

The Need for New Wineskins in the Global Church

David, a servant of Christ Jesus, to the pastors and leaders of God's church in our contemporary age, especially those laboring in Anglo-European contexts.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I write to you as a fellow laborer in the gospel, compelled by the Holy Spirit to address the urgent issue before us—the state of the church as we see it today. In the lands where the faith once flourished, we now witness stagnation, division, and a profound disconnection from the Holy Spirit's current movements, which we see powerfully emerging across the Global South. The theological issues we face today stem from a long-standing separation between our beliefs and the social, ethnic, and racial realities in which our lives and faith are embodied.

Our task is not only to re-evaluate the historical roots of this problem but also to consider how we might create new wineskins—structures that do not abstract the gospel from its lived expressions but rather integrate belief and social embodiment in ways that reflect the realities of the Body of Christ across space and time.

The Decay of the Church in Anglo-European Christendom

For centuries, Anglo-European Christianity grew alongside the structures of state power, merging the church's influence with the rise of empires, national boundaries, and the enforcement of political will. Christianity's growth in this context was not neutral but deeply intertwined with ethnic and geographical identities, shaping theological beliefs and denominational distinctions that took on political and social significance. Denominations like Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and later Protestant evangelical and mainline traditions arose as confessional bodies, yet each bore the marks of its ethnic, linguistic, and political contexts. These divisions were not simply theological preferences but reflected the distinct social and regional compositions of their day.

The problem, therefore, is that these theological identities have been perceived as abstract or universal, stripped of their social and historical particularity. In reality, these denominational structures are old wineskins, contextual expressions of faith tied to the political, racial, and ethnic realities of early modern Europe. They served a purpose within that historical and cultural context, but as Paul warns, holding tightly to such distinctions fractures the Body of Christ: "Each one of you says, 'I follow Paul,' or 'I follow Apollos,' or 'I follow Cephas,' or 'I follow Christ.' Is Christ divided?" (1 Corinthians 1:12-13). Today, the Holy Spirit calls for new forms and structures that can embody, describe, and instruct Christian faith across different regions of God's creation—a world where denominational categories of the past do not fully contain the work of the Holy Spirit.

Listening to the Global South

The center of gravity of the catholic church has shifted. The Holy Spirit moves now with force in regions historically distant from Christendom's core—Africa, Asia, Latin America—where Christians live out their faith within realities distinct from those of the North. Jesus'

proclamation that “the first will be last, and the last will be first” (Matthew 20:16) echoes here, challenging us in the Global North to consider our assumptions about theological primacy and cultural superiority. For too long, we have regarded Anglo-European theology as normative, imagining that our ecclesial and theological models are universal. This is an implicit assumption that theology can somehow transcend social embodiment, divorced from the ethnic and geographical contexts that shape it. Yet this assumption often blinds us to the Holy Spirit’s movements in other contexts and hinders the universal Body of Christ from receiving the Holy Spirit’s gifts poured out in the Global South.

Paul’s admonition that “the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’” (1 Corinthians 12:21) takes on fresh relevance here. The Global South, with its faith in the face of poverty, injustice, and persecution, confronts the North’s tendency to reduce faith to confessional abstractions. The theological insights emerging from the Global South, shaped by lived struggle, persecution, and solidarity, offer necessary counterpoints to the historical dominance of Eurocentric categories. The issues they wrestle with—ranging from economic disparity to political oppression—are far removed from the theological debates of the North. Here, faith is experienced and embodied amid trials that transcend denominational boundaries, pointing us back to the inextricable link between belief and social context.

Just as the early church gathered at the Council of Jerusalem to discern the Holy Spirit’s work among Gentiles, the North today must listen to what the Spirit is doing among the majority world. In this listening, we may begin to see that the Global South’s theology is not an addendum but a vital expression of the gospel, revealing how deeply Christian faith is shaped by the particularities of ethnic, social, and geographical realities. This listening challenges us to adopt a posture of humility and receptivity, welcoming the particular expressions of Christ’s body across space and time.

The Need for New Wineskins: A Global Christian Ecclesiology

Jesus’ parable of the wineskins provides a guiding principle for our moment: “No one puts new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed” (Mark 2:22). The theological assumptions, ecclesial frameworks, and denominational structures shaped by Anglo-European Christendom cannot contain the new work the Holy Spirit is accomplishing across the Global South. Old wineskins shaped by Western power, privilege, and universalizing tendencies no longer serve the church’s needs.

The new wineskins we need must embrace the truth that theological doctrines and ecclesial identities are inseparable from their social and regional expressions. Rather than abstract, disembodied doctrines, the gospel is always incarnate in the lives, ethnicities, and places of its followers. Ethnicity, race, and place are not incidental to faith but are channels through which the Holy Spirit works uniquely in each context. Theologies emerging from majority-world contexts are particular expressions of a universal Christian faith. New wineskins must reflect this reality, integrating belief with social embodiment in ways that recognize the Holy Spirit’s work across peoples.

However, this approach comes with caution. Race and ethnicity, when misused, can become idols that replace unity with exclusion. The global church must be vigilant in ensuring that emerging ecclesial structures do not replicate the ethnocentrism, nationalism, or racial divisions that have been destructive within church history. Ethnic and racial identities are signs of the particularity of God's creation but must not become divisive forces that fragment the Body of Christ. The Holy Spirit's call for new wineskins invites a faith that holds unity and difference together, recognizing the rich particularity of different expressions while remaining committed to the gospel's reconciling power.

Embracing New Wineskins Without Sacrificing Unity

At the heart of the gospel is a profound theological tension between the universal and the particular. The good news of Jesus Christ is a message for all people across all places and times, yet it is always expressed through particular places, languages, and embodied experiences. The Incarnation itself—the eternal Logos becoming flesh in a specific time and place—reminds us that the universal truth of the gospel cannot be separated from its socially embodied expressions. The church is called to honor both the universal and the particular, allowing the gospel to flourish in the particularity of God's creation. Paul's reminder to the Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28), calls us to unity. But we should recognize that this cannot be done without recognizing the particularity of our social embodiment.

In the present age, race and ethnicity are not only markers of difference but tools for navigating the tension between the universal and the particular. Properly understood, they reveal the Holy Spirit's work in distinct ways across different peoples and places. Let us, therefore, be vigilant against the dangers of ethnocentrism and racism, which distort the gospel's unifying message. When race and ethnicity become tools of exclusion or superiority, they obscure the reconciling power of Christ.

The new wineskins we create must serve as vessels for justice, reconciliation, and mutual recognition, embodying the universal love, truth, and grace of God while celebrating the particular ways the Holy Spirit moves in and through different peoples and places. These new structures should neither idolize nor diminish cultural and regional particularity but instead create space for the Holy Spirit's work to flourish within diverse, socially embodied contexts. In doing so, we will faithfully respond to the gospel's call to be a church united in Christ, diverse in Spirit, and continually attentive to the particular ways God moves among us.

Grace and peace be with you all as we seek to build these new wineskins together.