

New Wine in Old Skins

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | February 20, 2019



Recently, I received an email from a friend that had such powerful insight that I asked permission to post it on our website as a guest blog. I hope you find it as impactful as I did. – Dr. J

Issues of women's ordination and compliance committees have some of us thinking that deeper forces are at work today in the church.

I've found that secular schools of thought are often valuable when seeking to understand the underlying dynamics of the human condition—even with regard to religious and theological issues. I will reference the Spiral Dynamics school of thought, originating with Claire Graves and refined first by Don Beck and Christopher Cowan.

In their groundbreaking work, *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership and Change*, Beck and Cowan describe the difference between the container—which is thinking style/worldview/governance system preference and the contents—the actual values/norms/mission of an individual or group.

For example, the Marine Corps and organized crime groups share the same container: Loyalty,

command and control, clearly defined behavioral norms and punishment for transgression, well-defined hierarchy and decision rights, enforced rules of engagement, and so on.

Now consider the vast difference in the contents—the missions and values of the two organizations.

The tensions in the church today are thought to be rooted in disagreement around the contents (doctrine, norms, and practices). However, I suggest the root of the tensions goes much deeper and is really about the container.

Christianity's container has changed very little since Constantine co-opted the fledgling theology in a shrewd political move. He took the governance approach of imperial Rome (which had worked very well for centuries) and filled that container with Christian theology; he replaced the pagan metaphysics with fresh, new Christian theology.

But the new theology was tainted by the old container—fundamentally changed (adulterated)—so that it could be successfully held within the imperial mindset. The promise of Christ's message to the world, in the form of Christian theology, was soured because it was held within a human-governance worldview.

In Spiral Dynamics language, the imperial governance container reused by Constantine was color coded in their diagram as red/BLUE: authoritarian, hierarchical, based on the rule of law, self-serving, and self-protective. Emphasis was placed on behavioral right and wrong, group norms, compliance and punishment, the human need for justice, and a focus on the visible (hand) instead of the invisible (heart).

Jesus used the metaphor of filling an old wine skin with new wine, something the people of his day clearly knew to avoid. New wine continues to ferment, and a new wine skin will stretch to accommodate the pressure produced by the carbon dioxide. The new wine skin takes a particular form due to the maturing of the new wine.

New wine, placed into an old wine skin that has stretched once and hardened, will burst the old skin and waste the wine. Or the new wine will be contaminated with bacteria and turn to vinegar.

Jesus was trying to get his listeners to grasp the unavoidable outcome of placing truly new light within an old-thinking container. And he had a great example of a reused wine skin at his disposal: the theocracy of the Jewish governance system—largely self-serving, self-protective, authoritarian, and hierarchical; that is, a rule-of-law governance model.

The reason that the metaphor of the wine skins is so powerful is that we have a very difficult time seeing the problem: our human tendency to ascribe to God the system of governance that we use to survive in this fallen world.

The rule of law is the most effective governance system ever developed. But the problem is that this adaptation is profane; it works, but it is also of this world and a direct result of our sinful condition and the forces of chaos we face. This old wine skin, formed by the human need for authoritarian governance in response to survival-of-the-fittest dynamics is not a part of God's design, as clearly illustrated in the life of Christ.

Many praise the Reformation and laud the new wine. Martin Luther dumped out a portion of the old wine of Catholic theology and norms, but because he continued to use the old Roman Catholic

container, he contaminated the new wine with the old. Protestant theology was adulterated by contact with the old wine skin.

We Adventists are satisfied that our church founders dumped a portion of old wine from mainline Protestant theology and replaced it with new wine. But the new wine, pressed in the excitement of the Awakening, was also contaminated by using the old wine skin, which has been passed down from pagan Rome.

And our message to the world is still not truly new wine, and it smells of vinegar. All this is due to using the old container—creating God in our image, believing that God’s governance of the universe mirrors human systems of governance that emerged due to our sinful condition.

The rule of law evolved for one purpose: group survival. By dampening intragroup conflict and chaos, the group is strengthened against external existential threats. And as such, when inter-group conflict grows, those given leadership positions are expected to apply a heavy hand, “for the good of the organization.” Does this sound familiar?

What would a new wine skin need to look like to hold the new wine that Jesus referenced? Think about the Good News without the contamination of the Roman wine skin. This is hard for us to envision, because a human system of governance for a religious organization formed by the fermentation of truly new light has never existed, except for a short time during the life of Christ and possibly the very early church.

In his understanding of reality, Christ saw past the profane usefulness of human governance systems based on group survival. He valued the progress of the individual and the value of the individual over the integrity and safety of the system. He understood, because of his divine perspective, that earthly group success and survival were temporal and not important compared to the healing of the individual character.

He was an outspoken critic of the use of coercion by those in positions of authority focused on behaviors, conformity, and group norms. And this was because these rules/norms/policies/enforcements evolved to protect the system and the collective, rather than out of concern for the spiritual health and well-being of the individual. Jesus was also notorious for non-compliance with the Jewish rule-of-law theocracy.

We have yet to see a new wine skin emerge that will successfully hold and protect the Good News, while it completes fermentation and maturity. That container, patterned on the life of Christ, will not look like the familiar kingdom-of-man container, which every historical theocracy and all successful contemporary denominations have adopted. When we refer to God as king, lord, judge, or ruler, we reinforce our mental model of a god created in our image.

The true kingdom-of-God container (wine skin) on this earth will take form based on the fermentation and influence of truly new wine. That form of governance, worldview, leadership, and organizational design will emerge based on the living and active nature of the new wine.

For this to happen, Christ’s life must be the template for the system of governance. And the eternal good of the individual must always outweigh the perceived threats to the integrity and security of the system. If this principle is not reflected in form of the container, then we are destined to use an old wine skin to carry the good news to the world. This has been and will be ultimately futile.

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