

THE CHALLENGE (WORSHIPING WINESKINS)

The Renewed Church:

Matthew 9:14-17
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Bethany Church
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One day I conducted a funeral for an old bachelor. The relatives told me that he let his house get in such poor repair that you could see the open sky from his bedroom. They chuckled because one time he got so cold, that he heated a brick on a pot stove, put it under his covers, and the covers caught fire. Is that colorful? I read a story about an old curmudgeon who was notoriously dirty. People said he never washed his dishes. One day he invited a pastor to dinner. The pastor looked at a plate, saw some discoloration, and asked, "Is this plate clean?" The old guy answered, "It's as clean as soap and water could get 'em!" When the pastor started eating, he found the food so delicious that he cleaned his plate (so to speak). After dinner the man said, "Sit down on the couch, and I'll take care of the plates." The Pastor watched him place them on the floor, open the door and whistle to his hounds: "Here Soap, here Water!"

I can't authenticate that story, but with the colorful people I've met, I imagine there is some truth behind it. People do have different sensibilities. What is normal and healthy to one is repulsive and dangerous to another. What is normal for some may not be healthy at all. A missionary friend told me that half the population of the Congo is under 16 because people die so

early. The African nickname for the Congo means “the land where children die.” That may be normal there, but that certainly is not healthy.

Most of us equate normality with health. It once was normal practice for surgeons not to change clothes or aprons between surgeries. In fact the spattered blood on their surgical aprons was a status symbol. Despite studies proving it dangerous, it took quite a time for that practice to end. What is normal may not be healthy.

Could that be true of the church? Was your childhood church healthy? Are churches in this region healthy? Is this church healthy? How would you know? If physicians were blind to their unhealthy practices, how do we evaluate ours?

Although 84 percent of Americans identified themselves as Christians in the year 2000, nearly one-third of American teenagers and adults have no religious training. Right now, only 41 percent of the population attends a church, and the influence of Christianity on morals and perspective is quickly falling. American culture is increasingly hostile to Christian ideas and ideals. United Methodism, once the world’s leader in church growth, is about to mark 40 straight years of decline. Minnesota Methodism is right there shrinking as much as the rest. Twenty years ago, Bishop Richard Wilkie from Kansas was commissioned to lead a turnaround of The United Methodist Church. After just two years, this is what he wrote:

Our sickness is more serious than what we at first suspected. We are in trouble... We thought we were just drifting, like a sailboat on a dreamy day. Instead, we are wasting away like a leukemia victim when the blood transfusions no longer work.

The illness, to which Bishop Wilkie refers, is not confined to United Methodism or other historic denominations. Most churches, including evangelical and Pentecostal, are losing ground. They are not keeping pace with population growth.

These are not the signs of a healthy church. They are not the kind of fruit that Jesus promised. He told his followers:

My true disciples produce much fruit. This brings great glory to my Father... I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce fruit that will last... (John 15: 8, 16, NLT)

Once Jesus compared people to soil that produces crops when seed is sown. He said about the good soil:

The good soil represents the hearts of those who truly accept God's message and produce a huge harvest — thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted. (Matthew 13:23, NLT)

Jesus was not talking about character. He was discussing impact. The farmers I know care about the character of the plant only as it impacts the multiplication of what they're sowing. They want seed to multiply. They want a large harvest. Jesus wants God's lost children to be found. That is why he came. That is why he died. He's not interested in fruit that leaves God's dear children alienated, lost and facing destruction. I think we can say that if quality doesn't produce quantity, he wants no part. People are just too important, and their condition is just too desperate.

The fact that quantity matters doesn't mean that a healthy church is a large church. Many large churches grow by attracting believers rather than converting non-believers. They've become little more than comfortable holding pens. Christians are listening to music they like, hearing sermons they like and participating in programs they like, but they are not interested in lost people. They are not praying for lost people. They are not reaching lost people. Instead, they often experience a "disconnect" with the New Testament church. They can't imagine what the power of the Holy Spirit is. They relegate prayer to an obligatory act that pacifies or pleases God, and they treat healing as if modern medicine is their Jesus.

One way you can tell that a church is unhealthy and needs to be renewed is that it talks of Jesus as if he lives in the past. They focus on what Jesus *did*, not what he *is doing*. They also focus their eyes on their efforts and activities rather than on God's activity. They behave somewhat like the disciples of John the Baptist.

In Matthew 9 followers of John approached Jesus. They asked:

Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples don't fast? (Matthew 9:14, NLT)

Having fasted, I can tell you that the question was not emotionless. Fasting is not pleasant. It is humbling. You feel weak. Your body cries for food, drink or whatever you are withholding from it. It is not a party. It is a battle. John's disciples saw John fasting, and they saw power that came as a result. They along with the Pharisees knew how important fasts had been in the history of Israel. The great leaders and prophets had fasted. Nationwide fasts had brought forgiveness and deliverance. They wanted to know how Jesus and his followers could even suggest they are close to God and not be fasting.

Jesus told them that it was inappropriate for his disciples to fast. The timing was wrong. He spoke of old wine needing old wineskins, and new fermenting wine needing new wineskins. Your behavior must match the situation. Your practices must be appropriate. They must be evaluated like you do a patch for a garment. In that day you not only matched the color and fabric of the garment, you also matched the age. You didn't want what you sewed on a garment to rip out as the material shrunk while drying.

Jesus was saying that our practices with God need to match what God is doing. You don't just do things because they worked in the past. You do what matches the occasion. You do what is appropriate for the time... because God is at work now. It was inappropriate for Jesus' disciples to fast because God had come in Jesus with power for salvation and direction for

their lives. It was the time to celebrate and act, not fast and wait. Similarly, if you don't have power or direction, it is time to fast and wait, not work harder.

When the church focuses on practices (like preaching, prayer, fasting, Bible study, singing and service) rather than the presence of God, we confuse wineskins for the wine. Wineskins are helpful. They are containers that help us access the very thing we need. However, who wants to haul a 100 gallon tank of water on a two-hour hike. Wouldn't you prefer a water bottle? The key is drinking the water, not what we haul it with.

We focus on and even worship the wrong thing. The order of worship becomes a huge thing. Did you run your idea through the proper committees? Does the preacher have a master's degree? Is he or she seminary trained? We focus our effort and trust on human processes rather than God's presence. In doing that, we are no different than the Pharisees that opposed Jesus. They missed the savior because their sensibilities were formed not by the presence of God but by the practices of people they respected. They didn't expect God's presence. They didn't look for God's presence. They weren't hungry for God's presence. Instead, they were commended by their practice. Their practice was their hope. Their wineskins, their glory!

In contrast, Jesus told his disciples to do nothing but wait until God had breathed into them the same Spirit that empowered Jesus. Then they would operate in power. For you to fulfill your purpose and for us to reach our potential, we need that power. We need God's AID, His Anointing, Intimacy and Direction. We need to take AIM: receive an anointing of God's Spirit, cultivate an intimacy with God and employ ourselves in God's mission.

In the next few weeks, we'll examine this call and ready ourselves for an amazing work of Christ. However, let's begin with repentance. Let's confess our impoverished sensibilities, our wrongful worship of the wineskins. Let's ask for and focus on the wine, God's presence.