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Wineskins Revisited

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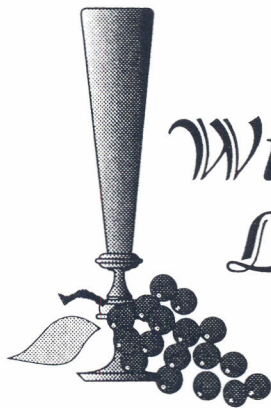


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Wineskins Revisited *Luke 5:27~32*

By John O. York

There is a lot of talk today about the need for new wineskins in the church. This text (and its parallels in Matthew and Mark) has been used to defend a variety of new forms being introduced in the name of enlivening the church. Different music styles have been called new wineskins. The introduction of drama and choral groups into worship assemblies has been called new wineskins. Most of the vocabulary of change that we hear today makes its appeal to this text sooner or later. I have made such appeals in the past, but as I have read and re-read this text recently, I have come to believe that it is *not* saying what we have made it say. As a matter of fact, our interpretive uses may be exactly opposite the intent of Jesus.

Remember the context of these words in Luke 5. Jesus is in the midst of a controversy with the Pharisees. As Luke presents this controversy, it is a continuing discussion with Pharisees that began when they complained about the disciples of Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus had passed by the tax office of Levi the tax collector and had called him to be a follower. When Levi accepted, he hosted a great feast at his house and invited many tax collectors and “others” to dine with his honored guest, Jesus, and those already his disciples. In the larger context of Luke’s narrative, this is the third successive episode (or fourth, if Jesus’ encounter with the “sinner” Simon in the boat is included) in which Jesus reached out to the social outcasts of his day and offered them restoration. He touched the leper and then healed him; he offered forgiveness of

sins and then healed the paralytic. Then he called the outcast tax collector to be a disciple, accepted Levi’s invitation of fellowship, and dined at the banquet with him and his guests.

The religious leaders were quite upset at this precisely because eating was a sign of fellowship, making Jesus a social equal in the shame of the tax collectors. In the first century, social identity was signified by those with whom you ate. Rather than the religious leaders categorizing the whole group as in fellowship with Jesus, they saw Jesus and his disciples in fellowship with tax collectors and sinners. When the Pharisees asked why the disciples of Jesus ate with such low-lives, Jesus responded by saying that the well have no need of a physician. He had not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. For Jesus, repentance was made possible by acceptance. For the Pharisees, acceptance was made possible by repentance. They therefore could not understand why or how Jesus and his followers could be in league with such people.

As the story continues in verse 33, the question shifts from with whom Jesus and his followers eat to how often they eat and why they do not observe the times of fasting that even the followers of John the Baptist practice. Fasting was an important part of Jewish piety—it was preparation for repentance and service. It was done by Pharisees twice a week, and it is clear from other texts that Jesus had nothing against the practice when it was done for the sake of true righteousness. In the Sermon on the Mount, he ap-

proved the practice when pure motives were at work. In the ongoing story of Luke-Acts, fasting was clearly a practice of the early church. Here, the issue is one of timing. When is fasting appropriate? Is it a form of piety to be observed at all times because it is a commanded expression of piety, or does the given form of piety have meaning only as it reflects the larger situation and need? Jesus says that fasting makes no sense in the context of joy and revelry brought on by the presence of the bridegroom. No one fasts at a wedding feast, even if the feast occurs on a normal day for fasting. The bridegroom is here, he says—it's eating time, not fasting time. Yes, when the bridegroom is gone, then there will be times for fasting—times appropriate to the form. In Acts 13, we find the leaders of the church in Antioch fasting because they are about to launch the boldest initiative ever in Christian missions. The form of piety is a means to an end, not an end in itself. It's appropriate only when the bridegroom is away.

But the problem is bigger than fasting, as Jesus makes clear in the parables that he tells. You can't take new cloth and put it on an old garment without creating more holes. Likewise, you can't put new wine into old wineskins without the fermentation process bursting the skins. That leather can be stretched only once; then it becomes hard and brittle, and the expansion of that fermenting wine will burst the skins. New wine must go into new skins. New cloth must be matched with new cloth. Only Luke includes the final sentence of Jesus in the controversy: *No one after drinking old wine desires new; for he says, "The old is good."*

In context, the point is surely directed at the religious leaders who could only see Jesus and his disciples eating with the wrong people and eating at the wrong time. They could not accept him because they were already locked into their old garment, their old wineskin. For them, one did the right ritual at the right time, kept the rules in the right way, thereby being able to declare oneself righteous. They knew the rules and rituals. The presence of a new understanding of God—one beyond right form and right ritual—was a mystery to them. Why taste something new when the old already feels so good? We all know about old jeans and old boots and old shoes, and how much more comfortable they are. Even when we realize the need to trade in the old for new at times, we really are not ready to give up the comfort, if not also the security, of the old.

Jesus has nothing against the practice of piety, nor does he have a problem with fasting—he himself fasted for forty days before he began his ministry. But fasting is not piety in and of itself any more than eating with the right people is a sign of piety. The issue in both cases is a right heart

before God. Jesus and his followers understood that the meal they ate was a sign of fellowship all right; the outcasts were now in fellowship with Jesus. Eating with Jesus was much more appropriate than fasting if the issue was really drawing closer to God. The forms—eating and fasting—had value only as they reflected heart conditions of people. Neither eating nor fasting could become an end in itself or the measure of righteousness for a right heart.

Neither the new wine nor the new patch of cloth are representative of particular acts of worship or forms of piety in these analogies. They both are representative of Jesus himself—the presence of the son of God as the means by which people come to know God. No longer is access to God to be found in the Law, but in Jesus. The Pharisees thought God was to be found through their keeping of the laws and rituals. Jesus comes saying the reign of God is here—in the flesh, not in new forms of ritual.

I suggest that, since the cross of Jesus, there has been no new wine; no new wineskins, no new garments by which we can be clothed and know God. God did not say through Jeremiah, "The days are coming when I will give new forms for worship and teach people new songs so that they feel more spiritual." Jesus didn't come to give new forms of worship, new styles of music, new dramatic presentations that better meet peoples' needs and feelings. He came to create new hearts. This text is not about changing our worship services; it is about changing our understanding of worship. The days are coming, Jesus says in John 4, when time and place won't be the issues in worship; people will worship in Spirit and truth. As children of God in the Spirit, they will have relationship with the God who is Spirit. But how do we define worship today? Isn't it by being at the right place at the right time? When we think that a few new forms of worship will make us more attractive to outsiders, are we not playing the fasting game, believing it is the methods and forms themselves that carry the content of faith? When what we are worried about is how long we have to sit in the auditorium or whether or not a small group could sing instead of the whole congregation—that's not new wineskins; that's playing with patches. There is a sense in which all of Christianity for the past two thousand years is a patchwork quilt.

We keep living with the misguided assumption that a new patch will fix the church. We want to find a new program that will make visitation successful; a new or old program that will make fellowship appealing; a new program for religious education. If we just changed materials or changed personnel, somehow people would want to come to Bible class and there would not be this huge group

of people who can make it to worship but not to class. Some folks think we need a new patch for music, from multiple song leaders to changed presentation formats for the songs (books, overhead projection, handout programs) to multiple services for multiple styles and tastes. Every time a new patch gets sewn on the quilt, there is a tear somewhere else. Whenever the new programs are launched, others seem to suffer, and then when the enthusiasm of the few is exhausted, so is the good idea. There is nothing wrong with the forms—and that applies in most cases to both old and new—but the search for hearts goes on.

The Restoration Movement originated as a unity movement—an attempt to bring all Christians from different denominations together. It was not new wine in a new wine-skin; it was a new patch on a seventeen hundred-year-old piece of cloth. What of that unity movement today? Most analysts tell us we are in the midst of yet another major split between hard-liners and progressives. You see, our attempt at unity was based from the beginning on an attempt to go back to the Bible primarily to find the proper forms for worship and practice. The focus was on restoring the forms of the first-century church. Particularly in the latter part of this century, we have fought over the forms of singing, we have fought over forms of structure and organization; we are now fighting over whether or not the forms have been fully restored or whether there are new ones that are acceptable. Think about what we have done with Paul's words in Colossians and Ephesians about singing: *Don't get drunk with wine but be filled with the Spirit, singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, **making melody in your heart!** Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with **thankfulness in your hearts to God.*** So we have argued about form!

And I hear God screaming, "That's not what I meant!" The issue/concern is appropriateness. You want to fast—go ahead and fast, but do it when it's appropriate. That appropriateness is determined by God's putting his law in our hearts, not our hands—hearts given to God, not just our heads given to rules. Right hearts are bigger than forms. That was the problem in the first century. *The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.* I fear it is still our problem today. God wants whole lives given to worship and praise, not a few minutes given to *my* style of music and *my* kind of preacher. Hearts given to God are always

pliable, always open to him, always searching for the best ways and forms and times and seasons to praise him and serve him. I fear that God is often asking a totally different set of questions from ours. We seem most interested in the Pharisee's question—How come you don't do it my way?! There is no blessing in keeping old forms just because they are old forms. Neither is there blessing in adopting new forms just because they are new! Our forms, times, places—all are means to an end—and we have made them ends in themselves.

Later in Luke, Jesus says, "[W]here your treasure is there will your heart be also" (12:34). I doubt that many of us left our hearts in San Francisco, but I have to confess that all too often I leave my heart in affluent America, and I'm not sure I know how to give it to God. How about you? Could there be the selling of houses and property in our day to meet the needs of others? Could there be that sense of love and acceptance of outsiders and outcasts in our day that would invite them to repent and join in the fellowship? *Those who have tasted the old wine do not want the new for they say, "The old is good."* Why? Because they think the forms are ends in themselves.

Remember these words from Jeremiah: *This is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts. And I will be their God, and they will be my people. And no longer will each man teach his neighbor and each his brother saying, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.*

Human existence on earth is so fragile, so temporary. Nobody died and made you and me judge, precisely because we can't see and know peoples' hearts. But make no mistake about it, *God does know hearts.* God knows our hearts, and the good news is, he loves us and offers his acceptance and forgiveness to us. He longs through Jesus to empower us to turn away from pursuits of the world; from our failure to remember that forms of worship are means to an end, not the end in themselves. He longs to clothe us with Christ, write his law on our hearts, forgive our iniquity, remember our sins no more.

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