

SECRET GROWTH

by Ray C. Stedman

I can recall the time -- eighteen years ago, in May of 1950 -- when I first came out to Palo Alto, right after graduation from Dallas Seminary, and spoke for the first time to the little group that was meeting in the Community Center. I remember the story I used to introduce that message. It was of a stranger who was visiting a certain town and who stopped one of the natives and asked him where the churches were located. This fellow happened to be something of a wag, and he said, "Well, the Episcopal church is down by the theater, the synagogue is next to the bank, the Presbyterian church is over by the cemetery, the Methodist church is next to the golf course, and the Baptists are down by the river." I remember commenting on how appropriate it was that the Peninsula Bible Fellowship was meeting in the Community Center.

Well, we have moved out of the Community Center, but we are still in the center of the community, and I rejoice in the fact that, through these many years now, God has blessed our efforts to be a part of the life of the world around us -- in it, but not of it. This, of course, is the mark of a Christian community.

This is a Sunday we have set aside to think about what God has taught us through the years. In trying to put this down in some orderly form, I have felt very struck by the parable our Lord told of the seed growing secretly, recorded in the fourth chapter of Mark, Verses 26 through 29:

And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how. The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle because the harvest has come." {Mark 4:26-29 RSV}

There is our Lord's extremely instructive comment on how the kingdom of God comes in the affairs of men.

I do not know what you think of when you hear the phrase "kingdom of God." Perhaps you might think of the theocracy back in the days of Israel when God ruled the nation through his presence in the temple. Or perhaps you look forward to the time of the millennium, when, as the Scriptures promise us, the kingdom of God shall be visible on earth, and none shall hurt or destroy in all of God's holy mountain, and righteousness shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. Every man's heart leaps up when we hear words like that. Of course this year we are hearing them from all the political candidates, and each one is volunteering to be the man to produce such a kingdom. But we have heard all that before. We know that man will not bring this about, although there will be a day when the kingdom of God will be visible among men. But you and I have lived long enough with this process to know that this is not enough in itself; this is not all there is to scattering the seed. Back of the proclaiming there must be obeying. We know that the man or woman, boy or girl, who tries to proclaim the Word, to tell people what God says but who isn't himself (or herself) obeying what he says, has already ruined his witness and the Word falls barren and dead upon the ears of those who hear. So, you see, part of scattering the seed is the obedient heart, responding to God's Word.

But even back of that there is a previous step. We cannot obey it until we have heard it. I do not mean just the hearing of the ear, but the understanding of the mind and heart. This Word must somehow come alive to us. We have to see it as truth, as real and vital and living truth. It has to grip us, and hold us, and capture us. And I trust that we have already learned that this experience comes only as we ask God to make it known to us. We ask the Holy Spirit to perform his function of taking this Word and unveiling it to us, opening our eyes. So the scattering of the Word involves prayer, seeking God's face, and opening the eyes of the heart to his Word, being ready to obey it, and then to proclaim it in truth. This is man's part in the process. As Jesus made clear, this is the first step: We must scatter the seed of the Word, in this way.

Then this inevitably is linked with the sovereign, mysterious activity of God (and this is the important element

in this parable) -- making the seed grow. Jesus says it happens in three stages. There is first the sprouting of the blade, and then the unfolding of the plant as it grows up from the earth, and then the ripening of the seed into the full grain in the ear. All of this is God's responsibility; God alone can produce it.

You have already sensed how this works in your own lives. Have you not felt the Word of God take root in your life? Some saying of Scripture, some verse, some phrase, some great thought has captured your mind and taken root in your heart and you have said, "Lord, that's true; I'm going to walk in light of that, I'm going to follow that way." And then, as you seek to do this, you discover it is doing something to you and you do not really know what it is. And then comes a time when its fruit begins to appear. Looking backward you see that the planting of the Word in your own heart and life is now beginning to produce blessing, marvelous benefit. You are a happier person, a more fulfilled person, a whole person, made new again, set free from habits and thoughts that were troubling you. The Word has come to harvest and has produced fruit in your life. And this, says Jesus, is the process by which the kingdom of God takes root in the hearts of men.

It is a simple concept, this matter of proclamation of the Word of God, the scattering of the seed, and then its springing up afterward. It happens in life all around us. Every year farmers go out and cast their seed. And perhaps, if the Lord had not pointed it out to us, we would never have seen that this is what we do. But since this is the case, there are certain conclusions to which we must come.

First, it is obvious that we must be faithful to sow the seed. You cannot expect to harvest if you never sow. To me, one of the weaknesses of the church in general today, and, in some degree, of our own church here, is that we circumvent this sowing. We gather together sometimes and show films on how to sow seed. We take courses in it, and we read books about it. But somehow we resist letting this seed actually take root in our own hearts -- opening our eyes to it, believing it, obeying it, and then proclaiming it to those around about. But this is the only way God has arranged for planting the kingdom in the midst of men. He is not going to do it through political maneuvering, or military conquest, or through any other program men can devise; he is going to bring it about only through the planting of the seed. And you and I must be faithful to sow it.

You young people especially must realize that you will never have the kingdom of God in your heart, you will never know the glory of living under the rule of God, or know the benefit of his fullness in your heart, unless you sow this seed. This is the responsibility God has given to men. We must take it deliberately, thoughtfully, seriously, and open our hearts to his living Word.

Second, we must leave room for God to work. Is this not what Jesus makes clear here? We must expect God to do something when we sow the seed. After we have opened our hearts to his Word, and allowed it to take root in our lives, and set ourselves in this direction, then God must do the rest. There is nothing else we can do.

I think this means we must avoid doing certain things:

- We must not expect, for instance, the knowledge of the Bible alone to be sufficient. I believe in knowing the Scriptures. I think it is wonderful to memorize them. I met a group of boys the other day who were telling me how much they had been memorizing the Scriptures, and I think that is great!

I also remember that it is common knowledge that Nikita Khrushchev can quote the first four books of the New Testament from memory. So memorizing Scripture is not sufficient in itself. Knowledge of the Bible is not sufficient in itself. You can be a Bible scholar and study it from Genesis to Revelation, be able to explain dispensational charts, know where the Antichrist comes in, and all the other intricate and esoteric considerations that are involved in deep Bible study -- but that is not enough.

You have not sown the seed of the Word of God until it has been obeyed in your heart, until you have launched your life out upon the basis of it. We must never be content with letting Bible knowledge take the place of Bible obedience.

- Also, we must avoid arranging for phony harvests. Jesus said that when the harvest grows up, then is

the time to put in the sickle and reap. But I think a lot of us are constantly trying to produce harvests in our own lives which simply aren't there yet. We want to reap either when we have not yet sown, or when it is not yet time for the harvest. We want so badly to see results, don't we? We are never content with this process of sowing and then waiting for God to work, but we want it to come **NOW!** Instant salvation. Instant maturity. This is the cry of the age in which we live. Everything comes in instant formulas: Just mix with water, stir, and you've got it. This is how we want maturity as Christians. But we cannot force it; we must wait out God's time with patience, as a farmer does. He does not go out the next morning and dig up his crop to see how it is doing. And neither must we. We must allow the seed to bring itself to the harvest, as God has arranged, and not be trying to reap phony harvests before the time.

- Furthermore, we must refrain from attempting to dictate what form the seed will take when it becomes ripe. I think this has been one of the greatest faults of the church for many, many centuries.

The Roman Catholic church decided very early that they were the true church and only that which was in accord with their form of church government was genuine. They have stuck to that idea ever since and it is causing endless problems today. But when the Protestant Reformation came about, it is remarkable that the churches which spun off in that great revolution of thought did exactly the same. So today we have many different denominational groups, each insisting that it is the true church and that it alone represents the kingdom of God among men. This is absurd!

The seed will produce what is inherent in it. "The earth produces of itself," said Jesus. We cannot dictate what form the seed will take. We can only recognize the result as being the product of God's life at work, characterized by that which characterizes him.

Third, we must expect this process to take some time. The seed does not grow up overnight, as I have already suggested. In the seventeenth chapter of Luke, Jesus also said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation" {cf, Luke 17:20}, i.e., you cannot camp beside it and watch it appear. "A watched pot never boils," says the old proverb, and watched seed, similarly, does not grow.

This is the reason for so much pessimism today. Men and women look at the church and say nothing is happening. "No," Jesus says, "you cannot tell that way. The kingdom of God does not come by observation, by scrutiny, with careful watching and measuring, like everything else." This is encouraging, is it not? You look around and see so much apparent failure. The standards by which we attempt to measure progress seem to be so negative; there seems to be no mark of success. It is because we have not taken seriously what Jesus says: It does not come that way. You cannot measure by the normal measuring stick. It is not a question of how many countries officially acknowledge the cross of Christ. It is not a question of how many people subscribe outwardly to the cause of Christ. The kingdom does not come with observation, yet it is coming, nevertheless, and it is a process that takes time.

As Jesus suggests in this parable, the man went back after he had sowed the seed and lived a normal life. He rose in the morning and slept at night. He did normal things. You and I must learn to expect this in our own experience. As the seed takes root in our lives we are to keep on doing the normal everyday things of our experience, washing the dishes and making the beds, making phone calls and decisions at the office -- all the normal things. And all the time we are doing so, the principles to which we are committed in our own hearts are making gradual changes. Things we cannot see are happening. When we think nothing at all is happening, everything is happening. Therefore we are not to get discouraged when it looks as if nothing is occurring in our lives.

Does a farmer get discouraged when he plants seed? Does he go out the next morning, see the field lying there just as black as the day before, and say, "Oh, what a waste of time. Nothing's happening." And the next day there is still no sign of anything. And the next day, and the next. After four or five days does he say, "What's the use of this? Why did I waste my seed? What's the point? Nothing happens at all." No, no farmer does that. He knows that, as surely as the seed is there, it must take root. The forces of life in the soil must react with the forces of life in the seed, and, without his realizing it, things will happen. And, sure enough, if he waits a little while, when he goes out he finds green shoots sticking up here and there. A little while later the whole field

suddenly turns green -- almost overnight, it seems.

This brings us to the fourth conclusion. We must realize that the growth of the kingdom of God can be detected only at certain stages, as Jesus made clear. First the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear, the full stalk of wheat. Though we cannot see change in our lives from day to day, yet there are times when we can see that something has happened. When we take the backward look, when we compare what we have become with what we were a while ago, then we see change. This is exactly what a farmer does, is it not? He can look at his field any given day and not detect any change from the day before. But when he looks back two or three weeks, or two or three months, he can see remarkable change. Jesus says this is what happens in our lives as well.

I think all this has been illustrated in the experience of twenty years at Peninsula Bible Church. You remember, those of you who were here at the beginning, that we began with the conviction of certain truths of Scripture which needed to be emphasized in our day. In many ways, we were almost alone in the emphasis of those truths. Not entirely alone -- we must never allow ourselves to adopt an Elijah complex, in which we say, "We alone are left of all the people of God," {cf, 1 Ki 19:14}. God always says to us, "I have yet seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal," {cf, 1 Ki 19:18}. What are you talking about, "all alone?" But we did begin with certain emphases. I would like to outline briefly the four great seeds I believe God led us to sow in the beginning which we have now come to harvest in our experience as a church:

1. First, we began with a deep and strong conviction of the Lordship of the Spirit of God, a conviction that the Lord Jesus is a living presence in his church. He is the Lord of the church. He has not left us. He has not gone off to heaven somewhere in space to sit and twiddle his thumbs while we get everything done down here. No! He is right with us as he said he would be. "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature," {cf, Mark 16:15}. "Make disciples of all nations," {Matt 28:19b RSV}; "and lo, I am with you always, even to the close of the age," {cf, Matt 28:20}. Therefore, he is able to direct the activity of this church. And through the mind of the Holy Spirit imparted to those who are in leadership within the church, chosen by the Spirit, he directs the steps we take, chooses the activities in which we are involved, and develops the strategy for approaching the community around. Now, I believe that. I believe it has been demonstrated through these twenty years. This is one of the reasons why we have the form of government we have here at Peninsula Bible Church. We have tried to follow as closely as possible the New Testament pattern. We find that a living Lord in our midst is still able to direct, with Holy Spirit strategy, the workings of his body.
2. The second principle with which we began is the ministry of the saints. We do not believe there is such a thing as the "clergy," if you think of them as an isolated group of superior people, different from plain-vanilla Christians, who have a special pipeline to God, and, therefore, are the only ones who can make decisions and perform ministries within the church. No, we took Ephesians 4 very seriously. God has given certain gifts to members of the church, so that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. He has equipped certain ones among us for a ministry of training and helping -- for what reason? -- "for the equipping of the saints unto the work of the ministry, unto the building up of the body of Christ," {cf, Eph 4:12-13}. The work of the church belongs to everyone. This includes the counseling, the evangelizing, the visiting, the praying, helping one another, and the teaching of Scripture. This work belongs to the whole body, and all the body must be at work in it, each one fulfilling the gift God has given him. If you ignore the gift the Lord Jesus Christ has given you, you have wasted your life. I do not care if you have made a million dollars, or ten million dollars -- you have wasted your life if you have not put to work the gift God has given you. This is the basis for measurement of success at the judgment seat of Christ.
3. A third principle is the authority and centrality of the Word of God. We have tried to sit under its judgment. Though so many are doing it today, we have tried never to presume to sit in judgment over the Word of God, which he has spoken and given through the prescribed instruments he has chosen. We have tried never to say, "Should this be here in the Bible, or should it not?" We have tried, rather, to say, "What does this mean, since it is here, and how does it apply to us?"
4. And, finally, the fourth principle has been declaring the great secret which God has given to man in

his Word: the indwelling life of the Lord Jesus, the power of a risen Christ, living his life again within each one of us, to manifest once again all that he ever was in the days of his flesh, but to do it now in the midst of this 20th century world. As Ian Thomas so succinctly puts it, "To make visible the invisible Christ." This is the function of the church. It is here for this purpose. Primarily, above everything else, this is what it is in the world to do. And when it starts to do this, all the highly desirable secondary results flow from it, including the solving of some of the thorny issues of society and the alleviating of the misery of mankind.

If you look back on these twenty years you can see that we have undergone exactly the process our Lord has outlined. There was first the conviction that these principles were true, arising from studying and thinking about the Word of God. The five men who gathered together to form this church did so with the conviction that these things were true. But it was only conviction. It was only the Word planted in the heart, sprouting, taking root within. But as we went on we began to see the promise of things to come -- that God was doing a new thing, that he was producing the life of the Spirit in a rich and abundant way in our midst. We have always been excited here at Peninsula Bible Church because we have seen God at work, and we see the promise of things yet to come. Now, twenty years later as we sit and look back upon it all, we can see that in many ways we have come to harvest. That which has been growing secretly is now manifest, visible to all. One of the encouraging things to us is that many are watching what God is doing here with us. But we are only one local church. This kind of pattern is expected to be reproduced throughout all the world.

This brings us to the final observation from this passage. The reaping is intended to make possible a yet greater sowing. Why does a farmer reap his crop? So that he may live from it, yes, but also in order that he may plant his seeds afresh the next spring. And then there will be a greater harvest than before, because the seed grows in such a way that it multiplies and increases, the barns fill up and overflow, and there is still enough for greater sowing yet at every new opportunity. I think this is where we stand this morning. This is to be a repetitive process. What God has taught us, and brought to fruition in our lives, we sow again in the lives of others; we pass it on.

As Paul wrote to Timothy:

and what you have heard from me before many witnesses, entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. {2 Tim 2:2 RSV}

There is the process. And in this remarkable way, which is going on secretly underneath all the confusion and the hoorah and hoopla of the world, beneath all the political chicanery and maneuverings of governments, within and above and beyond and beneath and around all the structures of society, this seed is growing secretly. God is producing his great and final harvest, and it will all come to pass exactly as he says.

The Lord Jesus said, "The tares and wheat will grow together until the harvest, until the Lord sends his angels to separate one from the other, and to gather the wheat into the barns and the tares unto the burning," {cf, Matt 13:24-29, 13:36-43}

How encouraging it ought to be to us that this seed grows secretly both in our lives and in the entire world. God has not failed, and the church has not failed. It cannot fail. Oh, there is a lot of scaffolding and physical structure, a lot of human organization and trappings all around the church, which we have falsely identified as the church, that is rotting and crumbling and falling to pieces. But this is not the building God is building in this age, nor the seed that he sowed and is producing. That seed is growing unto harvest, exactly as the Lord Jesus said. It will increase as you allow that seed to be planted in your own heart, and God will give the increase.

Prayer

Our Father, we thank you this morning as we think back upon these twenty years. What a brief time that is -- hardly time at all for a crop to have matured and yet here it is. We thank you for the harvest we have reaped and are reaping in these days. And we thank you for the confirmation of the truth of this Word we have looked upon. How it ought to encourage us

that you are able to produce this kind of harvest in the life of any individual here today, as well as in the life of the whole church around the world. How true these marvelous words are, Lord Jesus: "The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear." And Lord we pray we may recognize that these processes will never fail until that great day when all the harvest of the earth is reaped and the kingdom of God shall be made visible among men. "Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven." We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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