



One Man's Perspective

JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Several years ago, as our church was pecking its way out of the denominational shell, I suddenly realised that the scripture called for wine during communion, not the traditional grape juice. As a southern Baptist I knew all the arguments against wine. I had used them all in my sermons against alcohol. Yet, as I read the Bible, substituting grape juice for wine at the communion table seemed tantamount to substituting sprinkling for immersion in baptism. Thus, even though wine had never passed my tender lips, I took my stand.

I knew we had a few fundamentalist left in the congregation. Among them was my wife, who threatened, "Lips that touch wine shall never touch mine." Now this kind of threat is a wife's ultimate weapon to force her husband into her way of thinking. However, I beat her over the head with my Bible and finally forced her (in love, of course) to submit to my new theology.

"I'll submit", she said at last", but this will be the last straw for the Baptist remnant in the church. They have stuck with you through speaking in tongues, healing, even casting out demons - but they'll draw the line at wine."

Fearing she might be right, I decided, the first time out, to sneak up on them. I'd mix the wine with grape juice.

The result was chaotic. The wine drinkers (who were in the majority in our growing congregation) were offended because we had diluted the Holy Communion. The tea-totallers were furious because they could smell demon-alcohol in their sacred grape juice. And I was caught in the cross-fire.

I crawled home from the meeting and disappeared into a back room, licking my wounds and wondering what had gone wrong. Instead of pleasing everybody, I had made them all mad.

Here is what I learned from that near disaster. No sheep is going to follow a shepherd who whistles an uncertain tune, or gives them an option of which trail they shall take to the green pastures. Jesus (and Paul) spoke with authority. They knew the way and commanded their followers to walk in it. For many, of course, the price was too much and they turned back. Others kept their hand to the plow and walked on into glory.

With this understanding I squared my shoulders and announced that from that time on we would be using wine for communion. There was some bickering, but the church accepted the directive. Later, though, I learned an even greater principle than applying the letter of the law. I learned that abstaining from meat to keep from offending a brother is more apropos than insisting on being right. As a result we have gone back to grape juice except in the small groups where wine is used by common consent.

If we are going to walk the Spirit-walk, we must go all the way. A pastor who tries to lead his flock into the fullness of the Holy Spirit, but still insists on keeping all the old structures, is courting disaster. There may be nothing wrong with the old structures, but if they have become idols, or are preventing us from moving on to more light, then they must go. (Even though God may return them at some later date). If we are going to drink the new wine, we'd better be willing to put on a new wineskin. Lukewarmness, which is a mixing of wine and grape juice, is always nauseating.