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Putting New Wine in New Wine Skins

Matt 9:14-17

*“Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not? And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast. No man putteth a piece of new cloth unto an old garment, for that which is put in to fill it up taketh from the garment, and the rent is made worse. **Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved.**”¹*

Jesus’ comment that we should not put new wine in old wine skins is advice we should all heed in today’s Church of God environment.

When God puts new wine into the old wine skins (the past way of doing things), the skins will be destroyed. New wine and old wine skins are incompatible.

Things change. Circumstances change. The people God uses to accomplish His will fulfill their purpose and others take their place. Sometimes the Gospel goes out in great power. At other times it is only a whisper.

We can think we have all the answers. We are used to our “old wine skins”. And then God decides to make New Wine!

Jesus brought with Him a quantum leap in the way the religion of God would be conducted. His ways SHOCKED the religious leadership of the time. He brought new wine. What was needed were new wine skins.

OPENING OF SALVATION TO THE GENTILES

The Jews were jealous for God. They practiced a very disciplined form of worship with many rules and regulations. At the time of Jesus’ life on Earth, this included a strict separation from those who were NOT Jews. This meant that a practicing Jew would not even eat with non-Jews. They even referred to them as “dogs” (*see Matthew 15:26*).

The way of salvation was for the Jew – not the Gentile. Paul referred to this as a “wall of separation” (*see Ephesians 2:14*).

¹ KJV

Jesus changed all this. He brought new wine. One could say that he turned the Religion of God as practiced during that era -- *upside down!*

Jesus had to SHOCK His Apostles and the leadership of the Church into recognizing that the way of salvation was open to the Gentiles. Looking back 2000 or so years from where we are today diminishes the great CHANGE this was and how HARD it was on our brethren in the 1st Century Church of God to accept this NEW WINE!

KILL AND EAT!

The revelation that salvation was open to the Gentiles was first given to Peter. Jesus had to give him a shocking vision to JOLT him in preparation to accept the opening of salvation to the Gentile peoples. We find this story in *Acts 10*.

The story starts with a very strange vision given to the Apostle Peter. In this vision, a sheet full of unclean animals was lowered down from heaven, and Peter was commanded by God to “*kill and eat.*” This happened three times.

Peter was understandably shocked and confused by this command because he clearly understood that God made some animals to be eaten and some that were not to be eaten. The forbidden meats in the Greek were called “*koinon*” or unclean. Each time that he was commanded to kill and eat the unclean animals, Peter responded by saying he has never eaten anything common or unclean. Finally, Jesus told him that whatever God has cleansed, he should not call unclean.

Laying aside the ridiculous argument that this vision was given to Peter by God to show that ALL meats now could be eaten, the *true* explanation of this vision was a life-changing revelation to Peter. Jesus was about to slaughter a Jewish sacred cow. He was going to shift gears in the direction of the Great Work of Salvation of all mankind. He was about to create NEW wine. What he needed from his chosen vessels was NEW wine skins.

Now at that time in Caesarea there lived a Roman military officer named Cornelius. Cornelius was a faithful God-worshipper along with his entire household, but he was a Gentile. An Angel appeared to him and commanded him to send men to Joppa to find Peter. In the meantime, Peter was given this strange vision. As soon as the vision ended and Peter was left trying to figure out its meaning, three men from Cornelius showed up at Peter’s door.

Peter received word by the Spirit from God to go with them to see Cornelius. He took along some Jewish church members from Joppa. When he arrived at Cornelius’ house, many had gathered there to wait for him. Peter said to them, “*You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.*” (*Acts 10:28*)

At some point during the journey to Caesarea, Peter got the point God was making to him. The vision had nothing to do with clean and unclean meats. God was showing Peter that it was not the way of God to label any HUMAN BEING as unclean. This was new wine to Peter. God made the point even more profound by what was to follow.

Cornelius told Peter about the visit by the angel. Peter began to preach to those assembled. He started by telling them about the revelation that had been given to him. He said, *"In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him."* (Acts 10:34-35)² As Peter was preaching, something astounding happened. The Holy Spirit fell upon all those who had assembled at Cornelius' house. The Spirit was manifested by the Gentiles speaking in tongues (other languages) and magnifying God.

Peter and the Jews who accompanied him were completely astonished!

Peter was convinced. He immediately took action. He said,

"Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10:47)

God made it very clear. Things were going to change. He was creating NEW wine. This shocking revelation was so astounding that when the Apostles and brethren throughout Judea heard about it – they couldn't believe it! Peter had to go with his Jewish witnesses to Jerusalem to convince the leadership of the Church that God was no respecter of persons, but had INDEED opened the way of salvation to the Gentile world. Let's move on to Acts 11.

In Jerusalem Peter met with strong resistance. This was just too hard to believe. Verses 1-3:

"Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, 'You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them.'"

Peter recounted the entire experience starting with the vision he had been given and ending with the sealing of the Holy Spirit manifested by Cornelius and the other Gentiles in Caesarea.

It was difficult to understand. It was confusing and hard to believe. The entire basis of their knowledge of how God's salvation system worked was crumbling before them! But God, through the Holy Spirit, was creating NEW WINE SKINS to accept NEW WINE.

Verse 18: *"When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, 'Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.'"*

What an incredible event! They didn't fully understand, but there was no denying that God Himself was behind all that had taken place.

HARD TO TAKE

The Apostles and many of the leaders of the New Testament Church accepted God's revelation. But others did not. There were other Church brethren who wanted to cling to their old wine skins. They still believed that the way to salvation was through circumcision and observing the many regulations that the Jews had *added* to the Law of God.

² NKJV throughout unless otherwise noted.

Later Paul was appointed by Jesus Christ to spearhead the conversion of thousands of Gentiles. Some of these, like Cornelius, were God-fearers. But others were called to accept the Christ directly out of their pagan practices! The Jewish religious leaders were enraged! They began to fight Paul and his new wine. They began to thrust those who accepted the new wine OUT of the synagogues!

The Apostle Paul was quick to react.

Acts 13:46-48

“Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, ‘It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us:

“I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, that you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.’³ Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.”

This controversy led to a Church-wide conference in Jerusalem. We can find this account in Acts 15. Starting in verse 8, Peter described his experience of God placing His stamp of approval on a people that had been considered dogs by the Jews.

“So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.”

Then Barnabas and Paul told their story of the miracles and wonders God had manifested among the Gentiles. At the end, the Apostle James, who appears to have been the president of the conference made a ruling. Acts 15: 13-17:

“And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, “Men and brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written:

‘After! this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up; So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the LORD who does all these things.’”⁴

The accounts of the New Testament are filled with confrontations between those who were willing to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit and those who were not. Some were not willing to accept the new wine God was giving them. They tenaciously clung to their old wine skins (teachings).

³ Isaiah 49

⁴ Amos 9

ARE WE TODAY FOLLOWING THE LEAD OF THE HOLY SPIRIT?

The Church is a spiritual organism. We are to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, “Not my will – but Your will be done.” THIS MEANS CHANGE! The very idea of repentance and following the Lord, no matter WHERE He is leading us, *is all about change!*

BUT human beings do not like uncertainty. We like things to be predictable. We get uncomfortable with not knowing. We do not like change. Yet the Gospel Message is all about CHANGE! Jesus brought NEW WINE – and he was killed for it!

In our 21st century Church of God environment, we are facing a crisis much like those of the 1st century Church of God. Some of us are willing to follow the lead of our King Jesus, while others are relentlessly clinging to the OLD WINE SKINS of the past.

Jesus said, “*Do you not say, 'There are still four months and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!*” John 4:35-36

Who are the harvesters? We are the harvesters – the people of God chosen by God to harvest His end-time fields! How goes the harvest? Where are the fruits we should be seeing?

As soon as the Apostles got it figured out that God was shifting gears, those who were willing to follow the lead of Lord Jesus began harvesting with a vengeance! They were willing to put the new wine God had given them into *brand new wine skins*.

What is holding us back?

I believe it is three things:

1. The spirit of *Exclusiveness* – *US VERSUS THEM*
2. Not recognizing the *Fields of God* – *ONLY ISRAEL*
3. *A desire to RECREATE the Past.* – *THE FEAR FACTOR*

These things STILL affect our thinking, no matter what we say.

1. US versus THEM

I only have my own Worldwide Church of God cultural experience to draw from. Various church organizations develop their own cultures. And the WCG culture was a very powerful influence. I came into the Church while in the US Navy, so most things except the Sabbath were new to me.

There were many good things about the WCG culture. After all, it was the WCG that was the instrument of my calling and Bible education. But there were also bad things that needed to change.

I remember well my WCG church experience. We used to call non-WCG believers “pagans”, “the world”, and “Satan’s children”, etc. Even the Sabbatarian church organizations that shared most of the doctrines of the WCG were still unacceptable. The Church of God 7th Day organization, the one that ordained Herbert W. Armstrong, we called the “Sardis Church” or the “Dead Church.” Our

efforts at preaching the Gospel were almost entirely aimed at the western nations we saw as Israel. The Gentile nations were only going to get the Gospel preached to them during the time of the Two Witnesses or the Millennium. We were primarily an American church. Words like evangelize and proselytize were *bad*, protestant words.

Not all of us believed that way. Herbert W. Armstrong himself spent most of his later years traveling to the “Gentile” world preaching the Gospel message. Many were not even Christians. But for the majority of us, we practiced “exclusivism”. We were the chosen ones. All the others were dogs. Not much different than what was true in the 1st Century.

You think I am being too harsh? Ask those who shared that experience. They will confirm what I am telling you. Was I an exclusivist? You bet I was! I was influenced by the wrong things about that church culture as much as I was by the right things.

Today, over 10 years after the breakup of the WCG, the spirit of exclusivism still affects some of us. There are those among us who even go so far as to *exclude fellow former WCG brethren* from fellowship unless they “join” us. It is much like saying, “unless you are circumcised and keep the “whole” law, you cannot be saved.”

Some still cling to old wine skins.

The remnant of old wine skin exclusivism keeps us separated and our collective part in the Work of God is *limited* in effectiveness.

How can someone who doesn't even recognize a fellow Sabbath keeping Church of God member as a brother recognize anyone out there in the harvest fields *as a POTENTIAL brother?*

2. Only Israel

Exclusivism in church culture is not the only old wine skin that needs to be discarded. There is also the idea that the called out and chosen are mostly taken from the modern day tribes of Israel. Perhaps people do not consciously recognize this kind of ethno-centrist mind set, but this idea *STILL* influences the thinking of many, and holds us *BACK* from the harvest. What if the Apostles would have clung to this idea? There would have been no churches raised up in Asia Minor, Central India, Rome, Gaul, Britain and other “Gentile” nations.

Some are still *AFFECTED* by this old wine skin idea that, since the Gospel is for the modern day descendants of Israel tribes in the present dispensation, Gentiles must wait until the work of the Two Witnesses or the Millennial Rule of Christ. But the Bible doesn't teach that. This is another one of those faulty notions that have shaped our view of God's Work for many years – and if we are totally honest with ourselves, it *STILL DOES TODAY!*

As Peter said, *God is not a respecter of persons*. He had planned to make the Gentile peoples a part of His family all along. And although some among us may be waiting until the Two Witnesses or the Millennium to see this happen – God is not!

Romans 10:12-13: *“For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”* There are millions of people in Asia, Africa, South America, and other “Gentile” parts of the world who need to be reached with the True Gospel of the Kingdom of God. Who will take that message to them?

It is not only the job of the Two Witnesses. It is not only the job of the kings and priests of the Millennial Kingdom. It is YOUR JOB and it is MY JOB, ordained by God Almighty. And yet we seem to flounder around in uncertainty, without any effective plan to do anything about all that ripe grain waving in the breeze.

3. Fear Factor

It is difficult to step into the unknown. It is hard to leave our familiar comfort zones and do things a different way. It is easier to try to rebuild the past. It is easier to cling to our old wine skins.

This comfort zone can be both spiritual and physical. It is primarily a fear to change.

The leaders of the Church in the 1st Century needed a radical change in doing the Work of God. Peter and the Apostles in Jerusalem needed a strong, powerful push to get them to change. A gentle nudge would not have sufficed. It took visions and miraculous manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Paul needed to be struck down in blindness on the road to Damascus or he would have kept on arresting God's very own. We love our old wine skins. What is it going to take to move the present day COGs from our own historical experience off of square one?

Some Sabbath keeping groups are busy filling their new wine skins. Some are out there harvesting. For example, the SDAs and the COG 7th Day have a very active program of evangelism and church building outside the confines of the Western world. In fact, it is my understanding that there are far more COG 7th Day church members OUTSIDE the US than inside. Here are some statistics of the Church of God 7th Day (Denver Conference): The number of Church congregations world wide is 3,386 and the estimated attendance worldwide is 308,496.

The Church of God 7th Day is very active in evangelizing Africa, India, South America and other parts of the Non-western World. We can learn something from their example.

God is waiting for us to change to NEW wine skins. But our natural tendency is to cling to our Old Wine Skins.

They are comfortable – but they are EMPTY!

A VISION FOR THE END TIME HARVEST

Again, I can only speak from my own COG experience. Most of you to whom I am writing share the same experience I have had. It is not the COG7th Day organization that is dead. It is us – or at the very least – we have become *lukewarm*.

It is far time we become New Wine Skins. We have a commission to fulfill.

We cannot leave the preaching of the Gospel up to Two Witnesses or a Millennial Work. The time to preach the Gospel to ALL the nations is right now! God has given us the Bible to educate us about God and His plan of salvation for all mankind. He has given us the financial and technological resources. He has given us the manpower among our COG youth who have grown up in *The Way of God*.

Paul gave us a clear description of how people are called. There is no magic in it. It takes hard work and vision. It takes COG leaders stepping up to the plate. We have to become New Wine Skins.

Rom 10:14-15

“How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written:

"How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!"⁵

This is what I call the “evangelistic formula”.

God’s role is to choose those He will call His own. Our job is to get the True Message of Salvation out there. The lost are not able to come to the Church if the Church is NOT taking the Gospel to *THEM!* God’s fields are out there. They are ripe for the harvest.

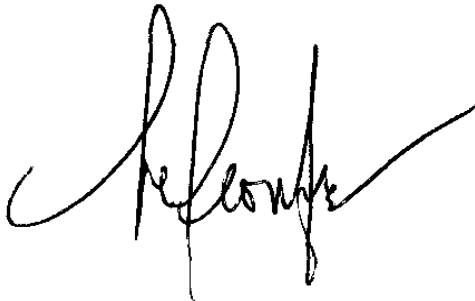
There are those among us who are actively joining the harvest. There are still others among us who will not get rid of their Old wine skins.

What happens to Old Wine Skins? They are no longer used. They are discarded and replaced by New Wine Skins.

THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER

Let us ALL be counted among the New! Let us ALL create programs that effectively reach out to our future brethren. They are waiting to hear the call. God is waiting. Pray that our God will send more workers from among us out into His vast End Time Harvest Fields. Pray that God help us all to become New Wine Skins.

A fellow-harvester in the service of Jesus Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Leon Sexton', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

T. Leon Sexton

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⁵ Isaiah 51