

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Ladonna had joined the church only seven months ago. When she told the women's fellowship that she closed on her new home, the good news spread quickly.

"Well, we're going to make quick work of this move today," said Ladonna's cousin. "I've never seen so many people involved in moving a person. Why did you volunteer? You're not family or anything."

The two men were somewhat cornered off together amidst boxes, sitting on two large sturdy crates. They had stopped to help themselves to slices of pizza from one of the towers of boxes on the dining room table.

"We very much are family," said Trenton, after wiping his mouth. "We are part of the family of God. Ladonna is my sister in Christ, and I will do what I can to help her."

"Oh, okay," the young man said.

Trenton sensed respect and a softening under the young man's quip. "This world goes its own way. I'm so glad I am part of the kingdom of God," said Trenton. "I've got the Creator of the universe watching over me, taking good care of me. And I have a family of believers to live life with. We are not all perfect, but we keep working at it. Our head is Christ, and we are His body. It's a great way to live. I'm not saying it's always easy, but the Holy Spirit empowers me, and God is always with me!"

"So, my man. What do you know about the Lord?"

1 What's an object you or someone you know has repurposed?

2 Do you have a memory of a parent or mentor teaching you something about God when they weren't meaning to?

3 What's something in your home that you could make new?

²⁶ And he said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground; ²⁷ And should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how. ²⁸ For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. ²⁹ But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come. ³⁰ And he said, Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God? or with what comparison shall we compare it? ³¹ It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth: ³² But when it is sown, it groweth up, and becometh greater than all herbs, and shooteth out great branches; so that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it.

²⁶ He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

³⁰ Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?

³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth.

³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

The Kingdom of God Grows

Mark 4 is a collection of Jesus’ parables. A parable is a story that uses an example or image from everyday life to share a deeper truth. The Gospels present parables as one of the main tools that Jesus used in teaching. Yet Mark suggests that Jesus did not intend for everyone in His audience to understand these stories. At times, when it was necessary for the success of Jesus’ ministry, He used parables to conceal truths meant only for Jesus’ closest followers (Mark 4:10–12). Some parables He unveiled to His disciples (Mark 4:33–34), but the meaning of others—like the Good Shepherd parable of John 10:11–18—became clear only after His death and resurrection.

Mark 4:26–32 has two parables about how the kingdom of God grows. They draw their imagery from farming, a primary occupation of most people in the ancient world.

The first parable, the parable of the growing seed (vv. 26–29), shows that God is the one who causes His reign to expand. Before modern scientific study, the growth of a seed into a fully-formed plant was a very mysterious process. A farmer provides all the right growing conditions, but the farmer has no direct control over the actual process of what is happening under the soil. Jesus says that the kingdom of God grows in a similarly mysterious way.

Like the farmer sowing seed on the ground (v. 26), Jesus' disciples share His good news with the world (see Mark 4:14). The disciples don't control *when* or *how* the seed grows. It happens whether they are working or sleeping, preoccupied or busy (v. 27). They see the fruit of their labors in God's time (v. 29), and it is God who makes the seed grow (compare 1 Cor. 3:7). Even in a world that is out of sync with God's design, God is growing His kingdom in ways we cannot yet see.

The second parable, the parable of the mustard seed, emphasizes the radical growth of God's kingdom. The mustard seed is tiny (v. 31); we would never expect much to come from such a small beginning. But that seed ultimately produces a plant so large that birds can rest in its shade (v. 32). The same is true of God's kingdom. It began with a single Jewish teacher and a handful of unimpressive followers in a tiny, rural backwater. Today, over two billion people glorify God and affirm that "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:11). This parable offers us comfort as we navigate life's challenges. Though the world can seem dark, God's reign has continued to grow, and it will one day be known throughout the whole world.

1 Who were the intended audiences of Jesus' parables?

2 What does the parable of the growing seed teach us about the growth of God's kingdom?

3 What does the parable of the mustard seed teach us about the growth of God's kingdom?

⁴ There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; ⁵ One Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

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¹¹ And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; ¹² For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: ¹³ Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: ¹⁴ That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; ¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: ¹⁶ From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

¹⁷ This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, ¹⁸ Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart.

⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

...

¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

¹⁷ So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.

Maturing into Christ's Image

After reminding his readers of the gospel message in Ephesians 1–3, Paul begins to encourage the churches to pursue unity and maturity. Despite differences of location and heritage, they are united by what they share. The one and only Holy Spirit unites believers in “one body” (Eph. 4:4)—a metaphor that emphasizes the need to work together for the common good. Each believer enters the same faith through baptism (v. 5), shares the same hope for the future (v. 4), and serves the same Lord alongside God the Father (vv. 5–6).

Paul also points to God's work in helping believers grow and mature. God gives different ministry roles and places people in a position to help the church to grow into the “fullness of Christ” (vv. 11–13; compare 2 Cor. 3:18). By shepherding the church through adolescence, ministers protect the church against false teaching and help them to recognize anyone who wants to deceive them (v. 14). Fully mature people of God become a *body* that matches the *head*—Jesus Christ—who unites and grows the community in love (vv. 15–16).

As members of Christ's body, the collective church must reject the sinful habits that nonbelievers pursue (v. 17). Unbelievers do not participate in the life of God's people and cannot understand His ways (v. 18). Those on the outside repeat the unfortunate pattern of human hearts when they are hardened to the truth (v. 18; compare Isa. 6:9–10; 2 Cor. 3:12–16).

1 What are some of the things that unite God's people?

2 Why did God give different ministry roles?

3 Why must the church reject sinful habits of unbelievers?



Christian “churches” or “assemblies” started out much smaller than the Greek assemblies that came before. Pictured here is Pnyx Hill in Athens, where thousands of people could gather. Christian assemblies began in cramped quarters and tiny rooms, but would one day grow into the worldwide movement it is today.

Photo: Selbst

God of Growth and Small Things

The human ability to study small things has come a long way since the time of Jesus. Since the first century, we've developed optical and electron microscopes to unlock untold amounts of information. Since the Human Genome Project sequenced human DNA in the early 2000s, research possibilities have exploded into countless directions, often exploring the potential to treat diseases or improve health. Scientists have found that the alteration of a single base pair can impact the whole body. We are intricate machines indeed!

Even though we successfully study small things, that's not to say we comprehend them. Today's scientists might have more words to explain the growth of plants—words like “cellular mitosis” and “photosynthesis”—but that's not to say that humans can understand *why* the plant grows in the first place, apart from God.

The creator of all life uses images of growing things to explain the kingdom and the church. God became the master of growth before humans ever walked the earth. There can be no doubt, God uses the smallest of efforts, the most humble groups of people to form a global movement with eternal significance.

I've been to a lot of small churches in my time, but most were larger than a group of twelve disciples—the first group of Jesus' followers. It's easy to get hung up on anticipating God to multiply our numbers to reassure us of ministry success. It's a lot harder to be like the farmer, who trusts that something important is going on underneath the soil and out of sight. In the end, Jesus does not evaluate success by the size of our ministries but by the unity we share with other Christians, who join us in one Spirit and one body. Some go before us, and some will come after, but it is God who controls the growth.

1 What is the smallest church you ever attended? How did you see God using that community?

2 What is one way that you are connected to Christians in the wider world, outside your local church?

3 Where do you suspect that growth is happening outside of what you are able to see?

Small Things that We Can Do

The invitation for us all in the week ahead is to pay attention to small things. You might begin a new prayer habit, choose to get together for holy conversation with another member of your group, or even decide to germinate seeds for future planting (check local and seasonal guidance for suggestions).

God of small things, below is a small thing that I can do this week:

I will pay attention to what growth You provide!

Key Text

But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

—Ephesians 4:15–16 KJV

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

—Ephesians 4:15–16 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of February 2 through February 7

- Mon.** Exodus 14:21–31—Saved through The Sea.
- Tue.** Romans 6:1–14—Baptized into a New Life.
- Wed.** Exodus 16:13–16, 31—God Provides Bread in the Wilderness.
- Thu.** John 6:28–40—Jesus Is the Bread of Life.
- Fri.** Genesis 14:14–20—A Blessing with Bread and Wine.
- Sat.** Matthew 3:13–17—Beloved Child of God.

Next Week: Matthew 3:13–17; 28:19–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–29

We will talk about the sustaining practices of the church. Take the opportunity to investigate what your church or denomination teaches about baptism and Communion.