

## THE RIGHT MESSAGE IN THE WRONG CONTAINERS

Scripture Reading: Matthew 9:15-17, NIV

The Mosaic law required one day of fasting each year on the Day of Atonement. Devout Jews had added so many more fasts that they could boast, as did the Pharisee, "I fast twice in the week." (Luke 18:12)

Jesus seemed to approve of fasting as part of a disciplined spiritual life, but more often than not his disciples, and perhaps he, ignored many of these fasts.

When he was challenged about this, Jesus stated that his gospel was so joyous, more like a wedding than a wake, that it was as inappropriate to fast over the gospel as it was to fast at a wedding!

The dominant note of Christ's ministry was a deep joy. The sweet news of the Gospel was going to uproot the Jewish traditions of legalism and works-righteousness. Instead of merit there would be a song. People would still be under the law in the sense that God's will would rise up out of the depths of their grateful hearts—but it was a law whose obedience brought perfect freedom.

Christ's message was like a rainbow silhouetted against a storm. Nevertheless, he warns, the day will come when the joy of the wedding will, for a time, be gone. When the Bridegroom is taken away, crucified, then they will fast. Food has no flavor, dancing has no attraction, when the Bridegroom is murdered. There is only sorrow and weeping—fasting becomes the language of the soul.

Change must be expressed appropriately! The new often breaks up the familiar. Whenever the new comes there are two dangers. In the image of the garments, Jesus' concern is for the old garment that will be torn by the new. (When washed, the new material may shrink and pull a bigger hole in the old.) If we do not realize that the new is too strong for the old, even what is of value in the old may be destroyed.

In the image of the wineskins—new wine in old wineskins—Jesus' concern is for the new. Not one precious drop of wine must be lost.

The Gospel would break the Judaistic wineskin, and you see the agitation and stress in the New Testament Epistles. "Later it would stretch the old bottle of slavery beyond limits, and spill over the world in a new wine of freedom." (Buttrick, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 8.)

"Then why try to save old wineskins? They exist for the wine, and only the wine is precious...(Ibid.) So long as the energy and vitality of the new life in Christ is preserved, the old forms are adequate.

The moment the old forms, the old ways begin to drain life from Christ's Gospel, they must be discarded without remorse. If they are not discarded, the wine will burst them apart in an agonizing loss, not merely of the skins but also of the wine.

As human beings, however, we have a tendency to give the wineskins a peculiar sanctity. They are only important because they hold the wine! But it seems we cannot learn Christ's lesson. New modes of expression, new ways *of* doing things, seem to clash with the old time and time again; and new wine is

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spilled. This comparing and contrasting the new and the old is a refrain in Jesus' teaching. He talks about treasures new and old and makes it clear that the old ways are to be milestones so we don't wander around in confusion—millstones around our necks that drown us in the depths of the sea.

"A conservatism which, for the sake of the future, safeguards the treasure of the past" is to be applauded. But a conservatism which denies the future and the treasure it contains to preserve the past deserves contempt. "If the new has no root in the old, it withers. If the old grows no new leaves, it dies." (Ibid., p. 11.)

Neither standing pat nor worshipping novelty is adequate. Both extremes are to be avoided. The many ways in which this fundamental insight translates into our own situation can hardly be counted. Even Paul had some problems. When he tells us in 1 Corinthians 9 that he must exercise his freedom to preach the Gospel, he admits there have been tensions:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:19-24, NIV)

The history of Paul's preaching is the history of a man who put the Gospel in many different skins to fit the needs of hearers, yet the new wine was poured from skin to skin without spilling a drop. It made its impact. The whole missionary strategy of the apostle is in these verses. When any form or institution could not hold the gospel message, Paul got rid of it and adopted something that would.

I would like to relate a modern example of this technique. I talked to a missionary about our work in Asia, particularly those terribly war-torn countries of Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand. For many years missionaries, Adventists included, assumed that Western architecture, Western music, Western dress—our forms and institutions—were the skin in which the Gospel had to be preached. We built nice little white New England-style churches—with steeples—in the middle of a culture full of pagodas—thinking that the contrast would allow the Christian message to stand out distinctively.

It did not work. One missionary working in a remote part of Thailand finally decided that he would build a church that looked like a pagoda. (He was roundly criticized for this decision.)

What happened? The new wine of the Gospel literally drenched that area. People came to services, they were baptized, God's work moved forward. It is interesting to consider how the different perspectives of the missionary and the native Thai would view our text this morning.

To the missionary, he was putting the new wine of the gospel into a new wineskin—this had never been tried before. The old skin was not doing the job. In that sense, it had burst and was no longer useful.

To the Thai, this was new wine in an *old* wineskin—one he understood and was familiar with—but it

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was not a wineskin so small and brittle that it would break and thus spill the precious new wine. This is Paul's method used in our time.

Where we run into difficulties in the church is when some of us assume that using new wineskins means the message is being spilled and lost. The mere act of taking the wine out of the old wineskins is so frightening and the danger so great that some will be spilled, we simply *assume* that there is no way the transfer could be made without losing at least some of the wine. Jesus made it clear, however, that if we did not put the wine into new wineskins, the old would burst and there would be *nothing* of *value* left anymore!

Robert Zamora (formerly with the Columbia Union College/Newbold College Religion Department) tells the story of being in Hyde Park, London, listening to a fundamentalist preacher trying to witness to a young man who had taken a pamphlet from him.

The preacher used every cliché in the book. 'You are a sinner. You are lost. To be saved you must repent of your sins and be washed in the blood of the Lamb. Will you give your heart to Jesus right now and accept him as your personal savior?'

The young man looked totally bewildered.

Bob Zamora stepped forward and asked if he could horn in on the discussion. "Do you understand what this fellow is saying to you?" "No, I don't. What's he talking about?"

Bob replied: "He is telling you that God created humanity with tremendous potential, with creativity and possibilities that are limitless. But for some reason, those powers that can do so much good are used most of the time for selfish reasons, so we abuse each other, rape our environment, exploit the poor, kill each other in senseless wars, and never really achieve the possibilities we have.

Jesus Christ came to turn all that around. His mission was to remind us of our potential and to provide power for us to reach it, for the good of all mankind. But people have to realize first that there is a problem, turn away from the problem and accept the right solution. Jesus says that his answer is the only adequate one."

"Do you understand now what he is trying to say?" "Oh well, I understand that. Why didn't he say that in the first place?"

When I was studying at Boston University, a friend of mine was discussing religion with me. He said, "Jim, I can't make sense out of what you religious people are saying. You tell me that God exists, but I don't know what those terms mean the way you use them. God is an invisible, intangible, odorless, reality. Nobody can hear, see, touch or feel him if they want to, only if he wants them to. If God does not want to contact you, you're out of luck, aren't you? Furthermore, what do you mean when you say he exists? My idea of something that is real is precisely something that can be *sensed*. That we can all agree on."

How do I persuade him to drink the new wine of the Gospel without pouring it into a new wineskin? No evangelistic sermon I have ever heard will answer his question. Some Christians might say that there is

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no point in casting our pearls before swine, that such an intellectual snob has been sipping the wine of Babylon so long he cannot taste or appreciate the wine of the Gospel. Just forget it.

To paraphrase Paul: 'To the intellectuals I became an intellectual that I might win some; to the working man I became a working man that he might gain Christ; to the ultraconservative Baptist, I became conservative that in all things Christ might be exalted.'

While attending Boston University, I was enrolled in a *Death of God* seminar. This was a big topic of discussion then and the seminar was full of ministers and atheists. One night the teacher failed to appear on time for class. While waiting for him, one skeptic woman asked: "How can some of you believe in all that mythology? God becoming man, virgin births, the whole thing is nonsensical."

Her problem with wine cannot be solved by quoting a Bible text. What is at issue is whether or not the Bible even makes sense. To quote from it is to commit the fallacy of begging the question.

Christ's new wine needed some new wineskins. In answering her question, I decided that I had to drop all the religious lingo—no washed in the blood of the Lamb, etc. She didn't understand that kind of language much less believe it. I decided to use the language of ethics and psychology—something she could understand. I talked about the importance of love and the fact that Christians believe that there is a source of love in the Universe. Love is not simply an emotion, it is a principle. Love has a reality that is independent of my own personal feelings or someone else's. There is a sense in which love is not the present reality and possession of most people. There is a lack of trust in human experience and existence. I went on to talk in that kind of language and finally came to the significance of the cross. It took about 20 minutes for me to get through this and everybody sat there and listened. I said, "I don't know how the Methodist and Catholic pastors feel but that's where I'm coming from in terms of my faith."

Her response was, "That kind of faith I can accept."

That kind of faith was not different than any other kind of faith. She could not grasp or appreciate faith in the old wineskins. That is the problem.

There has always been and there always will be some conflict between the new and the old. Remember: The wineskins do not matter—whether old or new! What is precious is the wine—the message. Sometimes the wine, in order to preserve it, must be poured from an old skin to a new one.

May our Lord Jesus Christ help us to see that the transfer is made because we believe the wine is a priceless treasure, not because we do not value it at all.