

God's News In The News

Week One Hundred Forty-Four

New Wine In Old Wineskins

Not On The Fence

In a previous lesson I addressed what I called Gamaliel's logic which was to wait on the fence and see how things turned out in reference to the revivals spreading literally throughout the world now. However, there are another group of people who are hardly in the middle. They are the Sanhedrin in the story who are ready to tar and feather and even put to death these revivals much like that early bunch wanted to extinguish the budding Christian movement. They sent out one of their own to kill these religious zealots wherever he could find them. For now, we will see that these current day critics are just as blind as they take their literary daggers out and rip apart what I believe is a great last day's revival, one that will leave them behind much like those pharisaical leaders of the past as Christianity has more than endured.

Another Piñata

We all know about the Asbury Revival that started in Wilmore, Ky early last month and then spread to other college and universities and really, is still spreading. And then a movie came out called *The Jesus Revolution* which hit theaters on February 24th, roughly three weeks after Asbury. The same critics of the Asbury revival are the same ones ready to beat up their new piñata with much the same criticisms they used up until now. There is too much emotionalism and not enough substance, the worship lacks depth and isn't what we like, and the litany goes on and on. It's a false Jesus they are following and it's producing shallow converts if true converts at all. There's not enough preaching, and it's led by sinners. Strangely enough, I've seen this all before. I came to the Lord during that time, and I recall all the hullabaloo about the Jesus movement. Fortunately I went to a church that opened its arms to hippies and I remember as a young person, we fought for the first rows at the services. Were we rough on the edges? You bet, but our love burned hot, and we only wanted what He wanted.

And About That Film

Yes, I finally got around to seeing it and my wife and I loved it. We went in knowing that, as in all films, things were dramatized, and timelines were sped up. They took literary license from time to time, but the essence was there. However, what is lost in the retelling is that God genuinely moved and transformed lives and not just the hippies, but Chuck Smith himself. We see a church that was dying and stuck in traditional ways of doing things. And God said He would fill it, but it wasn't with people that the current congregants expected, and in some way not the people they even wanted. Some online comments say that the gospel isn't preached clearly in the movie and it is shallow. I wonder if they saw the same movie I saw. The baptism scene clearly saw Greg Laurie hear and respond to a call to salvation. Changed lives? They were seen in boatloads. Not enough preaching? Preaching isn't only evidenced in a traditional sermon nor did the movie have the time to do that. What I saw was God moving in unconventional ways, much like He is doing now.

Tradition Is King

To many, if God doesn't move like we want or expect Him to, we tend to reject it on the grounds of what worked before. If this element or that element is not seen or that process or this process isn't followed then it is altogether wrong. We judge movements by past movements and then expect them to be like cookie cutter remakes of them, when God doesn't fit in the boxes we think He used before. So what is the template? Tradition? As a student of revivals, I can tell you the one hallmark of revival is not tradition. And that isn't a criticism of tradition which serves us well once we are revived. It however is a criticism of how flexible we are when God needs to shake us to wake us. And in the times of Jesus, He faced an awful lot of traditions and He constantly bucked them, often going out of His way to do things like healing on the sabbath or eating with sinners. And He told His disciples why He did that in a passage found in **Mark 2:22**:

And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.

The whole chapter is full of Jesus irritating the religious leaders of His day by forgiving the sins of the paralytic and harvesting on the sabbath and then His disciples were criticized for not fasting. It is in this setting that Jesus gave this revealing scripture.

Old And New Wineskins

In light of all the newness of Jesus coming in the flesh, He represented new wine being poured into old wineskins. Old wineskins can handle old wine because that wine is already fermented. However new wine needs a flexible wineskin that can expand as the wine ferments and matures. What happened in the Jesus Movement of the late 1960s was new wine and old wineskins couldn't handle it and in many cases, those old wineskins burst. Mainline denominations were not welcoming to people who didn't know how to act in services, nor did they know how to dress properly or know how things worked like a service order and the like. And they certainly were rough on the edges when it came to living like Jesus. They had some "fermenting" to do and those old wineskins of tradition and religiosity that served as the structure of seasoned saints couldn't hold these new converts. There were churches and leaders who pushed them away, but there were others who saw what God was doing and welcomed them in and found ways to do things differently for a time.

Structure Isn't Bad

I like how this is addressed by Bible scholar R.C. Sproul explains this:

Christians have, throughout the history of the church, created many religious structures and rituals in order to develop a closer walk with God. At their best, things such as prayer books, specific patterns of spiritual disciplines, and other devotional aids have served as helpful frameworks that have assisted many people in deepening their piety. At their worst, when things that have not been given immediately by God are treated as having been given directly by the Lord Himself, they have become burdensome in the church. This reality shows how careful we must be not to treat good things as ultimate things, that we must not allow useful spiritual practices to become markers of salvation when our Creator has not made them such.

Right now, this is where the fight is being fought and, unlike in times past we have an element that makes for easy and constant visible disputes and that is the Internet and the vast opportunities for instant responses that can be seen by millions at a time. It is a challenge that we can't dismiss or ignore. In fact, it is an opportunity to be embraced and used for good. Ultimately, I believe that we can and will triumph in this arena, but we need to stop the infighting first.

We Need To Adjust

Sproul, in the same article goes on to say this:

Sometimes, the need for reform is so great that the fresh work of God cannot be contained in old or expected forms. Jesus makes this essential point in Mark 2:21–22. This teaching comes right after the people's confusion about why Christ was not engaging in the practice of fasting as the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees did. As we noted in our study of verses 18–20, Jesus did not condemn fasting itself; rather, He said that His presence meant it was not time to abstain from celebration. He did not conform to their expectations of piety, not because their views of piety were entirely wrong but because God was doing a new thing. If they were to receive Him, they would have to adjust their expectations and not try to contain the new in the forms of the old.

Does this sound like prescient advice for the times we are living in? I think so and, as I mentioned previously, we've seen this happen before. Those pastors and leaders who value tradition and the order it gives over being flexible when God sends a new thing may find themselves on the outside looking in during this current spiritual tsunami of His Spirit washing over the globe.

A Needed Caution

Going back to Sproul we read a wise concern for those who are using old wineskins in the following quote which was written right after he mentions managing expectations when the new is here: *To do otherwise would cause spiritual damage, as Jesus' illustration reveals. After a piece of clothing has been washed many times, it has shrunk to a point where it cannot shrink any further. Used wineskins have been stretched as far as they will go without bursting by the gases produced by the fermentation of fresh wine. If one tries to mend a shrunken piece of cloth with a new patch, the patch will eventually shrink and tear away from the shrunken cloth, because the shrunken cloth will have no give left in it. Similarly, the gases produced by fermenting wine will stretch old, stretched-out wineskins beyond their breaking point. New patches are for new cloth that can accommodate shrinking, and new wine is for new wineskins that can accommodate expansion. Jesus could not be fit exactly into preconceived patterns and expectations, and those who tried would find themselves suffering great spiritual harm.*

What's Next?

If God follows His previous pattern, then we can expect a move similar to the charismatic renewal in the 1970s that lasted well into that decade. But if we also heed the whole point of this lesson, we need to manage our expectations and let Him do a new thing which may not look or feel like that Jesus Revolution many of us lived through decades ago. That is the point of being told to have new wineskins, isn't it? So that begs the question of what constitutes a new wineskin? Without boring you with the literal process, they are made out of animal skins which tells that to hold the new wine, there has to be sacrifice and death. If we want to be a part of what God is doing now, we need to sacrifice things that give us order and comfort and then die to traditions that aren't needed now. God is still a God of order so that isn't a bad thing. But for a time, we need to be flexible and open to new ways of doing things as He bursts out of the old wineskins we are using now. In the end, if we are willing, the church will expand and grow in ways it hasn't done in a very long time and we will see souls added to His Kingdom that couldn't fit before. And that is a very good thing.