

# " Old Wine I n New Bottles "

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# Old Wine In New Bottles

## SCRIPTURE READING

I would like to read to you this morning from the text of Ecclesiastes, and I am going to use the King James Version of the Bible. My topic today is "Old Wine in New Bottles" and this is some of the finest old wine we have. Although it may seem like an old bottle, coming from the sixteen hundreds as it does, it is far newer than the wine it contains, which goes back more than two millennia. So, in a sense, this is old wine in a newer bottle. I read from Chapter 1.

What profit hath a man of all his labor which he taketh under the sun?  
One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh:  
but the earth abideth forever.  
The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place  
where he arose.  
The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north;  
it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according  
to his circuits.  
All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full;  
unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again.  
All things are full of labor; man cannot utter it:  
the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.  
The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be;  
and that which is done is that which shall be done:  
and there is no new thing under the sun.  
Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new?  
It hath been already of old time, which was before us.  
There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any  
remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall  
come after.

Would you enter with me now into the community of silence that we share together.

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## RESPONSIVE READING

MINISTER: The sum of all known reverence I add up in you, whoever you are;

CONGREGATION: Those who govern are there for you, it is not you who are there for them;

MINISTER: All architecture is what you do to it when you look upon it;

CONGREGATION: All music is what awakes from you when you are reminded by the instruments;

MINISTER: The sun and stars that float in the open air; the apple-shaped earth and we upon it;

CONGREGATION: The endless pride and outstretching of people; unspeakable joys and sorrows;

MINISTER: The wonder everyone sees in everyone else they see, and the wonders that fill each minute of time forever;

CONGREGATION: It is for you whoever you are - it is no farther from you than your hearing and sight are from you; it is hinted by nearest, commonest, readiest.

MINISTER: We consider bibles and religions divine - I do not say they are not divine; I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of you still;

CONGREGATION: It is not they who give the life - it is you who give the life.

MINISTER: Will you seek afar off? You surely come back at last, in things best known to you, finding the best, or as good as the best -

CONGREGATION: Happiness, knowledge, not in another place, but this place - not for another hour, but this hour.

Walt Whitman

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## SERMON

Last weekend instead of coming to church, our family and my brother's family together took a trip up to beautiful Beulah, Michigan, which is on the shores of Crystal Lake, a lovely spot where we did some skiing. We also did some bowling; there is a wonderful bowling alley in Beulah that harkens back to the pre-war days. We took trips to the Yarn Shop, which is a big highlight of a trip to Beulah. And, of course, we indulged in a little unnecessary overeating, part of our ritual for the New Year. But for two cable-deprived families, probably the highlight of the trip was watching cable TV all weekend, embarrassing though that is to admit. Even more embarrassing, I must say that they found a station that I wanted to watch, too. They found a station that had continual reruns of the "Twilight Zone" from morning till evening all weekend long. It was wonderful! I could watch that. It put me into the frame of mind where upon my return on New Year's Day I was seeing episodes of the "Twilight Zone" in everything that occurred.

For example, Thursday night I thought of another episode that Rod Serling never thought of, which I'll describe to you briefly. It stars a middle-aged man in a mid-size city in the heart of middle America. Of course, any resemblance to a living person is totally coincidental, you understand. The highpoint of his week is attending church choir rehearsals on Thursday night. As he was leaving the church, he had had a wonderful experience and he was leaving with enthusiasm, a song in his heart, and not a care in the world. He walked out of the front of the church and down the sidewalk by the marquee in front of the church, which he sort of glanced at over his shoulder, purely out of habit, when, to his utter total shock, amazement and horror, he saw his own name on the marquee as the person who was to deliver the sermon the following Sunday

morning. Of course, the music starts here and Rod steps out from behind the marquee, cigarette in hand, and says, "Charlie, welcome to the Twilight Zone." How on earth did I ever agree to do this?

Well, it is a short episode, but it has got a lot of punch in it, I think you will agree. It brings up one point that I need to disclaim right away, and that is that the name that appears on the marquee is not one that I am used to. It was a little strange, actually, to see Doctor Charles Gallmeyer there. That title, of course, implies completion of a Ph.D., to most people, and I am in that odd condition that is generally referred to in the trade as A.B.D., which is "All but Dissertation." I think my students at GVSU have some other names for it, but that is how I call it. I studied Medieval History years ago and completed everything except for the dissertation. I do have to say that it is correct to use the title doctor: the University does authorize that, and for a very simple linguistic reason. "Doctor" comes from the Latin, *doceo, docere, docui, doctum*, the verb meaning "to teach." So a "doctor" is simply one who is certified to teach. When you have passed all the examinations for your doctoral degree, whether or not you have completed a dissertation, you are certainly ready to teach. A couple of weeks ago when Doctor Hoekstra and I were talking about this Sunday, I explained that odd status to him, and of course he was very familiar with it and understood it perfectly. In that discussion I assured him that I never used the title Doctor because it does tend to mislead people and it does sound a little pompous. He smiled and nodded and said, "I see" and of course you know the rest of the story.

Well, why is this quack doctor standing in front of you today? I am here to conduct a periodic inventory of the church, in a sense. I am here to help us try to think about the big issues of being in this church. Why are we here? What are we about? Why are we here together, I think, is a better way to ask the question.

I will start with a letter that the Governing Board received three or four months ago from a very long-standing member of the church, and I will paraphrase it very briefly. He basically said, I think it would be instructive and beneficial to the congregation of Fountain Street Church if we would engage in a dialogue about what our spiritual values really are. We need not to hide behind the idea that we can be all things to all people. We need to decide who we are. He also added, by the way, if we decide we are essentially a Christian church, or even a Neo-Christian church, then "I want out." I certainly respect his point of view. I think it is a good idea for us to begin a dialogue about who we are, and what we believe, and what we stand for, and where we want to go in this church.

This is one of scores of letters -- literally scores by the way -- that have been received by the Governing Board. And while they all merit a written response, I hope you can understand that that is just an impracticability for all of us. But it is one letter that I think deserves a lengthy response and it does remind me of an issue that I like to think of as what I call Fountain Street orthodoxy. That may sound like a contradiction in terms to you, and in a sense it is. When I use the term "orthodox" I am referring to small "o" orthodox, not large "O." I don't want to refer to the ancient church that broke away from the Church of Rome in the eleventh century and has used that name in its denomination ever since. I use it simply in the Greek sense of right teaching: orthodox.

What is our orthodoxy? Do we have one? In effect, I think there is an unspoken orthodoxy in this church and it is roughly this: There is no place for a creed in this church. There is no need for a creed in this church. There is no required belief. We are open to all spiritual ideas and we are interested in all spiritual traditions. There is probably more to it than that, but that is the gist of it.

Now as a statement of an intellectual ideal, I think this is a commendable attitude. We want to be open-minded. We want to be looking at other ideas all the time. But as a statement to be used as a practical plan for operating an institution, an organization, it is utter nonsense.

There are basic requirements for maintaining any kind of group. There must be values that are shared in order for a group to stay together. Think, for a moment, of why you come to church every Sunday or many Sundays. What is it that brings you here? I will wager you that is not really theology. You can get theology out of books far easier than you can in the short time we have together on Sunday. It is not really for the sermons. It is nice to see and hear a sermon, especially a good one, but you can get them on tape, you can see them on TV, you can hear them on audio, you can see them on video, a lot more efficiently than you can once a week here. It is not just for the intellectual stimulation. You can get that from a continuing education program. You do not have to come here for that. So, why do we come here?

I think that the main reason we all come here is for our sense of community. We come here for each other. We come here to be with each other and to share with each other. And if we share with each other, we must have a shared consensus or shared sense of values; a common understanding of goals, of methods. I submit that we do ourselves a disservice by pretending that we do not have such a common sense of values and ideas.

I will give you a quick example of why I think we have to make some discriminating decisions. I have been having my hair cut for a number of months by a woman who is a member of an evangelical bible church. I thought that was kind of an interesting challenge for me and that I should take advantage of this opportunity to get to know a different point of view. So, we talked about our church experience. It was remarkable how similar many aspects were, even though the difference in denomination was so wide. We discussed the importance of having a religious experience, of having a religious community, of making that commitment to a group of people and to some ideas, and we had similar attitudes about that. We talked about the problems of church politics and, as you can imagine, there was a lot to talk about there. It did not really matter whether you were on the extreme left or the extreme right. Church politics are church politics, wherever you go. I was surprised how similar some of our experiences were, until I went to get my hair cut on September 13<sup>th</sup>. I sat down and she began her work, and announced that she could not wait to get to church on Sunday. She knew everything that had happened two days previous was in the Bible somewhere, and her pastor was going to explain it all to her on Sunday.

I have to confess to you that one of the many little open doors in my Fountain Street Church mind slammed shut at that point. I am not particularly proud of that, but it did bring home the fact that there are limits to the number of spiritual ideas or quasi-spiritual ideas that any person can work with, digest, use, understand in a lifetime; and that was not one that I was going to be able to work with. It also reminded me that it is hard to find a good liberal haircut in this town! And, it gave me a little insight into why, perhaps, I allowed my arm to be twisted, because I knew right then and there that I could find out where to go. I will be in the Narthex after the service and I would appreciate it if those of you who have found the right place to go would let me know.

If we have to exclude some values or some ideas or some approaches that we do not want, that implies that we share some values that we do want. The question is, what are they? I want to emphasize that in trying to define them I do not mean to make it exclusive. I just mean to focus our attention. We recognize that there are other views that are potentially valid and potentially useful, but they have to be secondary. It is just a fact of life; we cannot be all things to all people.

This gets me to the title. I imagine some of you are wondering when I was going to get to the topic of this. I make the simple analogy between our Christian heritage and a huge wine cellar. It is full of thousands of old bottles, and some of them are great vintages. There are some wonderful wines in the cellar. But the lighting in the cellar is very dim. It is very hard to read. Most of the labels are faded from age. Most of them are written in a foreign language we do not really understand, and they have information on them that only oenophiles can appreciate. It is hard to distinguish between the good bottles and the bad. Many bottles contain wine past its prime. Some have corks that have dried out and are full of vinegar, but some contain some of the greatest old vintages ever, and they are still good.

A lot of Christian writings and teachings are like these old bottles with confusing labels. For example, statements of belief. They describe the basis for faith, and it is important to understand that they are just labels. They are not the real thing. They are approximations: they hint at the contents within. If we understand and appreciate that they are imperfect, we can go ahead and we can use them and we can make good use of them. And it should not prevent us from trying to use them.

Many of us here at Fountain Street have a problem with a particular type of label, one generally referred to as a creed. We are anxious not to have a creed. Now, what is the problem with a creed? I will submit to you that the problem is not that it is a statement of belief. That is not a problem: what could be wrong with trying to communicate what it is that you believe, and what it is that you put your faith in? Having beliefs, after all -- notions that cannot be proven, but that we accept as basic to our outlook on life -- is fundamental to the human condition, as the little quotation from Emerson at the top of the Order of Service so nicely summarizes.

Also, I submit to you that the problem with a creed is not that it lets people follow the ideas of others. Not everybody can be his own spiritual leader at all times. We need to try out one another's ideas. That is why we are here. A creed that tries to articulate those answers, however imperfect it may be, would be a good thing to help foster the activity that we all come here to promote.

So what is wrong with a creed? Well, there is one fatal flaw, and in recognizing this I am beating a hasty retreat to Fountain Street Church orthodoxy. The flaw is simply this: they tend to get used and misused for political purposes. They are a marvelous tool of control. By political I do not mean in the sense of separation of church and state that we are all used to. I mean politics with a small "p" in general, for any kind of organizational connection and behavior. It is hard to resist the temptation of saying "if you don't believe this, you are not one of us; you do not belong here." It is hard to resist the temptation historically of saying "if you do not believe this you do not belong in society." And the fact that we do not have that problem right here and right now in this little space of time that we enjoy does not mean that it could not return some day.

The classic example of a misused creed is, of course, the Nicene Creed itself. It has been the litmus test used by orthodox Christianity ever since it was written in 325 A.D. It was an attempt, in part, to find a solution out of the decaying status of the disintegrating Roman Empire. It was led by the Emperor Constantine, who ruled at the beginning of the Fourth Century A.D., who wanted any way he could to avoid all the incessant bickering over doctrine that was going on about him all over the Roman world. It had been, after all, only twelve years since the Edict of Milan in 313 when Christians were free for the first time to worship and to come out of the closet, as it were. So Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea where legates from all over the Christian world, which was quite large at that time, debated for months until they finally came up with the only solution they could agree on, which was the Trinitarian Doctrine as we still have it. This new orthodoxy gave the church a great tool for increasing its control over local small churches. You now had a standard which everyone had to adhere to in order to be considered a member of the greater church family. It also gave Constantine a new lease on life in his vain attempt to keep the crumbling Roman Empire together. And, for the remaining seventeen hundred years, in order for you to consider yourself to be a Christian, you had to think of the divinity in terms of three persons, each co-eternal and each of the same substance.

Now the great irony of this Creed, and of this story, is, of course, that Constantine remained unbaptized until he was on his deathbed. He remained the central figure in the official cult of the Roman Empire. He allowed himself to be venerated and even deified by the millions of pagan subjects which he commanded all over ancient Rome. So his commitment to this new faith, while it may -- and indeed did -- have some genuine basis, also had strong political overtones.

That is not the entire story. It is not just the story of power politics. The Nicene Creed really is a very simple and beautiful metaphor. And it describes, or attempts to describe, the relationship between the infinite and the worldly. It attempts to explain how the two can co-exist, and as such it contains a lot of value, a lot of beauty, a lot of inspiration. Maybe we should try to use it here. Well, I think not. I am afraid that while there is nothing inherently wrong with the Nicene Creed and the ideas it tried to express, it has had too much baggage attached to it over the centuries. There are too many cases of discrimination, of war, bloodshed, pillage, mind control, torture; the list goes on and on.

I will give you one simple example. I find it most ironic that in this temple of spiritual freedom we memorialize a religious fanatic who presided over the execution of the intellectual father of Unitarianism. I will repeat that. It is probably a little bit of a surprise to some of you. We have a memorial here to a religious fanatic who presided over the execution of the father of Unitarianism. That spiritual father was a Spanish-born physician who lived in the sixteenth century named Michael Servetus. At a relatively young age, in his twenties in 1531, he published a treatise called, "On the Errors of the Trinity." In this treatise he attacked the basic precepts of the Nicene Creed. He quickly became an outcast in all the religious centers of Europe; he had to change his identity and flee to France where he settled down to the life of a country doctor in order to escape the Roman Catholic Inquisition.

He struck up a correspondence with none other than John Calvin. He imagined, perhaps, that he had a kindred spirit there because here was someone who was also subject to persecution, who had to leave his homeland of France and go to Switzerland in order to live out his own spiritual faith. At first Calvin responded a few times, then he stopped responding at all to the stream of letters that poured in from Servetus. Later he is quoted as vowing privately to a friend that if Michael Servetus ever came to Geneva, he would not leave alive.

This is a bizarre fact of life that has been repeated in history over and over again. The persecuted become the oppressors as soon as they win their freedom. Isn't that tragic? Servetus escaped the Catholic Inquisition in Lyons in the 1550's, and he went directly to Geneva. Very shortly after his arrival he was jailed. None other than John Calvin himself brought charges against him through his legates. And when the trial did not go exactly the way Calvin approved, he served for a time as the chief prosecutor. He had total control over that little hamlet in the Alps and could really exercise any function in the government that he chose, be it secular or sacred. Servetus was condemned to be burned at the stake, together with his heretical work. Calvin gave him one last chance to repent and "return to reason." When Michael Servetus declined, Calvin arrogantly declared that Servetus had condemned himself and there was nothing he, Calvin, could do about it.

In that moment, it seems to me, he forgot some of the most fundamental teachings in his own Institutes of the Christian Religion. He forgot about the irresistibility of grace, because he was worried, gravely worried, about the potential for the corruption of the faithful in his midst. So he had to silence that voice even though the grace he knew was out there was irresistible. He forgot about the perseverance of the saints. He did, however, remember, and demonstrate appropriately, the total depravity of man.

I understand there is no way in this church, or in any church, that every image, every icon, every decoration can be acceptable to every member of the congregation. So I guess it is OK that we have Mr. Calvin up there gracing our presence. But I would like to add that I think it would be equally appropriate for us to take down the image of George Washington at the end window there and put up King George III in its place.

What is this old wine of Christianity? It is, it seems to me, nothing less than the collected wisdom of our culture concerning the unknown, the infinite and that for which

the generations have yearned for centuries. And that is our heritage. It is not the only wisdom. It may not even be the best, but it is uniquely our wisdom. It would be a terrible shame, it seems to me, if we were forced to turn our backs on the teachings of Christianity simply because of the misinterpretations of zealots. I submit to you that because the conservatives attempt to lay an exclusive claim to the interpretation of Christian scripture and Christian teachings that they tend to make us reluctant to consider ourselves a part of that same tradition. We need to resist that.

What is the basic teaching of Christianity? That is hard to put in a nutshell, but I will suggest this as a starting point. It is the essential genius of St. Paul in combining that which is eternal, holy, divine and pure with that which is transitory, base, profane and imperfect. This combination is personified by Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. The dual nature of Jesus, half man and half God, is the basis from which all other Christian teachings proceed. It seems to me that insofar as this idea inspires our religious sensitivity, insofar as it seems an apt description of the human condition, we will find value in growing together in our understanding and appreciation of the writings and thinking and talks of those who have gone before us in examining these ideas.

It is not limited to just the essential core concept. The amazing thing is that even some of the peripheral ideas, the more far-out notions, the ones that appeal to the radicals on the right, even have lessons for us. Take, for example, the doctrine of the Second Coming. It is very easy for us rationalists to sit back and say, "What fools, for these folks to think that they know that the world is going to end; let alone when it is going to end." We can be very assured that whatever they think will not come to pass. And here I am just repeating a revelation that has been preached from this pulpit for at least fifty years. Those who are able to live each day as if it were their last have a perspective on the blessings of life that makes the pettiness and the busy-ness of us enlightened rationalists look silly. It was a wonderful day when that message first got put across to me. So there is a lot of value in places where we least expect to find it in the Christian tradition.

What books, what thinkers, what should we explore? The list is huge; it is endless. There is a vast and rich heritage still available to us, still of inspirational value to us. Obviously, a lot of the books of the Bible are fundamental to our spiritual well-being, not just the one I happened to read from Ecclesiastes. A lot of the books that did not make it into the Bible, like the Gospel according to St. Thomas, are also equally valuable for us. There is a whole body of medieval writings starting with St. Augustine going to the Venerable Bede, Hildegard of Bingen, Abelard, St. Francis, William of Ockham. The list goes on and on. There are still valuable ideas there; there is still good wine in those bottles. There were reformers of all types, such as Michael Servetus, or even St. Ignatius Loyola. They are on both sides of the religious spectrum. We do not have to limit ourselves to just the liberals all the time. There are modern thinkers, scores of them. Take Emerson for a good example; Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, there are dozens of others. To that list I would gladly and gratefully add some of the sermons that have been preached from this very pulpit; not just the sermons of Duncan Littlefair, although they certainly lead the list. We have got a great heritage to go back to with Randall and Wishart and some of the sermons they preached.

So, here is a modest proposal for you. It is one I give only half seriously, but only half in jest. Here it is: we should develop a Fountain Street Creed, radical idea though that is, a statement of our beliefs. I guess my point of departure for that is a comment from a former member of our staff who said, "This church would be a whole lot better off if it stopped worrying about what it does not believe, and started getting around to deciding what it does believe."

There are a few caveats with the idea of having a Creed that I would suggest to you. One is, of course, that nobody is required to agree with it, naturally. The second is that we would schedule a total revision of it every five years. It would have its own sunset clause. Imagine the opportunities for the radical right here. "Oh, you go to Fountain Street Church; that place where they think truth changes every five years." It is not the wine that changes. It is the label on the bottle.

I will just suggest a few things that our Creed might include. That is something that I think all of us should spend some time thinking about, whether we write one or not. One item would be that we believe in the democratic process. Anybody on the Governing Board in the last six months is acutely aware of that fact. We believe in the significance of spiritual questioning. We often believe that the questions are more important than the answers. We believe in the value of myth and metaphor, particularly Christian mythology. We believe that fervently: just because it is a metaphor it does not make it any less real, any less true or any less relevant. We believe in the primacy of the power of love, and we believe in the importance of the social gospel. There are lots of refinements to make to those points, and probably lots more to add besides.

The message I have been giving you this morning is essentially a conservative message. I am saying let's not throw out the past, let's maintain what we have; let's refine it, let's improve it, let's repackage it if we need to. I want to avoid totally the implication that I am arguing for no change. I am not arguing for no change. We need change; change is a fact of life. But I do want to argue that a substitution of new spiritual vision, a total substitution, for the ideas that have nurtured our culture for over two thousand years, must be scrutinized with extreme care.

I suggest to you that we delve into our cellar and we preserve that marvelous old wine we have. And we get to the business of trying to cull out the good from the bad, and the wine from the vinegar. And we get to the process of bringing brighter light into our wine cellar so that we can see better. We go ahead and re-label those bottles. We put nice bright, clear, crisp, well-printed labels in modern English with clear descriptions of the contents. We are free to do that; it is a marvelous thing that we are. Then we can sort through the good and the bad vintages. We can preserve and protect our heritage. We can, indeed, even add to it. I believe that this is, in fact, our spiritual mission for the world of our spirit in the twenty-first century.