

# Opportunities and Threats

John A. Jillions

This essay is based on a talk given at the online 2021 Parish Development Forum on “Awakening to Opportunity.” Parts of it appeared on the blog Public Orthodoxy as “Outside the Camp: Opportunities and Opposition,” in September 2021.

*The sense of danger must not disappear: The way is certainly both short and steep, However gradual it looks from here; Look if you like, but you will have to leap.*  
—W. H. Auden, “Leap Before You Look” (1940)

Much of the language one hears online from Orthodox Christians in reaction to our present age conveys danger, threat, fear, and enemies, and a need to be watchful, on guard, militant, and even aggressive in defense of the faith. In this view of the Church, our mission is to defend the truth of Orthodoxy (apologetics), to attract refugees from this decaying world, and to protect Orthodoxy from outsiders and internal enemies who would corrupt the Church. This dark perspective has often led to an erosion of goodwill; an unwillingness to engage with the world, its questions, its new developments; and a repudiation of fellow church members who might take a different view.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout church history, some have seen threats where others see new opportunities. But it is true that opportunities, even the most positive, can indeed be threatening, because they imply risk and change. For churches to make the most of opportunities sometimes requires a scary leap, says Charles Taylor, the eminent Canadian Catholic philosopher and author of the widely praised *A Secular Age*. “There can and must be leaps. Otherwise no significant forward steps will be made in the response to God. Sometimes, one has to break altogether with some historic forms.”<sup>2</sup>

Whether something is seen as an opportunity or a threat is a dilemma as old as the gospels. And paradoxically, it is the oldest layer of the Church’s life that gives us some of the most striking models of risk-taking and bold action in the face of opportunity. Jesus himself deliberately engaged people “outside the camp” (Hebrews 13:13) and encouraged the risky investment of talents (Matthew 25:14–30). While this approach was refreshing and invigorating for many, among traditionalists it mostly ignited fear and opposition. They saw Jesus and later the Apostles as threats to God-given traditions. Time and again throughout the gospels, we see Jesus standing his ground in the pursuit of his mission to open new opportunities and generously advance God’s Kingdom to those “outside the camp” through compassion, healing, simplifying, and widening access to grace. He does this often quietly and secretly, but at other times in open defiance of religious leaders and the expectations of his own family and disciples.

In this essay, I’ll consider how Jesus and the apostolic Church saw new opportunities for sharing the message of God’s Kingdom. Second, I will look briefly at one example from Christian history in the United States—the churches and slavery—that demonstrates how the interpretation of the biblical record can leave believers on opposite sides of social changes. Third, I will conclude with some insights from Mother Maria Skobtsova and Metropolitan Kallistos Ware on how we might think about new opportunities today.

<sup>1</sup> See John A. Jillions, “Preserve the Fullness of Thy Church: Fighting Fundamentalism, Defending Dialogue, and Reclaiming Catholicity,” *The Wheel* 28–29 (Winter–Spring 2022): 53–65.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 669.

It will be useful to keep in mind some definitions and questions. An *opportunity* can be defined as a “set of circumstances that makes it possible to do something.” What opportunities “outside the camp” can we see today? Who are today’s “Samaritans” and outsiders? A *threat* can be defined as “a person or thing likely to cause damage or danger.”<sup>3</sup> Danger to what or to whom? To control, authority, wealth, the status quo? Or to the truth, love, faith, God’s revelation, and inspired tradition?

### Opportunity and Threat: The Example of Jesus Christ

Being able to differentiate between opportunities and threats takes discernment, since the same person, object, event, or circumstances can be viewed by different people and from different angles as both an opportunity and a threat. Take, for example, Jesus’s interaction with the Pharisees in Matthew 12, after they saw his disciples plucking grains of wheat on the Sabbath and said, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath” (Matt. 12:2). Here we see Jesus taking advantage of an opportunity. He simplifies the requirements of faith and challenges the strict interpretation of the Sabbath rules. The Pharisees see this as a threat, but Jesus does not back away. Instead, he doubles down and cites a deeper tradition: “[If] you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless” (Matt. 12:7). His quotation would have been understood as a direct attack, since it comes from a famous prophecy against the twisted priorities of the religious leaders (Hosea 6:4–6). This isn’t subtle. Jesus goes even further: “For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath” (Matt. 12:8). No wonder the Pharisees saw Jesus as a threat and watched him closely. As the gospel account continues, Jesus goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath, encounters

a man with a withered hand, sees an opportunity for compassion, heals him, and defends his action as a demonstration of the deeper tradition of doing good on the Sabbath. “But the Pharisees went out and took counsel against him, how to destroy him” (Matt. 12:14).

A little later, Jesus heals a blind, demon-possessed man who can’t speak:

And all the people were amazed, and said, “Can this be the Son of David?” But when the Pharisees heard it they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.” (Matt. 12:23–24)

Once again there is a division between those who see grace and those who see demonic danger. Repeatedly, where Jesus sees opportunities, others see threats.<sup>4</sup> But here we also need to sound two notes of caution. First, not every opportunity is of God. We see this very clearly in Jesus’s temptation in the desert after his baptism, when Satan presents him with what we might call three big opportunities (Matt. 4:1–11):

1. The opportunity to use his status to satisfy himself (symbolized by turning rocks into bread)
2. The opportunity to be a spiritual hero (symbolized by throwing himself off the temple and trusting God to save him)
3. The opportunity to have fame and power (symbolized by the glory of earthly kingdoms)

Jesus rejects all three “opportunities” as demonic temptations motivated by self-interest, not self-emptying love for God and neighbor. This underlines the importance of discernment and spiritual watchfulness (*nepsis*, νηψις) in the Orthodox tradition.

<sup>3</sup> Both definitions are from the *Oxford Dictionary of English*.

<sup>4</sup> See John Jillions, “Outside the Camp: Opportunities and Opposition,” *Public Orthodoxy*, September 23, 2021, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2021/09/23/outside-the-camp-opportunities-and-opposition/>.

The second caution is about being exclusively oppositional. Yes, Jesus faces opposition and is willing to stand up when attacked. But he is also “the Prince of Peace,” knows when to withdraw, says “turn the other cheek,” calls peacemakers blessed, replies not a word when abused, and advocates only non-violent resistance.

### **Opportunity and Threat: The Apostolic Church and the Reception of the Gentiles**

The apostolic Church followed Jesus’s example and continued to open the message of Jesus and the kingdom of God to a wider and wider swath of people, who, in the thousands, welcomed this opportunity. But as with Jesus, the apostolic preaching was also met with fierce resistance from religious leaders as a dangerous threat to tradition. Saul, the later Saint Paul, was in the forefront of the violent backlash that put Saint Stephen to death as the first martyr. The apostles see opportunity, Saul and the religious leaders see threat.

We know the story of Paul’s conversion, preaching, and missions. He too experienced the same dynamic of opportunity and threat. Everywhere he went, he looked for opportunities, for open doors—and he also found opposition from Jews and Gentiles who felt threatened. But he persisted. Most strikingly, he did not view opposition as a sign from God to cease and desist. On the contrary, far from being dissuaded or discouraged, Paul took adversity as the paradoxical sign that he was on the path of the crucified Savior.

The most controversial decision of the early Church was to welcome Gentiles into the fellowship of the people of Israel. But the apostolic Church took this a huge step further. They set aside the ritual and legal demands of the written and oral divine law to make

the most of this new God-given opportunity. I want you to understand how radical and controversial this was from the perspective of faithful Jews. The longest single incident in the book of Acts, taking up almost the two full chapters of Acts 10 and 11, is the description of Peter’s encounter with the Gentile centurion Cornelius, eating with him, setting aside the kosher food laws, baptizing him, and then explaining this to the Christian leaders in Jerusalem. Opposition was immediate and fierce from what comes to be called the circumcision party, who saw this as a revolutionary and dangerous break with holy tradition. The controversy continues to divide the Church, and by Acts 15 it becomes the subject of sharp dissension and debate when some from the conservative party teach that “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). This question is then taken up at the apostolic council in Jerusalem, where the fault line between those who see opportunity and those who see threat is clearly drawn.

The council makes the radical decision not to follow the traditionalists, but instead welcome the Gentiles with minimal requirements. No circumcision. No law of Moses. Keep in mind that these had marked the identity of Jews for millennia, and here they are swept away. How could you call yourself part of the people of Israel without these signs and practices? Again, you need to appreciate how dramatic a change this was. No wonder the controversy persisted, most notably in Antioch, where even Peter was tempted to slip back under pressure from the circumcision party. Paul rebukes him publicly, insisting that life in Christ transcends the law (Gal. 2:11–14). We can sympathize with Peter. These were enormous changes, and he wasn’t yet totally comfortable with them. I don’t want to minimize how difficult it is to respond to new opportunities,

and how genuinely threatening, controversial, and divisive this can be. It is ultimately a question of discernment, and that might take years, decades, even centuries. So, it is no wonder that some of the most faithful Jews could not be persuaded.

This is precisely why a leading Jewish scholar and rabbi, Jacob Neusner, said it would be impossible for him to be a follower of Jesus. The message he hears from Jesus is *not* the Torah as he has received it. In his book *A Rabbi Talks With Jesus*, Neusner writes, “It was not that I was not persuaded of the virtue of the man, or the wisdom of some of what he said. It was that I did not hear from him the message the Torah had told me to anticipate.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, only a small percentage of Jews ultimately joined the Christian movement, and it became largely a Gentile phenomenon. The gospel Jews heard was, for most of them, not the Judaism they knew.

Jesus himself recognized that tradition is a powerful force, and much of its attraction comes from familiarity. “No one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, ‘The old is good’” (Luke 5:39). But more than that, faithful Jews had suffered for this tradition. And through this tradition they had come to know the presence among them of the God of Israel through their bitterest trials and sojournings. The ancient message of Judaism, centered on the Torah and its communal memory, was the faith devout Jews had pledged to maintain no matter what persecutions and exile they might endure. Indeed, as the early Church was in formation, the Maccabean martyrs were still a fresh memory, so how could a pious Jew contemplate turning his back on the Torah to follow the upstart Jesus, who had been rejected by the rabbis? For them, Jesus and his followers represented not an “opportunity” but a dangerous threat to everything Judaism cherished most.

## Opportunity and Threat: The Churches and Slavery in the United States

The New Testament world gives us a clear picture of how the same phenomenon can be viewed as either an opportunity or a threat. Now I would like to turn to an example from US history, to consider how different interpretations of Christian tradition can leave believers on opposite sides of enormous social questions. Although the speed of social change in the twenty-first century is without precedent (most obviously around the widespread acceptance of same-sex relationships), social change itself is a regular feature of Christian history. In the United States, we’ve been here before if we consider the history of slavery and race relations and the Christian response. Even after four hundred years, the effects of slavery are still acutely felt and debated in society at large and in churches.

A couple years ago, my wife and I visited Williamsburg, Virginia, and Charleston, South Carolina, and in both places the legacy of slavery is pungent. Williamsburg was the colonial capital of Virginia and some of the leading founding fathers of the American Republic were frequently in residence, including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Patrick Henry, all of whom were slave owners. At the start of the American Revolution, over half the population of Williamsburg was enslaved. Some fifty years earlier, in 1723, a group of anonymous slaves managed to send a letter filled with misspellings to the Anglican bishop of London, Edmund Gibson, pleading for relief:

Wee are commandded to keep holey the Sabbath day and wee doo hardly know when it comes for our task mastrs are has hard with us as the Egypttions was with the Chilldann

<sup>5</sup> Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus: An Intermillennial, Interfaith Exchange* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 138.

Slave auction in Charleston, South Carolina. Engraving from the *Illustrated London News*, November 1856. British Museum / CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.



of Issarall god be marcifll unto us. . . . Wee are kept out of the church and our matrimony is deened us and to be plain they doo Look no more up on us then if wee ware dogs which I hope when these Strange Lines comes to your Lord Ships hands will be Looket in to.<sup>6</sup>

There was no response. The colony was financially dependent on slave labor, first for tobacco and later for cotton, so Christian slaveowners and clergy accommodated their faith to the cruelties of slavery for several hundred years.

Charleston was the main slave port in the American colonies. Nearly 80% of African Americans can trace their ancestry to someone who arrived on a slave ship in Charleston harbor. Yet Charleston was called “the holy city” because of its more than three hundred churches of various denominations.

Slave auctions ended only with the Confederacy’s defeat in 1865. We visited the Old Slave Mart on Chalmers Street, where black men, women, and children were examined, prodded, and bought and sold, and families torn apart. Just a few doors down from this appalling site is the Bible Depository, built in 1828

for the South Carolina Bible Society, testifying to the Bible as the bedrock of Southern society. Slave masters paid preachers to teach good Christian order to their slaves and to defend the plantation economy against abolitionists. They constantly repeated favorite passages, such as Romans 13:1: “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.” *Ephesians* 6:5 was another favorite: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.”

A few steps further down Chalmers Street we came to Washington Square Park, established in 1881 as a monument to the Confederacy. A brass plaque on a garden wall records a prayer by Ellison Capers, a Confederate General and, after the Civil War, Secretary of State for South Carolina. He then abruptly left politics to serve as an Episcopal priest and later bishop. By the end of his life in 1908, he was regarded as “the most widely known and most universally beloved man in South Carolina,” according to one contemporary.<sup>7</sup> Here’s his prayer:

Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, we adore Thy love and providence

<sup>6</sup> “Letter from Virginia Slaves to Bishop Edmund Gibson,” August 4 / September 8, 1723, reproduced in *Encyclopedia Virginia*, <https://encyclopedia.virginia.org/entries/letter-from-virginia-slaves-to-bishop-edmund-gibson-august-4-september-8-1723/>.

in the history of our country, and especially would we thank you for our Confederate History. We thank Thee for its pure record of virtue, valor and for the inspiring reflection that despite its bitter disappointments and sorrows it proclaims for us to all the world that we came through its years of trials and struggles with our battered shields pure, our character as a patriotic and courageous people untarnished and nothing to regret in our defense of the rights and honor of the Southland.

The “rights and honor of the Southland” were bound together with a Christian interpretation that upheld slavery on the grounds of natural black inferiority, as ostensibly decreed by the Creator. On this very point, just before the start of the Civil War, Alexander H. Stephens, the vice president of the Confederacy, in an infamous speech that came to be known as the “Cornerstone Address,” said that the US Constitution was “fundamentally wrong” in assuming the equality of races. The Confederate Constitution had now corrected this, since the founding fathers “were attempting to make things equal which the Creator had made unequal.”

This was an error. It was a sandy foundation, and the government built upon it fell when the “storm came and the wind blew” [cf. Luke 8:23]. Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth. . . . It is upon this, as I have stated, our social fabric is firmly planted;

and I cannot permit myself to doubt the ultimate success of a full recognition of this principle throughout the civilized and enlightened world.<sup>8</sup>

All of this shows just how inextricably slaveholding culture and its aftermath could be thoroughly integrated with Christian piety.

Let me underline my two main reasons for bringing this history into the argument about opportunities and threats. First, tradition is a powerful force to resist threats, uphold the social status quo, and justify as right and good what later history will regard as abhorrent. Second, social changes once viewed as threats—like abolition of slavery and racial integration—may indeed be opportunities to advance Christ’s mission.

We should have no illusions about how long this process of social and ecclesiastical discernment can take. In the case of race relations in the United States, the conversation is still going on after four hundred years. Orthodox churches in this country have barely begun to open themselves up to African Americans. And some topics, such as sexual identity, remain too radioactive for open discussion in the Orthodox mainstream.

So, where do we begin to properly discern opportunities from threats? Here I suggest that Mother Maria Skobtsova and Metropolitan Kallistos Ware point the way.

### Discernment today: Mother Maria Skobtsova and Metropolitan Kallistos Ware

Mother Maria was put to death in the Ravensbrück concentration camp for the crime of protecting Jews in Nazi-occupied France and was glorified as a saint in 2004.<sup>9</sup> She was impatient with anything—including Orthodox

<sup>7</sup> Anonymous writer quoted in “Biographies: Edgefield County,” Genealogy Trails History Group website, [https://genealogytrails.com/scar/edgefield/bio\\_misc.htm](https://genealogytrails.com/scar/edgefield/bio_misc.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Speech by Alexander H. Stephens, March 21, 1861, reproduced on American Battlefield Trust website, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/primary-sources/cornerstone-speech>.

<sup>9</sup> See Sergei Hackel, *Pearl of Great Price: The Life of Mother Maria Skobtsova, 1891–1945* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1981); Michael Plekon, *Living Icons: Persons of Faith in the Eastern Church* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 59–80. For bibliography, see <http://incommunion.org/articles/resources/st-maria-skobtsova/mother-maria-skobtsova-bibliography>.

<sup>10</sup> Mother Maria Skobtsova, “Types of Religious Lives,” tr. Alvian Smiren-sky and Elisabeth Obolensky, *Sourozh* 76 (1999): 23.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>12</sup> Maria Skobtsova quoted in Hackel, *Pearl of Great Price*, 73.

<sup>13</sup> Kallistos Ware in Fr. George Westhaver, “An Interview with the Most Revd. Kallistos Ware, Archbishop of Great Britain for the Ecumenical Patriarchate,” *The Prayer Book Societies at Lambeth*, 2008, website, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080825044254/http://www.prayer-bookatlambeth.org/interviews/2008/7/28/an-interview-with-the-most-revd-kallistos-ware-archbishop-of.html>.

tradition—that stood in the way of a generous life in Christ, and insisted that her impatience was entirely justified in light of the world’s calamitous state. While other Orthodox spoke of “churching” the world, Mother Maria spoke instead of “Christifying” the world:

If I am faced with two paths and I am in doubt, then even if all human wisdom, experience and tradition point to one of these, but I feel Christ would have followed the other—then all my doubts should immediately disappear, and I should choose to follow Christ in spite of all the experience, tradition, and wisdom that are opposed to it.<sup>10</sup>

The condition of the world no longer permitted Christians the luxury of preoccupation with peripheral issues. “Perhaps in the past it was possible, but not today,” she wrote in 1937.<sup>11</sup>

We must not allow Christ to be overshadowed by any regulations, any customs, any traditions, any aesthetic considerations, or even piety. Ultimately Christ gave us two commandments: on love for God and love for people. There is no need to complicate them, and at times supplant them, by pedantic rules.<sup>12</sup>

When facing new issues, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware said that Christians need to pay serious attention to tradition and

theological consensus. But that’s not enough. There must also be room for seeing new possibilities, taking risks, being willing to stand up for controversial perspectives and initiatives.

Should there not also be the possibility for a prophetic action? Will you ever have change unless some people are willing to stand up and say, this is what we ought to be doing? And even if their testimony is highly controversial, who will nonetheless stand by their position. . . .

How can we do both these things together—preserve catholic consensus, and yet allow grace for freedom in the Holy Spirit? Christ did not tell us that nothing should ever be done for the first time. The whole witness of the early Church points in a different direction.<sup>13</sup>

Metropolitan Kallistos’s last point needs to be underlined: “Christ did not tell us that nothing should ever be done for the first time.” Doing anything for the first time involves a risk, a “leap.” And this means going beyond the boundaries of the comfortable religious world where we are at home right now. But that is precisely where our Lord Jesus Christ is to be found. “So let us also go forth to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come.” (Heb 13:13–14) ✽



The Very Rev. Dr. **John A. Jillions** is the former chancellor of the OCA and the founding principal of the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies in Cambridge, UK. He has taught at Saint Paul University (Ottawa), St. Vladimir’s Seminary, and Fordham University. He holds degrees from McGill University, St. Vladimir’s, and Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. He has served parishes in Australia, Greece, England, Canada, and the United States. He is vice-president of the Orthodox Theological Society in America and the author of *Divine Guidance: Lessons for Today from the World of Early Christianity* (2020).