*Wine & Wineskins*

No one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for that which fills it up pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither do they put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out, and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved. (Matthew 9:16-17)

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the wineskins, and the wine is ruined as well as the wineskins; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins. (Mark 2:22)

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the new wine will burst the wineskins, and it will be poured out and the wineskins will be ruined; But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one who has drunk the old desires the new, for he says, the old is better. (Luke 5:37-39)

We'd like to consider a few revealing passages in the New Testament regarding corporate worship. Many preachers address these verses in Matthew, Mark and Luke from the perspective that their group represents the "fresh wineskin" mentioned and that others represent the old wineskins.

Wine Signifying Experiences of Christ ...Wineskin the Container of that Experience

In Matthew 9:17, the Lord says, “**Neither do they put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out, and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved**.” That the Lord uses the metaphor of the wineskins here is meaningful. It differs from the earthen vessels in John chapter 2, which signify the believers, in whom Christ as the new wine, has come to abide. Wineskins are simply containers. The new wine is the sole reason for the wineskin's existence. Apart from the wine, the wineskins simply have no purpose.

As the wine ages, so do the wineskins. This is a natural process. But as wineskins age, they become firmer and less pliable. At the same time, the wine is also aging and losing its virility. New wine, therefore, must be put into fresh wineskins. According to the Greek, 'fresh' means 'new in nature, quality, or form; unaccustomed, unused; hence, fresh” (footnote 17:3 in Matthew 9). “…New wine put into old wineskins bursts the wineskins by the power of its fermenting. To put new wine into old wineskins is to put Christ as the exciting life into any kind of religion…” (W. Lee, 17:2). Hence, the Lord Jesus concludes that new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. Once a wineskin has become old, it is no longer fit for use as a container for new wine, lest the wineskin burst and the wine is poured out. And there is no way to renew a wineskin, once it has lost its freshness. They simply continue to age with time.

Looking at the history of the church, it is easy to see that the Lord has had many fresh wineskins (*it is interesting to note that the Lord uses the plural, not “a new wineskin”*) throughout the past two thousand years. However, all have eventually become old. This, I believe, is normal and to be expected. The interesting thing is that the characteristics of an old wineskin should be obvious – and they usually are. However, they only are obvious to those “outside” of the thing! Hebrews 13:12-13 touches upon this same thought. "Therefore, also Jesus, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Let us therefore go forth unto Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach." The life of a regenerated believer in Christ is always new (2 Corinthians 5:17; Romans 7:6; Galatians 6:15; Colossians 3:10; Hebrews 10:20), always in resurrection outside the camp of religion. Those outside the camp can see what those inside the camp cannot see. Oldness is not tolerated; whereas newness is always the rule.

So why is oldness perpetuated generation after generation and denomination after denomination? Those 'inside' their own religion are convinced that their wineskin is THE wineskin. This must be why, in Luke’s gospel, the Lord added, “And no one who has drunk the old desires the new, for he says, The old is better.” It is a shame when so much energy is expended in an effort to renew the old wineskin. How many hours of discussion, planning, and coordinating have been spent on improving the wineskin! I believe that once the focus turns from Christ as the new wine to the wineskin itself, all kinds of “extras” come in. By extras I mean human organization, manipulation, even control. Ultimately, the system must be maintained in these ways. The Lord’s response to this is quite simple; No one puts new wine into old wineskins. The life of the new wine demands a fresh wineskin; the old simply will not do. The incompatibility is too obvious.

Spiritual "Contradictions" Bring New Life

Luke 5:39 says that those who like the old wineskins say that the old wine is better. As usual, the Lord defies the natural human existence and logic. Any true wine connoisseur knows that old wine is better than new wine due to the vintage. However, in the spiritual life, new wine is better than old wine. This has great significance in the practice of today's church. Those who cling to their natural understanding can never realize, nor see, nor comprehend the "newness" in the divine and mystical realm of spiritual life.

Believers who trust their natural senses will not accept the new wine of Christ as better than the old vintage wine of previous experiences of Christ. This makes too much sense to the natural man. Believers love to speak and respeak their past experiences, leaving memorials and benchmarks of their faith. This is not necessarily a bad thing UNTIL the memorials take precedence over or exclude the new challenges, the new obstacles and the new faith produced to overcome. The problem with every Christian group, every denomination, every so-called church is the oldness in letter that crowds out the newness in spirit of Christ (Romans 7:6). And the natural life strongly supports the old things because the "old is better." Unless one has a deeper experience of the spiritual life which surfaces and overshadows the natural life, no believer will continue to pursue the difficult challenges that lie ahead in the walk of a believer. No, the old way is more stable, it is tested. The old way eventually becomes accepted by many, it is corporate, not isolated. The old way generates order and security in numbers, it is comfortable.

John mentions this principle of new wine being better than the old as well. In John 2:9-10, "And when the master of the feast tasted the water which had become wine and did not know where it came from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew, the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, Every man sets out the good wine first, and when they have drunk freely, then that which is worse; you have kept the good wine until now." The Lord's timing is to perpetually produce new wine. The Lord does not allow wine to age and become the "best wine" through the vintage process. No, He continues to create new wine and those who can taste it realize that it is better than the vintage stuff.

Saints in Christ, are you drinking the old wine contained in the old wineskin? Consider whether everything has some elements of comfort, convenience, stability, security based on the previous practices, teachings, and hierarchy in your group. Then, honestly confess to the Lord your situation of enjoying the old wine as better than the new wine of Christ which He desires us to pursue daily.

*Growth In Life Breaks the Old Wineskin*

Let’s make this matter practical. Have you ever had a leading from deep within your being that did not "fit" with the church you attend? The Lord may be leading you to follow Him in a way that is not prescribed by your church. Who will you follow: your church (old wineskin) or the Lord (new wine)? I am not promoting disrespect or rebellion, but Jesus as Lord. Remember, everyone who desires to live godly will be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12). Will we pursue Christ at such a risk or will we go along with the outward authority to avoid confusion and pain?

Here are some examples of being led by the Lord Jesus that did not fit the mold. I remember being warned by my pastor about reading certain spiritual materials because they were not accepted by the church. Another time I felt from the Lord to preach the gospel rather than attend the Sunday morning meeting ... God forbid! The phrase, “Do not forsake the going to church on Sundays” was often used to support church-going rather than Christ-following. By the way, the context of Hebrews 10:25 has nothing to do with going to church, but with gathering together with believers despite intense persecution. Saints risked their lives daily just by confessing they believed in Jesus. The author of Hebrews exhorted saints to gather anyway at the risk of their lives! If we would live in the middle East or India, China, Russia, etc. just telling others about Jesus is a huge risk with dire consequences (loss of family, friends, job, and education, imprisonment, and possibly death).

If you are able to step outside the “church-going” paradigm for a moment, consider some practical ways the Lord leads “outside the camp” (Hebrews 13:12-13). As song leader or minister, I often would lead a song or hymn according to what I thought was anointing from the Lord, but did not match the standard ways it was sung in the past ... only to get rebuked by an elder after the meeting for changing the "spiritual flow" of the meeting. On more than one occasion I desired to spend time with certain families based on an inner feeling, yet leading ones would restrict me and prohibit me. The Lord blessed me with an honest, open spirit so when I participated in small groups, I always encouraged saints to pray and speak genuinely from their heart. Therefore, at times, saints would be transparent about struggles they had with other saints. Instead of ministering and dealing with the offense, leading ones considered this gossip, back biting, and evil when a weaker saint would share with them that we discussed something so openly. This blocked the organic flow of life that could lead to confession, repentance, and forgiveness among the saints.

Many believers suffer because the church they attend sets all the parameters of their Christian faith and does not allow for differences or variations in growth among its members. Doctrines, practices, liturgy, timing, and associations are clearly defined. The path of growth is defined by the organization rather than by the organic growth in life before the Lord. Believers often are held accountable to the church they attend at the expense of following Christ. This is a serious matter.

As we grow in the Lord, we will also grow in our responsibility before the Lord. For instance, when we were born, we virtually held no responsibility to anyone. As newborn babies we were totally dependent on others to care for us and raise us up. As we grow in life, however, we become more and more accountable for ourselves until we eventually are considered mature. In adulthood we are accountable to Christ alone. We will render an account to Him, not to anyone else (Romans 14:10-12; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 10:18).

Saints are brought into a kind of suffering when they begin to reach maturity in Christ yet the group, the organization or the system they belong to no longer matches their inward growth in life. The group places restrictions, demands, obligations and requirements on saints as if they are still children. We must realize that it is God's design that we all come to maturity and not remain infants. Ephesians 4:13-14 says, "**Until we all arrive at the oneness of the faith and of the full knowledge of the Son of God, at a full-grown man, at the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, that we may no longer be little children tossed by waves and carried about by every wind of teaching in the sleight of men, in craftiness with a view to a system of error**." When any person, group or system continues to treat us like little children, we must follow Christ as our Head so that we may continue to grow in a healthy way before Him. Otherwise, we will remain in infancy and experience the consequences of being tossed by waves and carried about by teachings rather than seeking, pursuing, and following Christ.

I am not at all advocating church hopping. On the contrary, I am advocating that we pursue Christ alone and do not follow an outward organization unless the Lord Himself leads us to do so.

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