

Jesus said:

Luke 13:¹⁸..... "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? ¹⁹ It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches."

²⁰ And again he said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? ²¹ It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened."

What was He talking about? You know the song "*From little things, big things grow*"... Well, that's what He's talking about. The Kingdom of God, was going to begin as a tiny, insignificant blip, and it was going to grow, and take on a life, all of its own.

How distant those words must've seemed, to Jesus' disciples, when He was nailed to the cross (they must've thought "*Well, somebody's sprayed the seedling with a good dose of roundup— she's all over*)... They didn't hold a lot of hope for the growth of the Kingdom of God, and so they cowered behind locked doors, afraid to even be discovered as one of Jesus' disciples.... How un-real Jesus' statement about the Kingdom of God growing, must've seemed, **until** the day that God's Holy Spirit began to motivate the church at Pentecost... Because at **that** point, **everything** changed...

And the book of Acts, is exactly the story of the growth of the mustard seed, into the largest of the garden plants – it's the story of a little bit of yeast, having an effect on a whole lump of dough.

It's the story of 30 years that changed the world, as the good news of Jesus Christ, spread **throughout** the world.

We've been working our way through this book of Acts, and up to this point, the church has been growing, almost seemingly by accident... A hand-full of Christians started out in Jerusalem. And when the Holy Spirit came upon them, they grew into the thousands. And then when they were persecuted, they had to get out of Jerusalem and run for their lives, but everywhere they went, they carried the Gospel with them... And it was almost seemingly by accident, that the church began to spread... Everywhere that the persecuted Christians fled, people were now turning to Jesus....

And now, in today's reading, Acts Chapter 13, it becomes very clear, that there was nothing accidental about it – it was **all** the work of God's Spirit.

And it's becoming really clear to me, as **we** work **our** way through this book of Acts, just how important it is for us to grasp this. Acts describes how the Kingdom of God grows, as disciples of Jesus Christ **stop** making their own plans, and begin listening to God – as they **stop** living for themselves, and **begin** to live for Christ....

The Christian church in the West today, is a far-cry from the Acts church. And even the way **we** do things **here**, is a long way from the Acts church...

I've been to a lot of different 'church growth' seminars – I've heard lots and lots of speakers on the topic... and most of

them – what they’re doing – is they’re really pushing a business model for church...

- Your church has to have a mission statement, and a strategic plan...
- or maybe we read a book about how so-and-so grew their church from 100 to 1000, and we begin to do what they did.
- We identify things like atmosphere and coffee machines, and how they’re going to make our church a place where people feel welcome.
- We put in a strategic process of raising up leaders.
- Maybe we begin an evangelism campaign,
- or a stewardship campaign...
- Maybe we put together a leadership team of truly excellent personnel...
- Maybe the sermon is purposely designed to be popular, and makes people feel good about themselves and want to come back again...
- Maybe we even have spin-doctors to present the good about ourselves, and to market our church to the world, and to manage the bad publicity...

And people push themselves to be excited about these sorts of initiatives, because the only other alternative that they’ve ever been exposed to, is a shrinking, dying church, which is gasping for breath, and just trying to hang on for one more generation to re-live the nostalgia of its glory-days when it first began. ...

But you know what? To me, none of that sounds at all, like a mustard seed that grows of its own accord. It doesn’t sound at all, like the growth of yeast and the rising dough. 1

Corinthians 3:7 says that it's **only God** who gives the **growth**. What place do **our** plans and **our** strategies have in that???

But you might say to me, "Michael, we have to have some kind of plan, otherwise nothing happens" – nothing that is, other than decline...

Can't you see that, when we seek God, God will grow His church???

Barnabas and Saul (later he was called Paul) were sent out as missionaries by the church, and yet in V4, it says that they were sent out by the Holy Spirit... So the church sent them, but the Holy Spirit sent them... Who's doing the sending? Who's in charge?

Who's in charge of this church? Michael??? - I hope not... A few of the older, more mature Christians??? – I hope not... Well, it can't be a larger denominational headquarters that's in charge, because we're not even affiliated with anyone... Who's in charge of this church???

Well, it can either be us (all of us together), or it can be Christ, through His Holy Spirit... – which one do you want it to be????

It'd probably be safer if I was leading the church. It'd probably be less taxing if you were leading the church... But you want the Holy Spirit to be leading us, don't you??? I know I do...

What does that look like? What does it look like, for the Holy Spirit to be leading the church?

Well, we can learn a fair bit from the church at Antioch.

1. Firstly, they were a fellowship from all walks of life.

Among the leaders, were Barnabas, and Simeon, Lucius, and Manaen, and Saul...

- Barnabas was a Christian leader, who'd come from Jerusalem.
- Simeon: Well these days, it's terribly politically incorrect, but we're told that Simeon's nick-name, was "nigger" – that's how it's pronounced in the Greek, and yep, it meant exactly the same as it means today "darkie" ... We've got to try not to get our 2015 knickers-in-a-knot about racism – we've got to remember this is 1st Century, this was his nick-name, and they loved him like a brother.
- Then there was Lucius from Cyrene (in North Africa). And he probably had black skin too...
- Manaen had been a life-long friend of King Herod... Isn't it amazing, that 2 young fellas who grew up together – one becomes a Christian and a leader in the church, and the other is the one who beheaded John the Baptist and played a part in the trial of Jesus.

Where you come from, doesn't define who you are. It's how we respond to Jesus Christ, that defines who we are...

- And of course Saul was a trained and zealous Pharisee – he used to hunt down Christians to have them arrested, but now he was about to become a missionary **for** Christ.

And so the Christian fellowship was from all walks of life.

2. How is it, that a group of people, coming from such vastly different backgrounds, could all work together, hearing from God, and being led by the Holy Spirit????

I'll tell you how – It wasn't because Manaen grew up in a royal household. It wasn't because Paul was a trained Pharisee..... It was a unity of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Two spiritual gifts are listed here – a gift of prophecy and a gift of teaching... When God chooses to speak through a nobody, the whole church is blessed. When God gives somebody a gift of being able to teach, it is for God's glory, and for the building up of the church, and the whole church is blessed. And that's the way it works for all of the Spiritual gifts.

You know, most churches, when they're electing their elders, or choosing their leadership team, they choose businessmen and professionals – they choose the well educated and the well spoken... But when God builds **His** church, He very often chooses the nobodies – He equips ordinary men and women, like you and I – He gives them gifts – we don't all have the same gifts – But He empowers us with His Holy Spirit, to do in the name of Christ, what we are **not** qualified to do.

I could never be qualified, to teach to you the word of God – I'm not that smart. But by the grace of God, He has given me

a gift, of being able to do just that. I've got nothing to be proud of, because I'm hopeless... But in His grace, God uses me anyway...

That's what God does. And **none** of us can be proud of our position in the church, because we're just merely different parts of the same body, working together to serve Christ.

Some people will be part of a church all their life, and never feel that they have anything to offer to God, and so they never find their place in serving Him (how sad that is)... Well guess what? – **None** of us have anything to offer God... All God wants is our availability, and our willingness, to be given Spiritual gifts, to be used for the building of His Kingdom...

And if you're sitting here today, feeling "I'm one of those who have nothing to offer", you say to God right now, Lord, I'm willing to be your servant, in whatever capacity you equip me...

And the Lord may give you a gift of:

- Preaching
- Teaching
- Love
- Mercy
- Serving
- Giving
- Prophecy (to deliver a word from the Lord)
- Evangelism – of reaching out to those who are just like you were
- Helping others
- Prayer

The church is a body. And the spiritual gifts, are so we can function as a body.

And we saw the church at Antioch, were utilising their Spiritual Gifts.

3. Thirdly, the church at Antioch, were a church who worshipped.

They worshipped. They prayed. They fasted...

*Somebody once said: "Prayer does not enable us to **do** a greater work for God. Prayer **is** a greater work for God."*

And it was in this context of prayer, worship, and fasting, that God spoke to them...

But let me say this: It's not a matter of routine – it's a matter of the heart... Let me explain.

If I view "worship; prayer; and fasting" as a three-part formula, I've lost the whole point. If I say, "Right, I have to bring into this church a culture of worship; and we're going to start all these prayer groups, and everybody has to come and pray; and we're all going to fast once a week, because we've learnt that this fasting thing is important".. If we do all that, and then we expect that because we're doing all these things, God's going to speak to us, we're missing the whole point...

It's not a matter of process – it's a matter of the heart...

What's going on in your heart???

- What does Jesus Christ mean to you?
When we're thankful for what Jesus has done for us on the cross, we worship Him, don't we???...

- Do we love our Lord?
– then we'll want to communicate with Him, won't we???...
- Do you want to see the Kingdom of God grow?
- Does your heart break for your next-door-neighbour who doesn't know Jesus???
Then we're gunna pray aren't we???...
- Is your love for God a sacrificial love???
Well maybe sometimes we'll pray instead of eating...

They worshipped. They prayed. They fasted. – not because it was part of their church growth model; Not because somebody made it a rule – you've all got to do this; Not because they'd read in a book that somebody else's church had done that, and they'd grown, so we'll do the same thing... They worshipped; they prayed; they fasted, because it is a natural behaviour of a heart devoted to God.

4. Fourthly, they were a church who sent people out. (even when it cost them). They were willing to send out the very best of their leaders.

You know, I still remember what it cost out church in Dalby. They sent out 2 key families – us and John and Kathryn Ruhle – they sent us out in the same year. And yeah – sure that cost them – for John and I to both go to Bible college in the same year..

When the Holy Spirit said to send Paul and Barnabas out, they fasted; they prayed; they laid hands on them, and said “We're sending you....” But V4 tells us that the Holy Spirit sent them... And He did, because the church at Antioch were devoted; listened; and obeyed.

And so they left Antioch, they went down to Seleucia, they got on a ship and sailed to Cyprus, and in the city of Salamis, they preached the word of God. And they preached their way, right across the island, and ended up at Paphos.

And at Paphos, they got some opposition from Satan. One thing you can be sure of, is when God's doing something good, Satan's gonna try to **undo** it.... What happened?

Sergius Paulus was the Proconsul or Governor of Cyprusⁱⁱ - he was the most important man on the island. And we're told (basically) that he was no fool – he's described as “**a man of intelligence**”. And when he heard about Saul and Barnabas, he summoned them, because he wanted to hear the word of God.

You know, **usually** it's **not** the important people – it's usually the nobodies that God chooses. But every now and then God does choose someone of influence, like He did in this case.

But there was a Jewish false prophet, who used to influence the Governor. His name was Bar-Jesus (which means son of Jesus) (Bar means “son of”). Barnabas means son of encouragement.

Anyway, Bar-Jesus – this false prophet – opposed Paul and Barnabas, and tried to turn the governor **away from the faith**.

But Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him ¹⁰ and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?"

You see, his name meant "son of Jesus", but Paul said "You're not the son of Jesus – you're not the son of the one who saves – you're the son of the Devil."

I reckon there's something important for us in this: – I believe in Australia today, the biggest opposition we find to the work of God, comes from **inside** the church. Most people outside of the church – they're just disinterested... But within the church, there are some who claim to be sons of Jesus, but they're actually sons of the devil... How do we tell?

Well Paul says of this fella, that he's an enemy of righteousness, he's full of deceit and villainy, and what was he doing? He's making crooked, the straight paths of the Lord.

The gospel message is simple. It's straight forward. It's clear...

- Repent of your sin
- Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and the salvation that in His grace and mercy, He gives us
- Be baptised
- And then follow Christ in His ways of righteousness

Any attempt to divert someone from that path, is not the work of a son of God – it's the work of a son of the devil...

And through Paul, the Holy Spirit put Bar-Jesus in his place, and actually the same thing happened to him as what happened to Paul – he was blinded, and he couldn't even see the sun.

And the story had a happy ending: the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

And it's important to get something here: this governor was a man of intelligence. He didn't become a believer because Paul had done a neat trick – he didn't become a believer because he'd seen a miracle unfold before his eyes (old mate going blind)... We are clearly told that he believed **for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.**

And if our faith just rests on miracles, or signs and wonders, then that's a very shallow faith... Faith that endures, is a faith based on the teaching of the Lord – because that's what we respond to. We respond to the Word of God – not to signs and wonders.

So,,, Where to from here????

- My prayer, is for the Kingdom of God to grow.. – for it to grow, right here, in this town and this district.
- And I pray that it will grow, not through our plans and strategies, but because we have become a people who are devoted to God – a people who seek God, listen to God, and obey His Holy Spirit.

I also pray, that we, together, as a church, will:

- Be a fellowship of the Holy Spirit (even though we come from all sorts of different walks of life)
- That we would encourage one another to serve God, using the Spiritual gifts that God has given us.
- That we would be a worshipping and praying church – not because we're compelled to do so, or because it's a plan or a strategy, but because our hearts are devoted to God;
- And I pray that we would be a mission church – that as God directs, we would send people out on mission (even if it costs us)

That's my prayer... It's actually pretty big, hey... But I can see God doing it...

Because His Kingdom is still like the mustard seed, that grows and expands – God's doing – not ours...

I can see God doing it... Can you???

ⁱ Thomas Chalmers. Cited in Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary – Acts*. Zondervan: Grand Rapids. 1998. (p.380)

ⁱⁱ F. F. Bruce, M.A., D.D., F.B.A., Emeritus Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis, University of Manchester [in Logos Bible Software]