

The Power Is God's

"I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6-7).

Fellow Ministers of Christ:

"How can I grow this congregation?" I've asked myself that question many times over the years. I've asked the question after preaching to half-empty pews. I've asked the question after counting names in the guest ledger and after reading the treasurer's report. I've asked the question after wondering why a visitor never returned to church and after driving past the crowded parking lots of other churches on Sunday mornings.

"How can I grow this congregation?" If this is an understandable question, it is also a misleading question—misleading, because it contains entirely too much "I" and too little "God." How can I grow a congregation? When did God ask me to grow anything except to *"grow up into Christ" (Ephesians 4:15)*, and *"grow up in our salvation" (1 Peter 2:2)*, and to *"grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18)*—and even these are *His* doing, not ours.

When Jesus commissioned His Church, He said "Go," not "Grow." He said, "Go out," not "Bring them in." He said, "All authority in heaven and on earth is given to Me," not to you. *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).* The going is our responsibility. The growing is God's responsibility. If we could only remember this distinction, our ministries would be even more joyful and less stressful.

Paul wrote, *"I planted the seed."* Have you ever planted a seed? Most of us have. After planting the seed, exactly what did you do to make the seed grow? Yes, you chose the location. You scooped out the soil and dropped in the seed. You covered the seed with dirt. You faithfully watered, weeded, and fertilized. And when no one was looking, perhaps you spoke encouragingly to the seed: "Come on, little seed. Grow. Mature. Bear fruit." But what did you personally do to make the seed germinate and sprout? The answer, of course, is nothing. You did nothing to grow the seed, because the power to grow always resided in the seed and never in you. So it is with the seeds of God's Word.

In Mark chapter 4, Jesus told a parable about a growing seed. He said, *"A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself (αὐτομάτη, automatically) the soil produces grain" (Mark 4:26ff).*

What part did the farmer in the parable play in growing the seed? Night or day, awake or asleep, he had nothing to do with growing the seed or producing the fruit. God did the work. He gathered the harvest. What a relief! What a blessing! So,

a seed does not grow because of us, but in spite of us. This is true in nature. It is also true in ministry. The power to grow faith or effect change does not lie in the one sharing God's Word, but in the Word of God being shared. As Paul wrote in Romans 10:17, *"Faith comes by hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ."*

At times, the Word of God may appear small when compared to the heartaches and challenges of life. Perhaps this is why Jesus likened the Word of God to a seed and its growth to the growth of a mustard seed. In the world of gardening, what is smaller, more ordinary-looking, and less promising than a mustard seed? And in the real world, what is seemingly smaller, more ordinary-looking, and less promising than the old, tattered family Bible? Yet, there is no greater power on earth to make things grow, from a struggling faith to a struggling congregation.

How did God create the universe in its vastness? Through His Word. How did Jesus heal the ten lepers and the centurion's servant? Through His Word. How did Jesus calm the storm on Lake Galilee? Through His Word. How did Jesus raise from the dead Lazarus, the daughter of Jairus, and the son of the widow of Nain? Through His Word. How did Jesus promise to grow the Christian Church? Through His Word. *"On this rock,"* He said, referring to Peter's confession of Him as Lord and Christ, *"I will build My Church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it"* (Matthew 16:18). *I will build,* He said, *not you.*

Rest assured, ministers of Christ, that God is working through the proclamation of His Word and through the ministry of your congregation. How do we know? First, because He Himself has told us so, saying in Isaiah, *"As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is My Word that goes out from My mouth: It will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it"* (Isaiah 55:10-11).

But we can be certain that God is mightily working through His Word for another reason, and that reason is you. Sometime, someplace, someone—a parent, pastor, teacher, friend, or even a stranger—planted a gospel seed in you, and God made it grow.

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