

If You Want New Wine, You Need New Wineskins

You may not have heard the crashing sound. But last week, old walls of tradition collapsed when the nation's largest Protestant denomination elected a new leader.

The commotion occurred after J.D. Greear, 45, a successful pastor from Durham, North Carolina, was elected president of the 15-million-member Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). Greear is the youngest leader of the SBC in 37 years, and he brings with him a fresh approach to ministry that could trigger a wave of growth as well as upset some hyper-conservatives.

Greear lives outside the traditional Baptist box. His church doesn't even have the word "Baptist" in it. The Summit Church, which he started with 300 members in 2001, has now grown to 10,000 members who meet in nine locations throughout the Raleigh-Durham area.

The church's worship has an exuberant charismatic flair. In a 2012 teaching series on the Holy Spirit, he told his congregation that it's a sin to restrict speaking in tongues. But most of all, The Summit is aggressively evangelistic and missions-focused.

When Greear was elected on June 12, he said God is stirring the SBC and exposing "a startling amount of sin in our midst." Greear said he welcomed God's uncomfortable work "because whom the Lord loves, he chastens." He was specifically referencing recent reports that SBC leaders have at times told women in abusive marriages that they should submit to domineering husbands.

Greear even issued a heartfelt apology in June for the mistreatment of women in his denomination. "We are sorry and

we should have heard you before now," he said. "We know our deafness has added to your suffering."

The changes in the SBC have greatly encouraged me because I see similar shifts going on throughout the body of Christ. We are opening our hearts to change like never before. We are recognizing that too often we allow old mindsets to mire us in ruts of inflexibility and irrelevance. Our wineskins have aged, and we can't contain the new wine of the Spirit.

I hope those of us in the charismatic/Pentecostal world can learn some things from the SBC.

In our fast-paced world, Apple debuts a new iPhone almost every year and the most popular apps have almost monthly updates. We've come to expect frequent upgrades on all our technology. Yet for those of us involved in ministry, we tend to think the church needs no remodeling or renovation. That is a faulty assumption.

While the gospel itself is both timeless and flawless, the packaging we wrap it in must adapt with the times or we will quickly lose relevance. Pipe organs, steeples and choir robes were never wrong, but they won't help us reach today's generation. Nor do stale religious systems, tired terminology or worn-out denominational programs that should have been mothballed long ago.

Jesus reminded us that we should never put new wine in old wineskins. "Put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved," He said (Matt. 9:17b). But many churches and ministries today insist on pouring their new wine into old models, again and again. We resist innovation and we fight progress.

I'm willing to guess that 90 percent of what we are doing in church today needs a total makeover. We are facing the most daunting renovation project in the history of the church. But the task is not impossible. It will require us to take these

painful steps:

1. We must break free from the fear of change. God is always on the move. He might lead us to camp in one spot for a while, but we can never get too comfortable in one place. His trumpet will eventually blow, and the cloud of His presence will shift. Don't park when God is calling you forward. Stay open to His fresh directives and expect Him to stretch your faith. He is adventurous!

And be prepared for a surprise: Pentecost moments come suddenly! (See Acts 2:2.) The Holy Spirit is not under obligation to give you a two-year advance warning of His shifts.

2. We must be willing to defy tradition. People who are married to the past cannot embrace the future. Sacred cows do not belong in the pulpit; they must be sacrificed. "The way we've always done it" will not work in God's new season. The crowd chooses the comfortable pews of nostalgia, but God is with the courageous few who are willing to blaze a new path into unreached territory.
3. We must ask the Spirit to reveal His new strategies. We cannot rely on church growth gurus, popular books or rock-star preachers to lead us into genuine change. Copying spiritual trends is just a form of carnality—and it is a sad substitute for real innovation. If the Holy Spirit does not orchestrate the work of transforming the church, our changes will be shallow. The last thing we need is a superficial upgrade.

And remember: Just because J.D. Greear and his team are attracting big crowds in North Carolina does not mean your church will automatically grow if you copy him. You need your own download from God, not a suit of armor that was fashioned for someone else.

The Lord wants to unleash a gushing river of new wine into the church today, but we must prepare our wineskins. What is old must be renewed by the Spirit, what is outdated must be remodeled, and what is ineffective must be replaced. God wants to do a new thing. Don't resist it.