

The Growth of Christendom

Matt. 13:31-33

Intro. Have you ever wondered how there came to be so many denominations and cults that identify themselves as “Christian?” Many towns in America have a street named, “Church Street.” On that one street you may find half a dozen or more churches ranging from Methodist to Catholic to Unitarian. Because of their common faith in Jesus Christ, they all consider themselves “Christian.” The remarkable thing is that most of these churches believe they have the inside track on truth. I mean, we do, right? Is this good or bad? Does this simply represent diversity of thought and opinion and division over non-essentials? Or could this be the insidious work of the Adversary who seeks to confuse the truth by muddying the waters?

From the parables of **Matt. 13** we’ve already learned several things about **the secrets of the kingdom of heaven** or Christ’s rule over earth. At the present time, the kingdom consists of those for whom Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord. Since Jesus interpreted the first two parables, we can be sure about their meaning. The **Parable of the Soils** illustrates how the message of the Kingdom will be spread. But like bad soil, many people are in no condition to receive it. During the period between the first and second comings of Christ, gospel seed will fall on hard hearts / shallow hearts / and hearts crowded with other things. Because the heart soil of so many is unrepentant and unreceptive, 3/4ths of the message will be wasted. The seed is effective only in hearts that are empty / broken / and hungry. This harmonizes perfectly with the first four beatitudes in **Matt. 5:3-6**.

Then from the **Parable of the Weeds** (or tares) we learn there are two sowers / two seeds / and two different plants growing simultaneously in the sower’s **field**, which represents the world. Then, at **harvest** (or the end of the age judgment) there are two destinies. In other words, the **Kingdom of Heaven**, or the visible Church on earth, consists of **wheat**, which represents those who are truly born again. But growing beside the **wheat** are **weeds** that look like wheat, but are unsaved and “Christian” in name only. While Jesus builds His kingdom, Satan is also at work building a pseudo-kingdom. He does this by strategically planting his servants in places where they can have maximum anti-Christ influence. Since only God qualifies to identify who belongs to Him and who doesn’t, His angels will separate the false from the true. Just as the workers were told not to uproot the **weeds** while growing beside the **wheat**, believers are not to pass judgment on the unsaved. Like the mission of Jesus, our business is to evangelize, not condemn. **Jas. 4:12 - There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you--who are you to judge your neighbor?**

Between the second parable and its interpretation are two short parables. (**vs.31-33**) But unlike the first two, Jesus didn’t interpret the others in chap. 13. So we’re left to interpret them for ourselves. Sing this foreboding line with me... “*dum ta dum dum.*” And...as we might expect, a variety of interpretations are suggested. But have no fear...the text provides clues to help guide us to the meaning.

Let’s read **13:31-35 - He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches." He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough." Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world." v.35 explains what Jesus meant by **secrets of the kingdom (v.11)** They are **things hidden** (or not revealed) **since the creation of the world...** In other words, this is new revelation.**

Since Jesus didn't interpret these parables, two basic ideas are offered to explain their meaning. One interpretation suggests they refer to *amazing growth* and the other to *abnormal growth*. Those who believe they teach *amazing growth* see the parable's message as entirely positive. Among those who interpret the parable this way are *post-millennialists* and those who embrace forms of *Dominion Theology* and *Triumphalism*. Under these banners, it is believed that Christ will not return until the Church triumphs over the world. They expect Jesus to come back after sin and Satan are banished from the planet. But after two world wars and declining conditions in the world and the Church, this view has become increasingly difficult to defend. From all metrics, the world isn't getting better and the **weeds** seems to be winning over the **wheat**. Yet many contemporary commentaries reflect the view that the **mustard seed** and **leaven** represent *amazing growth*.

On the other hand, others believe the parables represent *abnormal growth* and a negative situation. Now I don't claim to have superior insight. But when rules of interpretation are followed, I think the evidence points to growth that is more *abnormal* and negative, than *amazing and positive*. This view is consistent with the context and with so much the Bible anticipates concerning the last days.

Let me say a few words about the rules of interpretation as they apply to these parables:

1. To interpret correctly, we need to put ourselves in the sandals of those who first heard the parables and consider the mental images that formed in their minds. If Jesus gave the parable of the sower today, we might think of a big Kubota tractor pulling a cultivator. Obviously those who first heard these parables didn't have thoughts like that. John Deere yes, Kubota no! But seriously...in their minds they would have pictured a farmer with a seed pouch slung over his shoulder scattering seed as he walked the length of his field.
2. When a person, place, or thing is used as an analogy to teach some spiritual truth, it doesn't switch meaning in the next parable...especially to something opposite. For example, **the field** in each parable refers to **the world**. It doesn't refer to **the world** in one parable and Comerica Park or something else in the next. The Lord is interested in clarity, not confusion!
3. Because all Scripture is inspired by God, the use of **things** as types or analogies is generally consistent from Genesis to Revelation. For example, **light** always refers to truth and righteousness and **darkness** always refers to evil and ignorance. **Light** never refers to evil and **darkness** never refers to righteousness. Following this rule, we can expect the elements in these parables to basically refer to the same things from parable to parable. So in **v.33**, when Jesus spoke of **yeast** or leaven...the Jews who listened would have immediately remembered the 44 instances in their OT where bread with **yeast** was disallowed. For Jews, **yeast** always had a connotation that was negative and never positive.

Since the first two parables address opposition by human hearts and a satanic adversary, context supplies the first clue that the meaning of these two parables might be negative. By means of those He alerted His followers to human resistance and Satanic sabotage. This coincides with what was happening to Him at that moment. In the previous chapter the Jews openly accused Jesus of performing miracles in the power of the Devil. They were rejecting His message and conspiring to eliminate Him. So the context is negative.

Yet another clue is found in Jesus' choice of words. We'll get to that in a moment, but here is the Cliff Notes version: If words mean anything, and they do, a **mustard plant** when full grown is a shrub not a tree. The disciples would have been astonished to hear that a tree grew from a mustard seed.

And once again, nowhere in the Bible is **yeast** ever symbolically used in a positive way. Instead, it always represents the inner contaminating influence of something evil. So for these reasons, I believe the next two parables continue to describe opposition the Kingdom would encounter...opposition from without and contamination from within. While the **Mustard Seed** and **Yeast** represent phenomenal growth...the growth is corrupted by evil in both its branches and constituency. This Trojan Horse like tactic is perhaps Satan's most subtle and effective strategy to oppose the Kingdom of Heaven.

1. The Mustard Seed - Abnormal outward growth - vs.31, 32 Notice the subject in **v.31** continues to be **the Kingdom of Heaven**. Jesus said, **The kingdom of heaven is like...** In its broadest sense **the kingdom of heaven** represents Christendom or all who religiously identify with Jesus Christ. The number of people around the world who identify themselves as "Christian" has nearly quadrupled in the last 100 years...from about 600 million in 1910 to more than 2 billion in 2010. While this number is impressive in a world population of almost 7 billion and we thank God for it...only God knows who in that number truly belong to Him. In **I Cor. 4:5** Paul wrote,... **judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.**

So here Jesus said the Kingdom of Heaven would be **like a mustard seed a man planted in his field**. The **man** or sower is Christ. And once again, **His field** is the world He created, manages and owns. The **mustard seed** is one of the tiniest of all garden seeds. In those days the **mustard seed** was often used as an idiom to describe tiny things. On another occasion Jesus compared faith to the size of a mustard seed. (**Matt. 17:20**) But according to this parable, when this **mustard seed** was planted, it would grow into the largest of **garden plants** until it became **a tree**. Since a **mustard plant** is an herb, the parable seems to suggest a point when the mustard shrub would morph into a tree. In fact, it would become a **tree** so large, **the birds of the air come and perch in its branches**.

Since the **seed** in the first two parables represents the kingdom in germinal form, we can expect the **seed** to represent the same here. Notice Jesus said the **Kingdom of Heaven** would have a **tiny beginning**. And the birth of the church was just that. According to the record in **Acts 2**, only 120 followers of Jesus gathered in the Upper Room. These believers were the first members of the Church and the visible kingdom of heaven on earth. So when the Holy Spirit descended on Pentecost the kingdom was anything but impressive. But before that day ended, more gospel **seed** was sown and about 3,000 were baptized and added to the Church. The mustard seed had begun to sprout.

During the first century, the Church experienced phenomenal growth. According to historian and Bible Scholar Erich Sauer, conditions of *world centralization / cultural unity / peace (Pax Romana) / the ease of travel and trade / a sense of despair / and the mingling of religions...facilitated the rapid advance of the Gospel.* In this environment, Christianity grew from the mustard seed to become like the greatest of herbs. Here's a photo of an enormous sprawling mustard plant.

The disciples knew all about mustard seeds and plants. They knew what to expect when a mustard seed was planted. The seed Jesus referred to is believed to be Kardah. Kardah is a rapidly growing herb which can attain a height of 10-12 feet in one season. But Kardah is a garden plant...an herb, not a tree! A mustard seed that turned into a tree would be highly irregular and abnormal. Suppose you planted a kernel of corn and told me it grew 100 feet tall! (I'd check your breath.) Your corn would be all over the news and it would certainly attract the attention of the scientific community. Even Miracle Grow can't produce corn that tall! But that's the idea here. Jesus was talking about an *abnormal situation*. God has ordained that living things reproduce after their kind. By that law, **mustard seeds** produce herbs not trees! **Herbs** are defined as *flowering plants whose stem rises above the ground that do not become woody and persistent.*

Trees on the other hand, are *perennial plants having a permanent woody self-supporting main stem or trunk that ordinarily grow to a considerable height and usually develop branches at some distance from the ground*. As the graphics illustrate, there's considerable difference between the two. If Jesus wanted to describe *amazing* growth, He might have used an acorn that over time grew to be an oak tree. But that growth would be normal and expected. Did He miss-speak? Hey listen...hoof in mouth disease is a problem I suffer...but not Jesus. His words are true and immune from every hint of error. So, I submit to you...the parable signifies *rapid growth that is unexpected and abnormal*.

Now for a moment, turn in your Bible's to **Rev. 2**. As many scholars have noted, the seven churches of **Rev. 2, 3** were actual churches but they also represent Church conditions during seven successive ages of its history on earth. The Church of **Ephesus** in **Rev. 2:1-7**, represents the Church during the Apostolic Era until approximately A.D.100. Then Christ's letter to the Church of **Smyrna** in **Rev.2:8-10** represents the period of Roman persecution that followed for the next 200 years under the Roman Caesars. In **Rev. 2:10**, Jesus encouraged the Smyrna church saying, **Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life**. As a rule, the Church thrives and actually grows in the midst of bitter persecution. So, for the first 300 hundred years of Church history, growth was normal and steady.

But then something dramatic happened that affected Church history from that time forward. Notice the graphic. A similar one is printed on the back of the sermon notes. (Isn't it interesting to see church history illustrated by a tree with many branches?) Both history and church tradition say the Roman Emperor Constantine had an existential experience as he was preparing for the battle at Milvian Bridge. According to Eusebius, he believed he saw the vision of a fiery cross in the sky and heard a voice telling him, "*In this sign you will conquer.*" He felt this was a message from God and God was saying, "*If you will embrace Christianity, you will defeat your enemies.*" Based on this experience he embraced the Christian faith and declared himself to be the defender and protector of Christianity. When the *roll is called up yonder* we'll find out if his conversion was genuine, but it appeared to be.

But given this experience, in A.D. 312, Constantine issued an *edict of toleration* for Christianity and showered the Christian Church with many favors. Overnight, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Instead of the objects of persecution it became popular to be a Christian. The Holy Catholic or universal Church was born. By official mandate, Christianity was made the religion of the universe. Pagan temples were transformed into centers for Christian worship. To gain the favor of the emperor and other officials, church leaders adopted customs derived from pagan practices. One compromise after another followed. Relics / statuary / and mystic rituals became increasingly important. The Church became more pagan and less Christian! What may have seemed a great blessing, became a great curse! As the Church was united with government authority and elevated to a place of honor, it declined in spiritual blessing and power. The tender herb that grew by conversion had suddenly become a mutant. The shrub had morphed into a tree.

Suppose by a legislative decree from Lansing, "Pure Michigan" meant that Christianity was the only religion allowed in our state. Would that law further Christ's kingdom? No way. No government edict can rescue sinners from condemnation and transfer us from death to life and earth to heaven! Only personal faith in Jesus Christ can do that. Yet in history past, growth by personal faith in Christ was replaced by an edict. The secular church was born. This is the subject of Christ's 3rd and 4th fourth letters...the letters to the Church in **Pergamum** and **Thyatira**. (**Rev. 2:12-29**) **Pergamum** means *thoroughly married*. It represents the era when the Church was married to the world system Jesus died to rescue us from. The name **Thyatira** means *continual sacrifice*. Both letters present the dark side of ecumenicism and the unholy mixture of Christianity with paganism and error.

The visible church grew and was corrupted under the steady influence of mysticism / false teachings / and an insatiable appetite for power and wealth. The next letter to the church at **Sardis** represents the Dark Ages when true believers were a tiny minority outside the church that had grown so large and powerful. During this present **Laodicean** age of so called, enlightenment...the visible church has not emerged from these conditions. The faithful represented by the church at **Philadelphia**, continues to be a persecuted minority. Though the World Council of Churches continues to identify with Christ, it has become a sanctuary for unbelief and unfaithfulness.

Notice Jesus said this tree would become so large the **birds of the air** would **come and perch in its branches**. Again, following the guidelines for interpreting parables, we can determine what the **birds** represent. In **13:4** - it was **birds** that devoured the **seed** that fell on the hardened soil. Then in **13:19** Jesus said the **birds** represent the **evil one** or **evil spirits** who serve Satan. If the **birds** represent evil spirits in **vs.19**, it seems inconceivable Jesus would use them to represent something good just 13 verses later! Yet some suggest the birds represent young converts flocking to the Church, or people of other races being saved. (I think that idea is "for the birds.") What I believe Jesus meant is that demons would actually take up residence in the visible church or Christendom. This may seem shocking to some, but this is exactly what is prophesied to occur in the professing Church in the last days. **1 Tim. 4:1-3** - **The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth.** Other points of identification are given in these verses and more could be said, but you need to study these verses for yourself and come to your own conclusions. But according to the **parable of the mustard seed**, evil spirits will actually take up residence in the professing Church. It's at least interesting that twice **Rev. 2:13** says Satan's throne was located in **Pergamum**...the city of this *thoroughly married church*.

2. The Leaven - Abnormal inward growth – vs. 33 - He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."

The 3rd rule for interpreting parables is especially helpful here. Throughout the Bible, yeast is used as a symbol or a type of sin and its corrupting influence. In fact, nowhere in the Bible does **yeast** refer to anything but evil when used symbolically. The act of purging out yeast under the sacrificial system of the OT or when believers gather around the Lord's Table in the NT...is equivalent to putting away sin.

And we know some things about yeast. We know, it works inwardly...or we could say, secretly. **Yeast** cells thrive on the simple sugars of whatever ingredients they're added to. As the sugars metabolize, carbon dioxide and alcohol are released into the dough, causing it to puff up or rise. If it wasn't for **yeast**, we wouldn't have intoxicating beverages or alcoholics. Once **yeast** has been added to a recipe, it's impossible to get it out. It spreads until it permeates the entire batch. The only good thing about yeast is donuts! Amen?

So Jesus said the Kingdom of Heaven would be like **yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough**. Did you notice it was a **woman** who mixed in the **yeast** and she's not Rachel Ray. In three of the parables, **the man** who planted seed represents Jesus. But here the one who introduces **yeast** into the flour is a **woman**. Now I mean no offense ladies...(say, "*None taken pastor.*") But throughout the Bible, a woman is often the purveyor of false teaching and seductive influence. Listen to **Rev. 2:20** - **Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess.**

By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. Just as **Jezebel** of the OT led Israel into idolatry...so a symbolic woman used her influence to corrupt the Church in its **Thyatira** stage of development.

Through this parable, Jesus is talking about false teachings that would insidiously work their way into the Church. Now remember, **yeast** is never used to represent something positive. Jesus warned His disciples against the **yeast of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herod**. Then in **I Cor. 5:6, 7** Paul rebuked the Corinthians for their pride and arrogance that allowed an immoral man to continue in the fellowship without discipline. He wrote, **Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast--as you really are.** Then, to believers at Galatia who were influenced by the false teachings of Jewish legalists Paul wrote, **That kind of persuasion does not come from the One who calls you. "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough. - Gal. 5:9** Make a note of it...**Yeast**, sin and false teachings have something in common...*"a little goes a long way"*.

So how did the professing Church morph into such a large tree? Why are there are so many Christian denominations? Why do groups like the Mormons / Jehovah's Witnesses / Unitarians / Branch Davidians / and hundreds of other cults and sects profess to be Christian? How did this happen? It came about by **yeast**, or the corrupting influence of sin and false teachings. From the moment the **mustard seed** was planted, Satan began to sow weeds among the wheat. Listen to what Jesus said to the church at **Pergamum... Rev. 2:15 - Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.** The false teachers at Pergamum were some of the weeds of the previous parable.

Now listen again to **2:20 - Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.** Once again, these letters, to **Pergamum** and **Thyatira**, represent the period of phenomenal growth of both weeds and wheat. It was at this time the Church was corrupted by the intrusion of teachings the NT calls **things taught by demons. (I Tim. 4:1)** The **birds** perched in the branches of this massive tree represent demon-inspired false teachers. And then, like Jezebel of OT fame, there came a **woman** who symbolizes false and seductive influence. She introduced evil into the Church and contaminated it with unfaithfulness.

Let me finish with three applications:

1. There are many true believers in the world and we should never think they only belong to Bible churches like ours. Saved people are found in almost every denomination that embraces Jesus as God incarnate. But under the banner of Christianity, there are also many who are unsaved. We know this from **Matt. 7:21-23** where Jesus said, **"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'** We need to be certain about who we're trusting to save us. (Troy and the little girl at VBS)
2. We should never be misled into thinking that rapid growth and "big" means that God is in something or God is blessing something. Just like the natural world, organisms that grow super fast and abnormally large are usually mutations that are unhealthy and can't survive.

God's way of growing people and churches is slow but steady. Disciple-making is like that.

3. A little sin ignored or tolerated or a little false teaching...goes a long way. This is why we are to put away every contaminating influence and **I Tim. 4:16** says, "**Watch your life and doctrine closely**" to be sure they are in sync with the truth of God's Word. A little deviation / a little sin tolerated / a little mixing of truth with error / can contaminate an entire life. Again, what's true for our individual lives is true for the Church. Mixture is never God's way. That's another problem with the positive view of the yeast. **I Jn. 3:3** says, **Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. Pure** means, no mixture.

So how is it with you this AM? Is the soil of your heart open and receptive to God's Word? Are you eager to grow in His grace and knowledge? Cutting through all the trappings of religion, **Micah 6:8** describes what God wants from us. **He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.** Is your fellowship with Christ pure, or are some things mixed in that shouldn't be there? As we sing the closing song, make it a prayer and ask the Lord to purify your heart.