

In Search of a New Wineskin

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus points out that in that period of time a person would never put new wine into an old wineskin. If they did it would cause the wineskin to burst and the wine to be lost. Traditional interpretation of that passage has taught that the wine is a reference to the Holy Spirit. When God wants to give a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit, it cannot be done into an old container because it is unable to contain it. I believe that the container or "wineskin" implies a religious system, form, mindset or state of being in the Church.

I believe that we live in a time when God has new and wonderful wine to pour out for his people, and is presently seeking for a new wineskin that can contain it. I believe our current "wineskin" is unable to contain what God would want to do among us. I believe there is great potential to see God do things that we've never seen before in and through His Church. But I believe His work is hindered because of the old wineskins we so tightly cling to.

Some Christians, having been so burned, hurt or disillusioned with the established church and its leaders, think that the new wineskin would involve no organization or hierarchy at all. I disagree with that because I don't think it's Biblical. There were definite gifts and offices that involved leadership and structure laid down in the New Testament. Corruption within the structure doesn't mean that the structure itself is wrong. But as it has always been in the history of the Church, there needs to be reform, renewal and revival in order for a new wineskin to be put in place to receive the wine of the Spirit.

There are four "isms" that I'd like to address that I think make up the fabric of current "wineskin" of the Church and have to be dealt with in order for us to have a new wineskin that can receive a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. These are: **Traditionalism**, **Denominationalism**, **Ethnocentrism** and what I'll call **Congregational-centrism**.

Traditionalism is when what we've always done becomes equal to or more influential than what Scripture says. This is not the same as tradition. There's nothing wrong with traditions. In fact many can be very good. But in traditionalism, our methods become entrenched and spiritualized, and have more power to determine our choices and actions than the Word of God. Walking by faith becomes a theory. We function more like clubs with unspoken rules than as the Body of Christ. Even Biblical change is strongly resisted. Predictability, stability and comfort are high values. Movements of God become monuments of the past. And much of what the scripture says is not only ignored, but if it was to be applied in the congregation, it would be opposed.

Denominationalism is an inordinate attachment to a particular theological system and/or methodology that causes us to divide with all others. In this context we find people who, in their affections and actions, are more Lutheran, Baptist, Catholic, etc. than they are Christian. In fact, they might equate one with the other. In this context, method becomes as sacred as theology itself and they find themselves at odds with others that would call themselves Christians but don't have their denominational affiliation or methodology. Here you will hear phrases such as, "She's a good Baptist", "He's a good Catholic", "Those are good Lutheran people", etc. Now I believe that doctrine is not a frivolous issue and false

doctrine and heresy have always been serious problems to be dealt with since the early church. But in our current state of denominationalism, our doctrinal/methodology issues have fragmented the Church into hundreds of pieces—each thinking they are the “right” ones and are content to stay with their “right” group of thinkers. There is no burden to pray for those we disagree with or cry out to God to help us sort through the confusion. We are thus left with the different fragments of the Church feeling more like different religions than part of one Body of Christ.

Ethnocentrism is when our ethnic identity is more important, influential and focal than our identity as one Holy Nation in Christ. Ethnocentrism allows us to embrace hatred or bitterness toward other ethnic groups while still calling ourselves Christians. Ethnocentrism allows us to advance the agenda of our own race at the expense of another while still calling ourselves Christians. Ethnocentrism allows us to have a core belief that there is something innately better about our ethnicity than that of someone else. Ethnocentrism allows us to be intolerant of other musical worship styles or other methods. Ethnocentrism treats non-Christians and Christians of other “races” as being other than ourselves and therefore “their” concerns are not “our” concerns. Therefore, though we all call ourselves Christians, our ethnicity is so much more powerful than our commonality in Christ that our Christianity feels like an add-on to our culture instead of our main identity. Ethnocentrism can come from two opposite sources. One group believes they are superior in some way and have routinely used and abused those of other races for their own advancement. Even those not involved in overt racism may remain indifferent and apathetic towards the struggles of other ethnic groups, and keep themselves at a distance from such problems because they are not personally affected by them. For others, being in the minority or having been oppressed and beaten down by another race has caused them to become ethnocentric in order to build strength and esteem back into their community. For some in the minority, they have an ethnocentric focus in order to maintain their culture and not get absorbed by the majority culture. I believe that celebrating and embracing our culture is great. We don't have to all become like another ethnic group. But when our embracing and celebrating become ethnocentrism in the Church as I've defined it, I think it's sin—no matter what the reason is for it coming into being.

Congregational-centrism is when what happens in the context of our congregation becomes our only concern. In congregational-centric churches, if you pay attention, you will notice that all praise reports, prayer requests, announcements and activities revolve around this one congregation. In this context, there is a complete absence of acknowledgement or concern about the Church in a city or region as a whole. What matters is what happens from out of these four walls. Here the congregation functions like an independent entity unto itself—as if it was The Church. Here you may also find that visiting another congregation would be treated as disloyalty. Volunteers and musicians are held onto with a firm grip—not to be shared with a “competing” congregation. In this context, the pastor(s) have no purposeful contact with pastors of other congregations because they don't see the connection between them or the need to be connected. Congregational-centrism can be an expression of arrogance or it can be an expression of insecurity. If we feel self-sufficient and relatively self-satisfied about what our congregation is doing and is about, it can be arrogant. If we feel small, weak and threatened by other congregations that are

bigger than us or who might “steal our sheep”, we close in and become congregation-centric in order to protect ourselves out of insecurity. Either way it's ugly and antithetical to the Biblical way that the Body of Christ is meant to function.

*At least part of these four "isms" are alive and well in most of our congregations. In many congregations they are nurtured and encouraged. But **I believe that they breed pride, envy, selfish ambition, arrogance, competition, lack of concern for one another and a lack of building the Church and the Kingdom of God.***

In the New Testament, you see churches addressed by their city or region. It was the Church of Macedonia or the Church of Phillipi or the Church of Corinth. Can you imagine Paul writing to Willow Creek church in Chicago while ignoring the other congregations in that city? Can you imagine him writing to the Lutherans of Chicago only (unless he was confronting them for saying “I am of Luther”)? Can you imagine him writing to the Caucasians of Chicago only (unless to tell them that He has torn down the dividing wall between Jew and Greek and all Gentiles)? It just wasn't the mentality. And not only did these congregations see themselves as part of the whole Church in an area, they also sent funds and individuals to help the Church in another area and of another race (Macedonians and Jews) that had a need—sometimes out of their own poverty. We tend to respond in such a way with congregations overseas, but not nearly as much with the churches right in our own city.

I confess that it's easy to point out the problems with the current “wineskin”. And doing so can just be an exercise in negativism and futility if there can't also be vision raised up for what a new wineskin might look like. In the context of knowing that the new wineskin is something that we've not yet experienced, let me attempt to present what I think are some possibilities.

IN THE NEW WINESKIN:

- All pastors would be praying with and would have relationship with other pastors. All thoughts of competition, arrogance or self-sufficiently will have been forsaken as sin. Pastors of churches small and large would humbly see themselves as servants and equals of one another.
- Because of the relationship between the pastors, there would be an awareness of the good things that are happening as well as the needs and concerns of other congregations
- Because of that awareness, weekend services would involve praise reports and prayer requests for other congregations as well as for the one that we are a part of
- Because of the communication in our weekend services about the whole Church, we would share resources and volunteers between congregations. We would link up and join in each other's outreach and social action efforts
- Instead of serving ourselves (congregation, ethnic group) first, we would be willing to wait on our dreams and lesser needs in order to help staff, support, build and bring along other congregations with greater needs than our own
- There will be a sense of “us-ness” instead of “other-ness” between Christians of different ethnic groups. Ethno-centric attitudes will be confronted, exposed and forsaken as sin.

- Doctrinal disagreements would be a focus of great prayer concern as we would regularly and intentionally cry out to God to take away the cloud of doctrinal confusion that has so divided us and lead us all into His truth
- Because of our interconnectedness, we would regularly come together for city-wide gatherings of worship and prayer and for cooperative city-wide evangelistic efforts.
- Traditionalism, comfort and predictability would be exchanged for a new surrender to a walk of faith and an embracing of the moving of the Holy Spirit

Although we've never seen Christ's Church function in such radical ways since New Testament days, it's exciting to dream about what could happen in our times if such things began to change! What could God accomplish in the world with a united Body of people who laid aside old agendas and sought the New Wine of the Holy Spirit? We believe that God is longing to pour out this New Wine, but he knows this old wineskin cannot contain it! **If we begin to focus not only on the health of our own congregation, denomination and ethnic group but to humbly see ourselves as part of the whole Church, I believe that God will bring a new outpouring of His Holy Spirit upon His Church.** We will begin to function and think differently. The Church will become healthier and we will make a huge impact on our Cities. Let's seek to change and pioneer a new path toward God's view of a united, loving Body of Christ, His Church, and let the wine start to flow!