

# “Religion Old and New”

a sermon by

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**Text: “And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.” (Luke 5:37)**

One of the sharpest debates that is taking place around us today concerns the role of religion in our society. Over the past weeks *Time Magazine*, *Newsweek Magazine*, and a number of other news periodicals have featured stories about religion in our society. Some maintain that religion plays less and less of a role in our society. Others maintain that religious faith is actually on the increase.

Several weeks ago, I had the privilege to speak to a group of graduates of Union Theological Seminary/PSCE here in Charlotte. I noted that in many ways, these are the worst of times. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), like almost all of the mainline Protestant churches, has suffered dramatic membership losses. The financial crisis affecting our nation today has dealt a very severe blow to all non-profits, including churches.

Yet, there are encouraging signs as well. The predictions of Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche have not come true. Religion continues to play an important role in the lives of so many people. One of the most encouraging aspects of the ministry of this church over the past years has been the presence and strong support of young adults and young families in this church.

## I.

This tension between old and new is present in the New Testament as well. In Luke’s gospel there is a section (Luke 5:27-6:11) in which Jesus is forced to deal with three controversies: his association with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 5:27-32); fasting (Luke 5:33-39) and the Sabbath (Luke 6:1-11). In each of these cases, Jesus introduced a transforming element of religious faith that went beyond what the Law of Moses had taught.

The first was his association with “tax collectors” and “sinners.” Luke tells us that Jesus called a tax collector named Levi (Matthew) to be his disciple. Moreover, Levi gave a party in Jesus’ honor. Now, tax collectors were hated in Jewish society. They were agents of the Roman government who did Rome’s dirty work. They milked people of their money. For Jesus to associate with this kind of person was a grave offense.

Now, let me put a little color in this. Let’s suppose for a moment that you and your spouse had attended an event at the Performing Arts Center. On the way to your car, you passed by one of the night clubs in the Uptown. Suppose that you happened to look inside and there were three of our ministers (Katie, Katherine, and Wes) inside this club. But this wasn’t just an ordinary club. There were people dancing on tables, the presence of strong drink, and even a thick smell of smoke that wasn’t exactly cigarette smoke. And let’s suppose for a moment that you went up to one of them and asked what they were doing in this place and they replied by saying, “This is what ministry is all about!” Would you be offended? Jesus said that he was like a physician. He came to heal the sick, not to attend those who were well.

Or, take the issue of fasting. John the Baptist was a very strict leader. His disciples were very ascetic. They wore simple clothing. They prayed a great deal. They fasted. Jesus’ disciples, on the other hand, were, on one occasion at least, accused of being drunkards and gluttons. In fact, in one passage the New Testament has Jesus saying what I think a lot of ministers might say about criticism. He accused his followers of wanting it both ways. They didn’t like John because he was too serious. They didn’t like Jesus because he was not serious enough.

The point that Jesus makes about fasting is not that there is anything wrong with fasting. Jesus’ point was that this was not the proper occasion for fasting. Jesus said that the present situation was more like a wedding. It was a time for rejoicing. Jesus knew that his time with his disciples was limited. He would not be with them always. There would be a time for fasting, but for now, it was a time to celebrate as with a wedding.

And, there was the issue about the Sabbath. In Luke’s gospel (6:1-11) as well as in Mark’s gospel, Jesus was accused by the Scribes and Pharisees of violating the Sabbath as a holy day of rest. On one occasion, his disciples were hungry and as they were passing through a grain field, they took grain and began to eat. On another occasion, Jesus healed a man with a withered hand. On each of these occasions, Jesus rebuked the Scribes and Pharisee by saying that the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.

Again, this was a revolutionary statement. Jesus placed human need above institutional need and that is something that the church has to always remember.

All of this, of course, leads to the final saying which forms the text of the sermon this morning – the saying about pouring old wine into new wineskins.

So, how does a church find a balance between old and new?

## II.

For one thing, the church has to understand its own history and tradition. It has to recover the language of faith: the narratives and the simple teachings of Scripture. Some years ago, there was a widespread understanding of the Bible. Today, there is a great deal of illiteracy concerning Scripture. When Winston Churchill was Prime Minister of England during the early years of World War II, he made a speech urging his fellow countrymen to stand firm against the potential German invasion. Then, quoting from the Old Testament book of Daniel, he said, "But if not, we will fight to the end." Almost all of his audience knew he was quoting from scripture.

Contrast that to the time in January 2001 when President George W. Bush, in his inaugural address, referred to the role in American life of the "Good Samaritan." After his speech, one of the ABC News commentators turned to one of his fellow commentators and said, "What was that reference to a 'Good Samaritan?'"

Allen Bloom, in his remarkable book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, noted that for a number of years he had taught freshman college students at the University of Chicago. Bloom noted that as a professor, he observed that almost all incoming freshmen entered college with two very ingrained notions. One was the belief that all truth was relative to culture. The second was the belief that all ethics are a matter of personal preference.

Edward Hirsch of the University of Virginia, in his book *Cultural Literacy*, noted that almost all cultures have a rite for young people to be incorporated into a religious tradition. By age thirteen, Catholic young people are confirmed in the church, and Jewish boys and girls undergo the rite of Bar or Bat Mitzvah. All of these rites carry with them memorization as a means of carrying on the tradition.

Today, it is critical that we teach our children the faith, including the children's catechism and the basic aspects of our faith:

- 1) A number of key Bible passages and the Apostles' Creed
- 2) At least two of the classic hymns of the church
- 3) Two or three traditional prayers, including the Lord's Prayer

These basic aspects of our faith take precedent over every other subject. To be sure, young people today need to study about the issues of race, human sexuality, the environment and a host of other subjects as well. But fundamentally, they must be grounded in the faith of the church.

## III.

A second critical dimension of the balance between the old and new is the concentration on basic human issues. Fundamentally, our faith must answer the most basic human questions: Where do we come from? Where are we going? Why are we here?

Shortly before his death several years ago, Dr. John Leith wrote that the most serious problems facing our society are not economic, social, or political, but theological. The great question that each person must face is the question “Why am I here? Does my life have meaning, or is it simply a senseless, meaningless episode in the history of the universe that will end without purpose or meaning?” The second most important question is the question of guilt and salvation. Is there some power in the world that enables us as human beings to overcome the dominance of instinct and impulse?

Dr. Leith went on to say that the church is involved today in many incidental activities that other institutions and communities in our society are also involved, but there is one service that only the church can offer that no one else is able to offer, namely a witness to what God has done for our salvation in the coming of Jesus Christ, by whose death and resurrection God has given hope to everyone who believes.

#### IV.

Then, too, the church must address itself to the critical issues of the contemporary situation. Peter Singer, who teaches at Princeton University, has recently published a book entitled *The Life You Can Save*, in which he makes the point that most of us may not be as good as we like to think we are. He observes that 18 million people die unnecessarily each year in developing countries. Singer raises the troubling question of how a world as rich as ours can allow this massive scale of human suffering.

The same is true in our community. During the last months there has been a tremendous increase in hunger, homelessness, and more and more people who struggle to find the basic necessities of life. On several occasions, the Charlotte Observer has called for business and community leaders to rise to this challenge. But what about the church? What would happen in Charlotte if our churches would bind together to address these most basic needs? To be sure, our churches do a lot. First Presbyterian Church certainly does a lot. Our Loaves and Fishes pantry is the largest in the community, providing over a hundred families each week with food. There are countless other programs, including our Sandwich Kitchen, the Urban Ministry Center, and a host of others as well.

But that is not what I am talking about. I am talking about a concerted effort by the churches to ban together in these difficult economic times to be sure that no one in our community is denied the basic service of food and shelter.

One of the sharpest debates in the early church centered on the question of the fundamental nature of the church. A British monk by the name of Pelagius argued that the church was called to be a group of perfect people. The context of Pelagius’ argument was the pagan and corrupt Roman society.

On the other side, St. Augustine saw that the church was made of sinful people and that it could never be perfect. Augustine argued that the church was not a community of perfect people. Rather it was more like a hospital or an “inn for convalescence.”

As Christians, we are called to build a society that is safe for all children. We should not shy away from the possibilities that are before us. But we should always understand that while there are an indeterminate number of possibilities for good, there are also an indeterminate number of possibilities of evil. Christian hope should be realism that neither despairs nor expects utopia.

We must strive for perfection without the illusion that we can achieve it.

Jesus reminds us that you cannot place old wine in new wine skins. Therefore, as a church, we must be confident that we are rooted in our past as well as committed to being that which God intends for us in the future.

Amen!