

New Wineskins for Old – A Transformed Way of Thinking

No one puts new wine into old bottles; else the new wine will burst the old bottles, and be spilled, and the bottles will perish. But new wine must be put into new bottles; and both are preserved. No man also having drunk the old wine desire the new one, because he says, "The old is better".

(Luke 5:37-39)

I will never forget my first visit to Aguas Calientes (Hot Springs) near Machu Picchu in central Peru. I was in town as part of a work assignment and circumstances forced me to stay overnight. When dinner time came, I went out in search of something to eat. There was only one small shop in the hamlet, and the food on offer was far from appealing. Most of the fruit on sale was rotten. The eggs were covered with mildew. The water was not potable (I spent the rest of my time there drinking lemonade instead of what came out of the taps). The bread rolls were stale and rock hard. Peasants purchasing these abominations that passed for food used bank notes that were torn, sewn up with cotton and covered with grime. Whatever Aguas Calientes once boasted, it was not modernity. In the interests of survival, I postponed eating until the following day. This town was in a time warp. Everything it had was out of date. Even the generator that was supposed to provide lighting after hours was out of service, so as dusk fell the population settled in for a long, dark night, with only nocturnal insects to entertain us and ubiquitous bed bugs to ensure we stayed awake for the performance. You could almost say that the town was "worn" out.

Things do wear out

In spite of our best attempts, things we esteem and use become obsolete or wear out and are discarded. What is now old and worn out was once new, perhaps a prized top-of-the-range product. Expensive possessions degenerate over time (Colossians 2:22). Today's fresh bread is stale by tomorrow and only the desperate will eat it. Discerning people prefer fresh products. Machinery becomes unserviceable. Today's news becomes tomorrow's analysis and drops off the page by the following morning. We used to say that, "Today's news is tomorrow's fish and chip wrap". Over time, even the best products fray, crack, splinter, lose their sheen and need to be replaced. The ultimate experience of wearing out is our bodies; they eventually give up, in spite of a lifetime of costly care.

It is the same in church life. Denominations and parachurches that serve with verve and distinction in one generation become out of touch; the numbers of people turning up for Sunday services decline in line with the moribund nature of traditions that remain in the next era. Old timers mumble about change and complain that "things were better in the old days". Today's experiences, including exciting meetings, things that bless and thrill us, even the way we apply truth to our circumstances, all need to be refreshed from time to time if they are to stay alive. That is not to say they were never genuine, they just get old, hackneyed, the shine wears off, they no longer have the same appeal.

I have sought in vain for a sense of residual excitement in churches once led by the likes of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, George Whitefield, John Knox and other men of God who powerfully touched their nations. I have attempted to read popular Christian works from those times (such as prolific journals of John Wesley), but they are turgid and dry in the context of the modern world. Only the legends of greatness remain, like so many ancient sites in the Middle East where mighty empires once held sway but have been displaced by sand or rocks. Even if the “left-overs” of great revivals remain for a period, the ants of time eventually carry away the crumbs, leaving only barren earth and a memory that no longer reflects reality. The sun sets on even the most majestic scenery. The body ceases to function and dies.

Adjusting to new times

I know Christians who are still living in the shadow of blessing, revivals and testimonies of events long ago and have not realised time has moved on and they need to catch up. (Like Internet sites, we all need to be “refreshed” from time to time to ensure we are current.) Jesus said that there will be those who believe the “old ways” are better, who erect barricades that chill the soul and who regard their styles and modalities as sacrosanct. However, this should not be an impediment to moving on with what the Holy Spirit is doing in “our day”.

When I was growing up in Australia a church movement emerged in response to infighting between Protestant denominations in the Australian State of Queensland (largely as a result of a wave of theological modernism that swept across the State). Bible study groups made up of like-minded people began to come together, almost spontaneously, drawn by a desire to practice a simple version of Christianity. A hymn book was designed and printed. Meetings were simple in structure. There was a minimalist approach to church government. These people shunned denominational tags, preferring instead to be known simply as “Christians”. They had something unique and other churches began to sit up and take notice. Finally, a conference was held between the “Christians” and the Queensland Baptist Union. Because of commonalities in vision, praxis and frameworks, it was proposed the two groups merge. No one demurred. However, a sticking point was agreeing on a “name”. Every denomination has to have a name. Opting for simplicity, a number of delegates suggested the combined movement jettison out-of-date tags and keep the New Testament name “Christians”. Finally, an old pioneer rose to his feet and approached the podium. In a raspy voice the sardonic speaker stated that he was a Baptist, had been so all his life and no one was “going to make a Christian out of (him)”. Very droll. In the end, both groups went their ways and the Christians virtually disappeared. (How ironic!)

Old wineskins perish

Jesus said that new wine is not put into old bottles (in New Testament days cured animal skins were sewn together, sealed and used to hold water and wine – this is still the case in parts of the Middle East). Otherwise, when fermentation occurs, the new wine causes the old skins to break and the wine is spilled.

New wine, Jesus insisted, must be put into new wine skins. The analogy is a powerful one. God does not mix new with old (cf 2 Corinthians 5:17, Colossians 3:10, Hebrews 10:20, 2 Peter 3:13). The context indicates Jesus was comparing the old ceremonial forms of Judaism and the new message he was bringing; the two were essentially incompatible.

The application of this principle is profound. We need to examine whether we are capable of holding God's new wine, his revelation, his message, the move of the Holy Spirit, a word of power for our generation, or whether they would be lost on us because we are no longer functioning as vessels in His hands. This happens if we are so enamoured of the "old" that the new is beyond us.

Let me tell a story that underscores this point.

I first met Pastor Juan Gonzales in his church in suburban Lima, Peru. A gentle man of God he told me how he had started his Christian ministry in a poor "*pueblo joven*" ("young town", or slum) on the periphery of the capital. As a teenager a friend talked to him about Jesus Christ and he made a decision to become a disciple of Jesus. Family members and friends noticed positive changes in his life and were drawn to share the same faith. After settling into a local "evangelico" (Protestant) church with strong pastoral support that enabled him to be effectively mentored in his Christian life he decided to go to Bible College and enter full-time Christian ministry. This decision required long nights learning how to read and write. In time, he was ordained a pastor, invited to care for a growing congregation of young Christians and became influential in the life of his denomination. After a number of years he was elected as a member of the National Executive of his church.

Juan was keen to take me to see the Bible College where he studied, a cluster of buildings on the road between Lima and the port city of Callao. Things had changed, he warned me, since a leftist military government toppled President Belaunde Terry. The new Dictator President, Juan Velasco, was fiercely anti-American, anti-Western and pro-Moscow. Juan and I had stood together on Avenida Arequipa and observed national day celebrations that provided a pretext for military parades and jingoistic speeches against Chile and bellicose denunciations of the United States of America. One of the first things the military government did was expel most of the foreign missionaries working in the country. Only Bible translators working in Yarinacocha, on the edge of the jungle deep inside the country, were permitted to remain because their work included the development of dictionaries and primers in indigenous languages. Velasco's anti-Western sentiment meant that he over-emphasised support for indigenous development and identity.

The first thing I noticed about the Bible College was its run-down appearance. The doors were locked and the windows were closed. Juan stood silently inside the front office and looked around disconsolately at the boxes of hymnbooks, the piano in the corner, stacks of chairs along the walls, dust, grime and cobwebs. I could imagine what was going through his mind.

Where students once read the Bible together, studied, listened to lectures and prayed there was now a deafening silence.

I picked up one of the hymnbooks and, leafing through it, discovered Spanish language translations of hymns I had grown up with. Copies of the *Reina Valera* translation of the Bible were in a box inside a nearby office. I asked Juan how long the Bible College had been in its present condition. "Since the new Government came to power", was his response. The expatriate lecturers had been told to pack their bags and leave the country. It seemed the only visible heritage they left behind, after years of ministry, was a broken down building whose ownership was now subject of some dispute.

Later that day Juan and I attended a meeting of the Consejo Nacional (National Board), where the focus was on how to deal with a growing number of churches without trained pastors. Many of them were being led by Sunday School teachers who were reading from lesson books and managing to keep just one step ahead of the rest of their congregations. Untold numbers of people were becoming Christians. There were dangers young believers would be subverted by cult groups taking advantage of rapid church growth without sufficient leadership. There was no money to enable students to study full-time. Many congregations had no premises in which to hold services. Local Catholic priests were threatening by the work and opposed it. In small villages high in the Andes, pastors and churches were being harassed by Marxist "Sendero Luminoso" (Shining Light) guerrillas. The bottom line was that, after years of prayer and faithful witness, a move of the Holy Spirit was touching the country and the church was experiencing a time of great blessing and growth.

The contrast between the extinct Bible College in Callao and the revival sweeping parts of the nation could not have been starker.

Enjoying the new wine

I once spent an evening in a village outside Lima, ministering to a congregation of around 50 "campesinos" ("peasants") in what was little more than a cattle shed (a cow rested behind the last row of seats). This was their "church", the humble place where they met several times a week to worship God. In the absence of electricity, one of the deacons lit an old Coleman lamp and placed it near the makeshift pulpit. As I preached, the level of light dropped progressively until we were practically in darkness; then the old deacon shuffled to the front of the church and pumped the lamp until I could see the congregation again. This happened several times. It was hard to keep to my notes, the occasional animal noise from the rear stall interrupted my thoughts and a mixture of smells assaulted my olfactory senses; but there was something marvellous about the way these simple people of God, many of them illiterate, were open to the Holy Spirit and excited about the truths of His Word. After the meeting we shared a meal of *choclo*, corn fried in oil and wrapped in banana leaves, and enjoyed the relationship of brothers and sisters in Christ that characterises the Body of Christ around the world. Nothing was strong enough to separate us from the love of God, not language, not economic conditions, not social status; not cows in church, not

lack of electricity. Our faith in Jesus was stronger than any human barrier, brighter than the darkness.

Post-revolutionary Marxist Peru would not be the easiest place to train men and women in Christian ministry, and new methods, apostolic methods had to be found that would enable this to occur in spite of official opposition, but the church would (and did) grow and touch the nation for Christ. It did so because people were prepared to change.

A new day with a new approach

We need new “sparks”, fresh momentum and continually revitalised ways of thinking. Old moulds need to be broken and thrown away, not kept on life-support systems or held in museums dedicated to reifying some “golden age” of Christendom.

We are tempted to rely on forms and traditions that have served us well. But what happens when circumstances seem to work against us? When missionaries are expelled from countries and the support they have carefully constructed for churches are no longer viable? How can a national church be equipped to tend the work and cause it to grow and not be extinguished by such traumatic events? How can we make a difference on a personal level? The grace of God and His desire to see humanity reached for Christ are greater than our limited and sometimes futile efforts. He can take an infant church orphaned by political events and cause it to grow and parent dynamic, reproducing, passionately spiritual and Godly churches. He can take our limitations and use them to achieve great things of eternal consequence. His ways are higher than ours. Mind transformation only comes about as a work of the Holy Spirit. Events that occasion disappointments in our lives are often stepping stones for Him to show Himself strong because of our weaknesses. We have to minister out of life.

Finally, concepts such as “new” and “old” have nothing to with age or the length of time someone has been a Christian. It is possible to be advanced in years but living in spiritual renewal. The reverse applies equally. I have seen enough to know it is not the style of church one attends, the version of the Bible one reads, the genre of Christian music one prefers, or the denominational tags one wears that make a difference. Renewal is all about the heart.

If our hearts are in love with the Father, truly excited about Jesus and disposed to obey the Holy Spirit and be open to his leading and anointing to both be and do the work of God, our “skins” will be able to cope with anything and what God gives us will serve as a blessing to many.