

New Wine in Old Wineskins:

Out with the old, in with the new

If the model of the Church we see now in the West was not Jesus' plan, what was His intention for His Church? What was it supposed to look like? Is there a prescription?

Yes...and no. There *are* a few guidelines about how to “do church” or about the gathering of the brethren in communal worship (mainly in 1 Cor. 11-14), but not many, so we have a lot of freedom and latitude in that regard. But there is *much* information about how to “be” the Church.¹ In both cases, these instructions were mainly given to us by Paul as he unfolded the “administration of the mystery² which for ages had been hidden in God.”³ The idea that the Church would be a synthesis of saved Jews and Gentiles working together to win a lost world to Christ was apparently almost completely unknown before it was revealed to Paul.⁴ It was his task to describe this new life of Spirit-filled and Spirit-led communion. The “one new man.”

Initially though, the Church was almost entirely Jewish. Why? Because salvation was “*of the Jews*” and “to the Jew first.” It had to be offered to them before it could be offered to the rest of the world. Jesus, a Jew, came to fulfill the prophecies given to His own people. That was His bona-fide mission, which is why He told His disciples when He sent them out: “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Matt.10:5-6) But even though He did come to the Jews first and offer them salvation, He spoke to them in parables, a clever way of ferreting out those who both recognized and loved the Truth and earnestly desired to understand and conform to His teaching and will. These folks were few among the thousands who heard Him speak, most of whom were more interested in His miracles and the prospect of liberation from Rome than in relationship with Him.

¹ For example, we are not to forsake meeting together. We are to encourage and edify one another. We are to exercise our spiritual gifts in an orderly manner. We are to confess our sins to each other. We are to deal with conflict within the Body, not outside of it. We are to allow the Holy Spirit to fill us, to reveal truth to us and to direct our decisions. We are to love the brethren in word and deed. We are to spread the good news. We are to seek to prophesy. And of course there is much more.

² The mystery that Gentiles would be joint heirs of salvation with the Jews.

³ God, after all, is not interested in filling His Church with a mob of those who merely want to escape eternal judgment. Though we all want to escape punishment, love of God, faith and repentance are prime requisites for entrance into the bridal relationship. After all, He is seeking and refining a Bride who will walk with Him in white. So all who want what He wants are welcome.

⁴ A few Old Testament scriptures spoke to the future of Gentile salvation (i.e., Is. 49:56: “And now says the Lord, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, to bring Jacob back to Him, in order that Israel might be gathered to Him (for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and My God is My strength), He says, ‘It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make you a light to the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.’”), but apparently it was not so clear that God was creating for Himself a Bride comprising both Jewish and Gentiles believers in Messiah.

And Jesus knew that the old guard of Judaism would never be able to accept His perspective on true spirituality. That's why He gave that enigmatic parable about new wine and old wineskins.⁵ Israel's pharisaic synagogue system was the old wineskin and Jesus knew it could never tolerate the radical concepts of His New Covenant, despite the Pharisees' familiarity with Jeremiah's prophecy on that score.⁶ The leaders of Israel as a whole could never have abandoned their privileged positions for the sake of equality with the common people nor could they have disavowed the physical Temple⁷ and the sacrificial system, which, in essence, gave them their power and position. They thought the Old Wine was better, after all, just as Jesus said they would, not understanding that it was a shadow of things to come. And if the new, Spirit-filled and Spirit-directed Church tried to pour itself into the old pharisaic forms, it would devastate both.⁸ New wine requires new skins, and the Church is to be an illustration of that.

But a small contingent of His followers did believe the gospel, those who were willing to forsake the Old Wine of the pharisaic system (or who had never imbibed it) and drink deeply of the New Wine of the New Covenant despite the cost, even if it meant death. Eventually they turned Jerusalem upside down and spread the good news throughout the Near East. For them, Pentecost changed everything. The Holy Spirit was poured into their hearts and fellowship with God became an anytime/anywhere proposition. No more rituals. No more sacrifices. No more bondage to a physical synagogue or Temple.⁹ Now they would worship in spirit and in truth, in faith and in repentance, in obedience and in gratitude, wherever they were and wherever the gospel took them. Those who persevered would be God's friends, continually washed clean through faith and repentance and thus suited for intimate relationship with their Perfect Husband.

Does the Church actually do this now? Yes and no. Many if not most Christians *do* talk to God outside of church. They *are* grateful for salvation. Many pray in the Spirit, live obedient lives and repent regularly. But for the most part, they also cling to the Temple or synagogue concept at the same time, with varying degrees of devotion (depending on the denomination or doctrinal framework), some believing that the church building itself is sacred, even calling it "the house of God" and treating it with reverence and awe, speaking in hushed tones inside; others seeing it

⁵ See Mark 2:22.

⁶ Jeremiah 31:31-34

⁷ Jesus prophesied that the Temple would be torn down stone by stone and it was in 70 AD. The Temple was a shadow of things to come, and in John 4:21-24, Jesus says to the Samaritan woman: "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem (meaning at the Temple obviously), shall you worship the Father...but an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit; and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

⁸ If the new believers in Jesus had tried to stay inside the synagogue system, its leaders would have quickly forced them to conform to existing Judaic rules and rituals, including the sacrificial system, or be evicted. One way or the other, they would have been poured out of the old skins.

⁹ See Hebrews 9.

merely as a meeting place, but exclusively so. Few have abandoned it in favor of meeting in homes or other non-religious structures, or outside in the natural environment for that matter. But the building issue is only one problem with the old wineskin. There are other intangible aspects of the pharisaic system that also serve to destroy the effectiveness of the New Wine.

Any attempt to pour the New Wine into the old pharisaic forms is doomed to failure. Once you own a building (or in the case of denominations, multiple buildings and properties spread across the country), you have to engage in risk management. Protecting corporate assets becomes job one for those in charge. Policies are enacted to reduce liability on all fronts and for all principals involved. Salaries, bank accounts, retirement programs, investments, and all tangible real property are viewed as essential to organizational survival. And anything that challenges or threatens that survival will be vigorously resisted. Consequently, policy will always trump the Holy Spirit and His agenda.

Unfortunately, most of the problems detailed in the last chapter characterize the majority of the Christian Church, at least in the West.¹⁰

How did this happen? How did the Church end up in this compromised condition? What happened to all those new Jewish believers who embraced the New Wine? Where'd they all go? Where are all the Jews who should be in the Church helping to evangelize the world? Good question.¹¹

Viewed by the mainstream of Judaism as heretical, destructive to the status quo, and worthy of elimination, this new sect of Jewish Christians was immediately and forcefully persecuted by the ruling elite, which was ultimately mimicked and escalated by Rome. Together they made the world a very inhospitable place for these believers for centuries. In 70 AD the believers fled Jerusalem in droves for the safety of the Decapolis and gradually migrated to other regions where they spread the gospel to the native populations. After the first generation of sold-out New-Wine believers died out (or were killed), the second-generation Church in the Near East began to be infiltrated by “ravening wolves” who pressured the churches to return to pharisaic

¹⁰ We suggest that Jesus' parable of the leaven might apply here. He described the Kingdom of God as being like leaven which a woman took and hid in three pecks of meal until it was all leavened. If leaven is this sort of pharisaic religion, was He telling us that the Kingdom of God on earth during this age would be entirely permeated with leavened practices? Perhaps the three pecks symbolize Judaism, Catholicism and Protestantism? That's one option.

¹¹ As faithful as He was to His mission to offer Himself as Israel's promised Messiah, Jesus knew the leaders and most of the people wouldn't receive Him. He did not fit their image of the conquering King they so desired. Nevertheless, despite their rejection and the travesty (in one sense) of the crucifixion, He gave them time to repent: 40 days of proofs validating His resurrection, and then another 40 *years* to repent and receive Him as their Messiah. (Forty is the number of testing.) They didn't. So the door of mercy closed and, in judgment, Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed in 70 AD. They lost their land along with everything they valued. Those who escaped with their lives fled to the four winds (many thousands of them Christians) and remained dispersed until 1947 when they were granted access to their ancient homeland by the international community after the Holocaust of WWII. Those who returned to Israel, for the most part, remain separated from Christ their Savior and His Church.

practices, quickly spawning a class of in-house ruling elites who demanded strict adherence to their views on various doctrines, sometimes on pain of death.

After much devastating persecution from within and without, the Christian Church in the fourth century became established as the state church of Rome. But what many saw as a tide-turning mercy quickly became a liability. Thanks to Constantine and the various councils, the Church became highly institutionalized and ultimately fossilized in a way that was not far distant from the prescribed methods practiced in the synagogue system. The entrenched hierarchy, the static forms and traditions, the legalism and orthodoxies, all eventually became normative in the churches. State-supported bishops, an established clergy, state-funded cathedrals and church buildings, political involvement and tax exemptions were part of the system.¹²

And unfortunately, the Trinity doctrine, finally set in stone at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD (after intense and murderous wrangling among so-called Christians), became an even greater stumbling block to Jewish evangelism as unconverted Jews could not reconcile its proposition of three separate, co-eternal and co-equal Persons¹³ with the Scripture's definitive declaration that "the Lord our God, the Lord is One."¹⁴ To make matters worse, this and other disagreements over the nature of God and salvation, and the death of Christ and His Messiahship morphed quite rapidly into a centuries-long militantly adversarial relationship marked by the trading of vitriol between Christians and Jews and violent inquisitions and persecution. The schism persists to this day.¹⁵ And may be again on the rise.

And when the Reformers took on the Catholic monolith in the 16th century, though they did much to make the Bible available and accessible to the common people, they failed to trash all the appurtenances of Rome's vainglory. They retained, in many cases, its attachment to strange doctrines, lavish buildings, a hierarchy of clergy, budgets and salaries, sacraments and traditions, statues and icons, holy days and vestments. In the end, they merely substituted their own orthodoxies¹⁶ for those of Rome and called it good.

Well it wasn't good enough as the chart in the next section shows. It was still a far cry from what Jesus intended. But because the effort to infiltrate and commandeer the visible Church in its early days was so successful, Pharisaism continues to reign to this day, largely because of

¹² We believe this eventually evolved into the Catholic Church, headquartered in the Vatican outside of Rome.

¹³ Father, Son and Holy Spirit

¹⁴ We discuss this issue of the Trinity in our 13 Theories/Appendix D of www.grace-n-truth.com.

¹⁵ One day soon, of course, this schism between Jews and Christians will be resolved. When Jesus removes His Bride from the earth, leaving behind the Pharisaic elements of both Christianity and Judaism, a remnant of unconverted Jews will eventually repent and recognize their Messiah. But for now, as Paul said, "blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in." Romans 11:25

¹⁶ Some of which were of course true, but they were imposed on the people leading to the loss of individual freedom in working out one's own salvation.

tradition. Having sown the seeds of thousands of denominations, all claiming a corner on the truth, we have reaped a fractured and largely impotent Church, particularly in the West. Of course the devil has a substantial share in all this, ratcheting up his deception as needed to undermine and destroy the unity that God intended and Paul promoted.

On the next page we've posted the New Testament Church wheel with its distinctives. These are some of the more significant elements that we think should define the New Testament Church according to Scripture.

K.C. and T.L.