

The Shoulders of Giants

By Paul R. Blake

"We are like dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants. We see more, and things that are more distant, than they did, not because our sight is superior or because we are taller than they, but because they raise us up, and by their great stature add to ours." (John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon*, 1159)

John of Salisbury wrote this in his treatise on logic in recognition of the work done by those who went before him. If a businessman can travel to Japan and close a billion dollar deal, and on the flight there and back direct matters at his home and office by means of a smart phone, he is able to do so because of the work of those who went before him. It required the efforts of inventors, engineers, entrepreneurs, statesmen, and investors to create the international relations, the global trade environment, intercontinental flight, worldwide communications network, etc. that made it work. Each consecutive generation builds on the knowledge and work of all of the generations that went before them. If we do greater things than those who went before us, it is because they created an environment that made it possible for us to excel. As John of Salisbury said, "And by their great stature, add to ours."

Forgetting this leads to overweening pride. We believe we have done great things by our own strength and knowledge without a thought for those who made it possible. Our pride then becomes our shame.

However, too much focus on the efforts of those who went before us can lead us into unwillingness to go forward and build on their work. Too high a regard for the men of the past can result in a contemporary form of idolatry or ancestor worship. Afraid of insulting the memory of great men in the past, our efforts become limited to maintaining their works, and we refuse to grow beyond or build upon their work.

This principle applies in spiritual matters. Great Bible students in years gone by made great strides in the work of restoration, but they were limited by the constraints of time and their own developing knowledge. Most of them understood this and wanted successive generations to continue the work of restoration. While a number of disciples went too far and created new doctrines and denominations, others went to the extreme of crystalizing the work of their ancestors and refusing to build on it. This form of conservatism is not approved in scripture. God's word demands courage to take advantage of the opportunities presented us.

We honor the memories of Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone, but we remember that these men had doctrinal feet of clay. Campbell was a post-millennialist and a borderline ecumenicalist, and Stone's primitivism created prohibitions not found in the scriptures. Subsequent Bible students examined their work, held onto what was right and built up the brotherhood's understanding of more Bible doctrines. Each generation must examine what the previous generation taught and stand on their growing understanding of sound doctrine and study in order to increase that understanding. And if we know more and see farther than Campbell, Stone, et al, it is because we are standing on their shoulders.

Another way of putting this is that it is not necessary to re-invent the wheel. Car makers understand the principle of the wheel and the mechanism of the internal combustion engine, and therefore do not need to start with inventing them. They simply improve on them. Likewise with our understanding of first principles regarding salvation, personal morality, and the nature of the Lord's church, things well known and surely believed among faithful Christians. They do not need to start all over again from the perspective of an alien sinner or abject denominationalist. In more recent times, we can be thankful for the work of such men as Roy Cogdill, Clinton Hamilton, et al. My generation can take advantage of the opportunities made available because these men developed and published studies that answer digressions on the work, worship and organization of the church. And just as they stood on the shoulders of giants

who went before them in order to see as far as they did, likewise they would want us to stand on their shoulders as we grow in our own knowledge of truth.

And as with generations in the past, some Christians crystalize the work of respected men and are afraid to deepen their study and increase their understanding. When Roy Cogdill wrote his study "The New Testament Church," he performed an incalculable service for us. But neither he nor others who did similar work would want us to treat their efforts as equal to the word of God. They would want us to examine their work in the light of scripture and refine their arguments where possible in order to be more effective students and teachers of the word. Nevertheless, I often hear in response to a closer examination of a Bible matter: "Well, old brother _____ said _____, and that's good enough for me." It may be good enough for them, but that spirit is not good enough for the Lord (2Tim. 2:15). Conscientious Bible students do not merit criticism from lazy, partisan brethren who seem to be making idols of past giants. For example:

Brethren use command, example, and necessary inference to establish Bible authority, and rightly so. Yet this is less accurate than what subsequent students have learned through experience teaching in the field; that is, command, Divinely approved example, and Divine implication. Dealing with errorists made it necessary to refine arguments. Example needs to give way to Divinely approved example to distinguish between incidental actions and Divinely authorized actions. Necessary inference needs to give way to Divine implication, because God must first imply a thing before man can draw the expected inference, and because it makes ineffective all charges of subjectivity. But because ol' brother Soandso didn't write it, some refuse to consider it and grow.

I have seen this happen multiple times over the years on a number of different Bible matters, brethren using weak or dated arguments because their ancestors used them, rather than growing in understanding and making stronger arguments against sin and error. Would they insist on cutting their lawns with a scythe because that's how it was done in the past, or would they do it faster with a lawn mower? Would they take a horse and buggy to the grocery store because that's how they did it years ago, or would they use an automobile? More to the point, given the choice would they want to break the ice in the river to be baptized, or would they choose to use the baptistery in a heated building? At one time, brethren believed baptisms must occur in running water. Where would we baptize today if serious Bible students refused to study deeper than their predecessors?

Do not let Alexander Campbell, Barton W. Stone, Roy Cogdill, Clinton Hamilton, or any other person become the end of your study in any Bible matter. The scriptures are the final word on all spiritual things. The Lord wants you, like the Bereans (Acts 17:11), to examine the word on your own, even if it is the apostle Paul doing the preaching. Yes, we are blessed with the opportunity to see farther by standing on the shoulders of giants; but, we must not become lazy or partisan and refuse to look further.