic to demographic studies and modern communicative techniques?

If we avoid these shortcuts, we will have to face the fact that ethics and theology in our time, to say nothing of church life and evangelistic strategy, should be different today, in important ways, from all past ages of church history — including the New Testament period. We face situations (both difficulties and opportunities) that were not faced by Machen, Kuyper, Hodge, Edwards, Owen, Calvin, Augustine, or even Paul. The Word must be applied to these new situations. Of course, I grant that we are in the same warfare as the older saints, and that we must use the same spiritual weapons. But in its *specifics* that war is different now. Those who take the lazy way, the way of shortcuts, will be left behind. They may be instructive historical artifacts, but they will not be powerful instruments to bring people to Christ. God can, of course, use the feeblest instruments; but he typically honors the work of believers who count the costs and seize the opportunities.

Besides laziness, there is a certain selfishness about the shortcut mentality.¹ Shortcutters are those who feel comfortable with certain “tried and true” forms of life and witness that God has used in the past, and who seek to produce a theological rationale for keeping those forms even when times have changed. They talk as if they are fighting for biblical principle, though in fact they are merely arguing for a certain *application* of Scripture that was appropriate to a past situation.

¹ Laziness is a form of selfishness, but the wider category also needs to be addressed in this context.

The debate is confused, of course, by words like “conservative,” which are applied both to defenders of scriptural principle and to those who merely defend past ways of doing things without scriptural justification. But defending authentic biblical principle is one thing; defending the continuance of past applications into our own time is something very different. Both shortcutters and critics of shortcutters need to be more aware of this distinction.

But what masquerades as a battle for biblical principle is often at bottom a mere rationalization of selfish impulses, a desire to stay comfortable, to avoid having to change familiar patterns. Often, however, Scripture itself is on the side of change! 1 Corinthians 9 is an important text in this respect. Paul was willing to be a Jew among the Jews, a Gentile among the Gentiles, in order that some might be saved. He did not seek his own comfort, or even his own rights. Indeed, he allowed his body to be buffeted, lest while preaching to others he himself should be a castaway. He tried “to please everybody in every way,” explaining, “For I am not seeking my own good, but the good of many, that they might be saved” (1 Cor. 10:33). And note: immediately after this verse, he urged, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).

This means that in our evangelistic methodology, indeed in our worship (for that too has an evangelistic element; see 1 Cor. 14:24ff.), our goal must not be to please ourselves, but to bend and stretch. We must accept discomfort and the trauma of change in order to speak the Christian faith into the contemporary world.

Let me also discuss here a different problem connected with our historical distance from the New Testament. Specifically, our present historical situation is something of an epistemological burden. We are around 1,920 years removed from the later books of the New Testament canon. Now, in some ways this is an advantage. We have had much more time to study Scripture than did the early church fathers like Clement and Justin Martyr. And in some ways, I think, contemporary orthodox Reformed theology has a far deeper and more precise understanding of the gospel than did the church fathers.² I say this contrary to those evangelicals who

² One remarkable evidence of biblical inspiration is the incredible difference in spiritual understanding between the last books of the New Testament and the first writings of the post-canonical period. Clement, for example, is confused about all sorts of important things. Scripture,

are joining Eastern Orthodox churches in order to return to the supposedly more profound teachings of the early church Fathers. Although the Fathers did wonderful work in their day, standing heroically for the faith amid terrible oppressions, their writings were confused on many important points. And although it is valuable to read them today (often they look at things from angles that today are unusual and edifying), we would be wise in perusing their writings not to confuse vagueness with profundity.

So, in some ways our historical distance from the New Testament is an advantage. In other ways, however, it is a disadvantage. For example, if I were a Christian church elder in A.D. 62 and my church faced a controversy over infant baptism, I could simply fax, in effect, the nearest apostle (I realize that this was not always a perfectly simple process) and ask what the apostolic practice was. That would settle the question. In the early generations following the apostles, doubtless there were some reliable traditions dealing with questions not explicitly answered in the New Testament. In my view, for instance, the early church did not need to have an explicit New Testament command to baptize infants. They just did it, for that was the apostolic practice, and the church had always done it that way.³ But we do not have today such access to the apostles. And there are a lot of questions which the early church could easily have answered, which nevertheless perplex us today — hence all the debates about baptism. We cannot “fax the nearest apostle”; we must engage in a somewhat complicated process of theological reasoning. The same is true with regard to the nature of church government, the church’s attitude toward war, the new covenant application of the Sabbath commandment, the style of worship, the grounds of divorce, the demands of Christ upon civil government, the proper criteria for determining physical death, and many other things. Some things mentioned in the New Testament, and evidently well understood by the original readers, are quite obscure to us, such as baptism for the dead (1 Cor. 15:29) and the covering of women “because of the angels” (1 Cor. 11:10).

Today, however, we are many centuries removed from the time of the apostles. And controversy in the church, particularly during the time of the Reformation, has made it impossible to identify any single strain of

however, is so rich that it has taken 1,920 years for the church to learn many of its lessons.

³ I am not, of course, advocating a Roman Catholic view of tradition. Scripture is judge over all such traditions, and of course it is very difficult today to tell what truth, if any, there may be in extra-biblical traditions.

church tradition as unambiguously apostolic. Thus, although we understand the central aspects of biblical teaching better than the church fathers did, there are other aspects which we perhaps understand less well than they did.

It is also the case, as we mentioned before, that many issues of the modern day are not specifically discussed in Scripture. If we cannot fax the apostles to learn their view of baptism, much less can we determine directly what they would have said about nuclear weaponry, the government's role in welfare, or the medical use of life-support equipment. Here too, there are biblical principles which apply; but the arguments can be complicated, the apostles are not readily available for interviews.

In facing our epistemological disadvantages, the first thing to be said is that God understands. He is the Lord of history. His providence has planned and controlled it. It is no accident that we are in the present epistemological situation. That situation, uncomfortable as it may be at times, suits God's purposes perfectly, and we must be thankful for it. We should not murmur or complain, as Israel did in the wilderness. When someone calls and asks me a hard question, such as whether or not he should remove life-support systems from a dying relative, I usually begin by saying that these are, after all, hard questions, and that God understands how hard they are for us. We cannot fax the apostles, but God doesn't expect us to. He has left us with Scripture and the Spirit's illumination, and He has determined that that is enough. We may fumble around searching for answers. We may make decisions which we regret later because we fail at first to consider all the relevant principles and facts. But God understands that! He doesn't expect us to be perfect theologians. He is not waiting up in heaven with a club to hit us over the head when we make an exegetical mistake.

In such situations it is helpful to remember that we are justified by faith, not by works, and therefore not by ethical accuracy either. That comfort does not, of course, excuse us from hard thinking. If God has justified us, we will want to please him, and we will make intellectual and other efforts to do what he wants. But the sincerity of such efforts is not measured by the perfection of the results. We may try very hard to apply biblical principles but come up with an answer that later proves inadequate. Yet God will still honor the attempt. He knows the heart, and he takes into consideration the obstacles (including epistemological) that we must overcome.

Thus when after prayerful, honest searching of Scripture you determine to let your mother die, and afterward wish that you had kept her alive longer by life support, do not be overcome with guilt. God still loves you, for Jesus' sake, more than you could ever love yourself.

Beyond that, I think that our "epistemological disadvantages" should give us more understanding and forbearance for one another. If God still loves the believer who honestly makes a decision which proves wrong, we should also love and encourage that brother or sister. And Sabbatharians should have a greater love and understanding for non-Sabbatharians, and vice versa. The same goes for anabaptists and paedobaptists, premillennialists and amillennialists, pacifists and just-war theorists. We should not pretend that everything is cut and dried, even though perhaps these issues were cut and dried in the New Testament period itself. We should agonize a bit with those who are wrestling with these issues. I am a paedobaptist; but what if I had been raised in a baptist church? Would I have seen things the same way? Would the same arguments carry with me the weight they carry presently? I don't know. I believe I am right, and that Scripture teaches infant baptism. I will present that truth as God's truth. But I won't pretend that it is so plain that those on the other side must be insincere.

God in his good providence has given us advantages and disadvantages, challenges and opportunities, which are not precisely the same as those of any past generation. He calls us to meet those challenges and to seize the opportunities for Christ. The church of past ages can help us by keeping us from merely repeating the mistakes of history and by giving us a platform on which to build the next story of God's temple. But we must not shirk our responsibility. We must be modern (or post-modern!) Christians, focused on the world of our own time, and upon the Christ who is the same, yesterday, today and forever.