

# Illustrations of Church Growth in the Natural World

The Lord Jesus was fond of using illustrations from the natural world or from ordinary life to make a spiritual point.<sup>1</sup> In this he followed the practice of the prophets, proverb writers and psalmists before him. This shows us an important principle: to understand that God has worked his design in nature according to his plan and that this design is intrinsic to the way he works. Thus observing the natural world, which declares God's glory (Ps 19:1) is helpful for us to understand spiritual principles.

When he spoke about the growth of the church, or kingdom, in the world Jesus uses natural images to describe it. Thus he compares the growth of the church to salt in a meal or yeast in flour.<sup>2</sup> The lessons from this are many, viz.:

- The growth occurs in an invisible way to the casual observer.
- There is no central organising unit, or particle; the growth occurs using all the parts of the salt or yeast equally; all contribute quietly to the growth.
- The active particle causing growth does not stand out and is unnoticed by its surroundings. You do not look at a large loaf and say, 'Look at the yeast in that.'
- Growth is by small particles that spread rapidly by cellular division.
- Small things influence big things far out of proportion to their size.

From these minor figures we can establish certain principles:

- Growth is by a process involving small things not big things.
- Centralisation is opposed to Biblical growth.
- Real growth does not focus attention on itself; there is no hype or advertising, and it does not draw the attention of outsiders.
- Growth involves the whole body and not a select few.
- There are no dominant figures involved in Biblical growth.
- Biblical growth does not involve the assistance of the world.
- Growth involves the cellular division of the units seeking to grow; not the aggregation of units into a single big unit.

Even from this initial introduction we can see that the normal methodologies of growth used by most modern churches are opposed to the figurative teaching of Jesus. I want to show that they are also opposed to the way that God designed growth in the natural world.

## **The growth of single-celled organisms**

Single-celled organisms, such as amoebae or bacteria, (and some simple multicellular organisms like sea anemones) can divide by splitting into equal halves; this is called binary fission ('fission' comes from the Latin 'to split'). It is a form of asexual reproduction.

Bacteria are probably the fastest growing populations in the natural world, dividing every twenty minutes, so binary fission is extremely successful as a method of reproduction. A single bacterium is capable of producing 16 million copies of itself in a day. It is often the case that the simplest mechanism is the best.

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<sup>1</sup> For example the spread of the Gospel based on the growth of seed sown by a farmer in Matt 13:3-8, Mk 4:3-20 or mustard seed in Mk 4:30-32.

<sup>2</sup> Matt 5:13, 13:33.

This is a clear type of the reproduction of local churches as evidenced in the early church, the most successful period of church growth in history. There was no centralised church, no headquarters, no denominations, no central dominant figure over multiple churches. Instead the local churches, under the governance of plural, equal elders, grew through natural witnessing of the membership until they became too big for the home they met in. At that point the elders presided over a split and the formation of two new churches. This growth was natural and required no money to finance it and pushed the boundaries of the local witness to a slightly wider area, whereby the process began again.

It is a wonder to me that every few years new methods of church growth are developed and popularised that initially prosper and then eventually fail in some way, but the Biblical and sure method of growth is constantly ignored.

### **Grain**

This is a natural example of growth used by the Lord Jesus as a striking image of his own death and subsequent resurrection incorporating a family of born again members. He is the first-born of many brethren.

**Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. Jn 12:24**

The farmer sows grain seed into the soil but by the time of the harvest, natural processes have turned these individual seeds into multiple stalks of wheat or other grain. Sometimes, as Jesus observed, the yield is a hundred-fold. Each seed has produced many stalks of new wheat, each having many grains.

Again, by natural division of the grain, splitting and reproducing, the produce is multiplied. This is further evidence of the way God expects church growth to occur.

### **Bulb, rhizomes, tubers, corms**

Bulbs are underground buds with fleshy leaves containing a food storage supply with roots growing from the base. Example: daffodils, onions, and snowdrops.

Corms are short swollen underground plant stems surrounded by scale leaves that store food as a means of vegetative reproduction. During the year the corm withers as the food reserves are used up to produce leafy, flowering shoots from axillary buds. Several new corms are formed at the base of these shoots above the old corm. Example: crocus type plants.

Rhizomes are horizontal underground plant stems. It forms new plants from buds along its length.

Tubers are the swollen region of an underground stem or root, used for storing food. The potato is both a tuber and a rhizome. Dahlias are root tubers. It is a means of vegetative reproduction. Unlike a bulb, a tuber lasts only one season; new tubers developing on a plant the following year are formed in different places.

All these forms of plant reproduction have these things in common.

- They develop new populations from a stored food supply.
- They reproduce underground in the dark.
- They reproduce by splitting open and forming new cells.
- The initial organ splits and changes and may perish but many new plants result.
- Plants need nitrogen to function. This is converted to ammonia by lightning and single celled organisms in the soil and used by the plant especially in reproduction.

From these we can see clear parallels in church growth:

- Growth must be based upon a home church that has a good supply of food, i.e. teaching ministry, that succours the newly planted cells.
- The growth that occurs is in the dark and quiet; that is, it does not attract the attention of the world outside. It is hidden to the eyes of the world and makes no fuss.
- Growth is by the splitting of the home church.
- The primary requirement is the power of the Holy Spirit to provide the necessary energy (like plants using nitrogen) to function.

### **Trees**

Reproduction in trees involves the formation of buds; these are undeveloped shoots enclosed by protective scales. Inside each is a short stem and many undeveloped leaves, or flower parts, or both. Buds grow on tree branches throughout the year and either grow into flowers (blossom) or new leaves, and subsequently seeds. The tree branches split open in various places to make buds and flowers and then seeds.

Seeds are the focus of sexual reproduction in plants. As the plant grows it holds an egg (ovule), or many egg cells, in its ovary. When the plant matures the egg is fertilised by sperm (pollen) from itself or from another plant. Bees and other small insects, like hoverflies and butterflies, are vital in this transfer of pollen. Other methods of transferring pollen are by birds and animals where the pollen clings to the carrier, or even by the wind. The fertilised egg (zygote) remains in the plant and eventually becomes a seed ready to produce another plant. Some seeds drop from the tree singly (acorns) while others are found in multiples the flesh of an ovary (e.g. pear) and are spread on the removal of the sweet flesh of the fruit. Pine trees produce cones instead of flowers, but the process is otherwise much the same.

Thus trees produce very many seeds and each one (in the right conditions) is capable of becoming a new tree. Again we see a splitting of some kind in the host plant to form new growth.

### **Crystals**

A crystal is a homogenous solid substance whose constituent atoms, molecules, or ions are arranged in an orderly repeating pattern. This regular internal atomic structure is expressed by a regular geometric shape with symmetrically arranged plane (flat) surfaces. For each crystalline form of a substance the angles between particular crystal faces are always the same. The crystal structure is one of the characteristic properties of a mineral identified by its X-ray diffraction pattern. All crystals can be assigned to one of the seven crystal systems, according to their degree of symmetry. Some are used as gemstones; others, such as calcite, or quartz, have commercial uses; some have domestic uses, such as salt.

The growth of crystals is difficult to describe in simple terms as it involves technical processes, but it involves the addition new atoms, ions, or polymer strings to its structure. However, in its typical method, a small nucleus containing the newly forming crystal is created (called the 'first nucleation stage'); this occurs slowly. Subsequently, crystal growth spreads outwards from the nucleating site more quickly. A great deal could be added to this explanation but the science is very complex.

However, this simple description is enough for us to see the parallels with church growth. The host body forms a new plant containing a nucleus like the host; just as a new house church has a few key members. From this nucleus growth then occurs rapidly as new people join it, just like crystals grow.

## Grass

The most common metaphor used to illustrate growth in the Bible is that of grass, which grows quickly and persistently and yet without observation.<sup>3</sup> We only notice the spread of grass once it has been established somewhere we don't want it in the garden.

Now we don't need to spend much time discussing this since the same details apply as to corn and wheat, which are types of grass; as are rice and oats. In fact, grass (the common name for the Gramineae family of plants) has more than 9,000 species; this family is one of the largest on Earth.

There are two major methods of reproduction in grasses. Some grasses have additional stems that grow sideways, either below ground (rhizomes) or just above it (stolons). Grasses use stolons and rhizomes to reach out and establish new grass plants. This horizontal stem supplies food for the new plant until it is strong enough to survive on its own.

Grasses also have small flowers known as florets. These grow together in small groups called spikelets, which collectively form inflorescences. The flowers produce the spores that pollinate other flowers, which produce seeds and thus produce new plants.

Whether by working through horizontal stems on the ground or spores in the air from flowers, grass illustrates Biblical church growth by the planting of multiple new colonies from its home base. It is growth by scattering as opposed to the modern method of growth by gathering to a central base.

## Scattering

Scattering is an important principle in the way that the Lord multiplies his people:

The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. Mk 4:26

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field. Matt 13:31

The early church had been given instruction from the Lord, through the apostles, to go out and spread across the earth.

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations. Matt 28:19

You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. Acts 1:8

Instead, the initial development of the church was centralised with the apostles staying in Jerusalem. Many people from foreign lands who had been converted remained in this centralised body in Jerusalem, disobeying the Lord's command. Indeed, it must have been difficult to consider moving away from the wonderful body life of so many house meetings in a small area and to be able to sit at the feet of apostles who had known the Lord personally. But this could not continue or the world would not have been evangelised.

Thus the Lord dealt more severely with the church and introduced persecution in Jerusalem so that the church was forced to scatter.

At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles. ... Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. Acts 8:1-4

Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word. Acts 11:19

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<sup>3</sup> Gen 1:11; Job 38:27; Ps 72:16, 90:5-6.

God's people find it hard to obey this principle of scattering; some commentators have noted that when the church ignores Acts 1:8 it results in Acts 8:1. Indeed it had been a problem for Israel, which failed to obey God's command to take his word to people of all nations. Instead they despised foreigners and centralised their religion where they apostatised and had the kingdom taken away from them (Matt 21:43).

Man's natural inclination, and the way of the world, is to grow by centralising into a big organisation and then running that monster by layers of managers headed by an authoritarian figure. This is the opposite of what God calls us to do; he wants us scattered like salt in a meal, yeast in a loaf and mustard seed on the ground.

### Conclusion

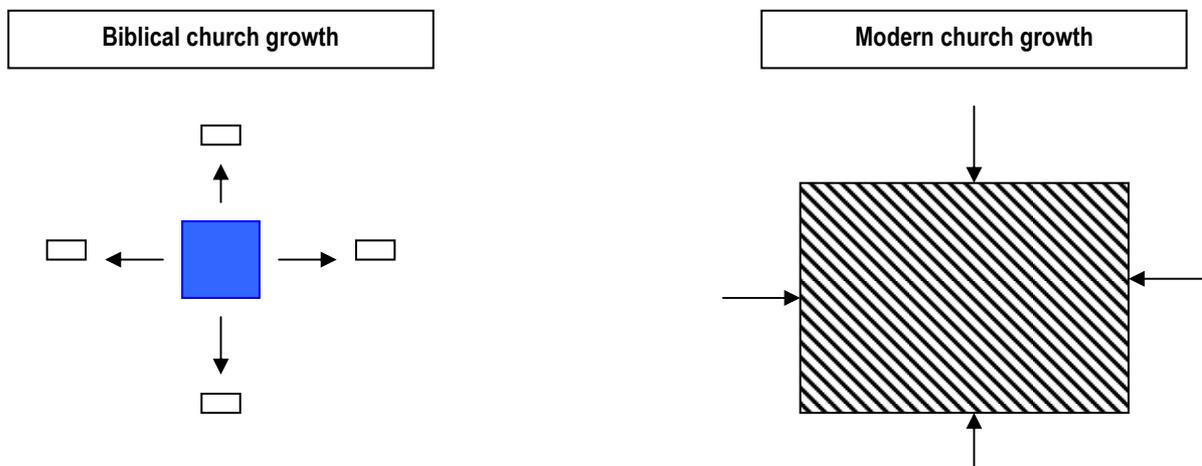
We have seen that Scripture explains church growth to be by the splitting of a home church and multiplication of new churches from that host church. In this divine plan we see similar processes everywhere in the natural world. Growth is thus by division of the host, or addition to the host and multiplication.

And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. Acts 2:47

And the number of the disciples multiplied greatly. Acts 6:7

Conversely, the overwhelmingly common approach to church growth in modern evangelicalism is not by splitting and multiplying of small churches, but by agglomeration of people into a central, organised, formal, large, institutional organisation. This, in turn, requires a host of unbiblical practices, such as: hierarchical leadership structures, paid staff, reliance upon a dedicated building and garnering huge amounts of money etc.

These two approaches could not be more different. The Biblical precedent is by splitting, adding new cells and then multiplying; thus a large area is covered in many small house churches. The other method is where the Christians in a large area are sucked into a big centralised meeting under authoritarian leaders.



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