

NEW WINE FOR A NEW WINESKIN

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Technology advances so fast that most of us can't keep up. If you buy a computer today, by tomorrow it will be getting out of date. Within a year or two you won't be able to get spare parts for it.

Teams of engineers are working hard all the time to make electronic equipment that can perform more tasks at higher speed. What looks brand new this year, and surprises you with what it can do, will look old and slow next year.

Someone has recently proclaimed that the thing that we will feel we cannot live without just five years from now, has not yet even been imagined. It has only been eight years since the first iPhone was released, and it has utterly transformed handheld communication. One can hardly imagine a world without cell phones. In fact, many people who own neither car nor house nor more than one pair of shoes, own a cell phone.

The speed of change is dizzying. If you feel technologically off-balance, you're not alone. But the pace is not likely to slow, so we must stretch ourselves. There are, of course, limits to how much any one of us can stretch—and those limits increase each year—but let it not be said that we were unwilling to stretch *up to* our limit.

Dizzying Frustration

I suspect that such dizzying frustration is what religious people in Jesus' day felt about many of the ideas and practices that He introduced. They were not completely unfamiliar, rooted as they were in the Jewish creed, but the level of understanding and the manner of application certainly knocked them off balance.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ was not a new idea, having been introduced in the first book of the Bible, but it was a fresh revelation of old ideas and proposed a revolutionary way of living. Therefore, Jesus encountered a great deal of pushback to His message.

Luke 5:36 Then Jesus gave them this illustration: "No one tears a piece of cloth from a new garment and uses it to patch an old garment. For then the new garment would be ruined, and the new patch wouldn't even match the old garment."

The point is that by cutting out a new piece of cloth you will both ruin the new coat and not help the old one. There's no use, in other words, trying to see if you can fit some bits of Jesus'

kingdom-program into the programs of John's disciples or the Pharisees. If you attempt to break up Jesus' Gospel into pithy maxims, you will spoil the whole thing. You have to take the new thing whole or not at all.

Luke 5:37 "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. For the new wine would burst the wineskins, spilling the wine and ruining the skins. ³⁸ New wine must be stored in new wineskins. ³⁹ But no one who drinks the old wine seems to want the new wine. 'The old is just fine,' they say."

Bottles in Palestine were made of skin, usually sheepskin or goatskin, and the neck area of the animal became the neck of the container. The body portion was skinned, the hair was removed, and the hide was treated to prevent the skin from changing the taste of the contents. Finally, it was sewn together.

When new wine was put into a wineskin it fermented and gave off gas. If the bottle was new, there was a certain elasticity in the skin and it gave with the pressure. But if the skin was old and had become dry and brittle, it would burst.

The mood of the metaphor is, "What a loss!" The religious mind soon loses the quality of elasticity and will not accept new ideas. "Don't," says Jesus, "let your mind become like an old wineskin." A new form, a new spirit, and a new approach may be required.

There is a note of rebuke here in the realization that some people will not alter the way they look at Jesus. They reject the new way He brings. Some people will not taste the new wine of the Gospel, since some tastes never change. One will not try what one does not sense the need for.

"The prejudiced person will not even try the new, or admit that it has any merits. He knows that the old is pleasant, and suits him; and that is enough; he is not going to change" (Plummer). This is Christ's picture of the reactionary Pharisees. There are many yet today who think they are not being religious unless they are uncomfortable and difficult to comprehend. The Pharisees were shocked by the normality of the followers of Jesus. There is in religious people a kind of passion for the old. "Nothing moves more slowly than a church."

Far too many people think of Christianity as something which compels them to do all the things they do not want to do and hinders them from doing all the things they do want to do. Laughter has become a sin, instead of—as one philosopher called it—"a sudden glory."

Are you sure that your resentment of new ideas is not simply a demonstration that your mind has become old and inelastic? Never shirk the adventure of explorative thought and reason. That a thing has *always* been done may very well be the best reason to stop doing it. That a thing has *never* been done may very well be the best reason to try it.

Once on a world tour, Rudyard Kipling, the author, saw General Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, come aboard the ship. He came aboard to the beating of tambourines which Kipling's orthodox soul resented. Kipling got to know the General and told him how he disliked tambourines and all their kindred. Booth looked at him. "Young man," he said, "if I thought I could win one more soul for Christ by standing on my head and beating a tambourine with my feet I would learn how to do it." Let us be careful that in thought and in action we are not hidebound reactionaries when we ought, as Christians, to be brave adventurers.

A New Thing

People sometimes use this passage to justify every bright idea and to mock every tradition, but that's not the idea. Jesus was doing a new thing; that new thing still forms the basis of Christianity today.

Yesterday's religious structures and forms are often incapable of handling today's dynamic of spiritual renewal. This does not mean that some forms of the old worship, like fasting, cannot continue; but it does mean that, at the least, they must be seen and applied differently.

The Gospel must not be reduced to a patch on the Law; nor should we attempt to contain it within the constraints of the Law. Jesus did not come into the world to patch up the Law of Moses. He came to pay the penalty of sin by dying on the cross, and rose from the dead so that we could wear a robe of righteousness. He offered the new wine of the Gospel. The new wine requires a new supple wineskin of grace, not the old inflexible skin of Moses' Law.

Luke was not suggesting the rejection of any particular elements of the Law, nor did he see the two as fundamentally incompatible. In fact, Luke stresses the continuity between Judaism and Christianity, even Pharisaism and Christianity. However, his emphasis is on the wholehearted reception of the new (the Gospel of Jesus) in its integrity.

In summary, then, don't try to *add* elements of the Gospel to your old ways or your religious habits. It will be an unworkable addition.

Putting your trust in Jesus is not done piecemeal. Just jump in with both feet. Put your trust in Him. Quit depending on your own faithfulness or promise-keeping. Depend, instead, on what Jesus has done for you—blotted out the whole record of your sins by His death, forgiven you, and counted you righteous in the eyes of Almighty God through His resurrection life.

Following Jesus will not be like any religion you have ever known. It will be more challenging than anything you have ever done. And it will be infinitely more rewarding. Eternally.

In closing, I want to suggest a particular application of this truth, which I hope to explore more fully with you in the future. It is this: We have begun the process of thoroughly updating and remodeling this building that God has given us. It is our house of worship.

The only thing that will not be replaced is its frame. Everything within will be replaced—walls, floors, ceilings, plumbing, electrical, mechanical, lighting, furnishings, and equipment. This is effectively a new wineskin, a new garment, a new container.

This new wineskin is made for new wine. “New wine” describes the result of formation—or re-formation—that God is now applying to us. We are being made new—a new people for new worship. Not new as individuals, but new as a unit, new as a church family—new in our relationships and service.

It is this process of renewal that I will be speaking to you about over the next few weeks—describing what God has been doing among us and what more we might expect, and how to reap the most from the process.

Let us become new wine—bringing new joy to the heart of the Father, offering new praise to the Son, discovering new intimacy with the Holy Spirit, and growing in closer fellowship with each other.