

## THE SOIL OF THE CHURCH

No, we did not mean “soul” of the church. We are looking at four different kinds of church members in which the word has been planted in four different kinds of soil. The growth of the plant is determined by the soil in which it was planted. In the parable of the sower (actually, a parable of soils) in Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23, four different kinds of soil are mentioned, representing four results when the word is sown. Note that Jesus speaks of “the word of the kingdom” being sown. In today’s religious system, the “word of the *kingdom*” has been replaced by the “word of the *church*” and the emphasis is on “church planting” with no mention of the kingdom.

It is only in the context of the Kingdom that being born again, salvation, redemption, forgiveness of sins, new life in Christ, and the whole message of conservative preaching has any meaning. These things are important, but they are not an end within themselves. It is God’s purpose to qualify us “to share in the inheritance of the saints of light, for he has delivered us from the domain (kingdom) of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Col. 1:12, 13). The ultimate purpose, then, of evangelism and preaching is to bring people into the kingdom of God and under the reign of God which is manifested in the life and teachings of His Son. When Jesus told Peter “upon this rock I will build my church” (Matt. 16:19) he went on to say: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (ver. 19). It seems building the church was not an end in itself but a means of entering the Kingdom. Today’s church planting movement seems to say the church is the end of God’s purpose.

Jesus in his ministry demonstrated what the kingdom of God is: “Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, ‘the kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say ‘look here it is’ or ‘there it is’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst.’” (Luke 17:20, 21). Wherever Jesus was, there was the kingdom. He further stated: “But if I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:20). When we pray “Thy kingdom come” we are asking God to manifest Himself through us. In the light of all this we can conclude that the mega churches have a unique obligation and privilege, because of their sheer numbers, to demonstrate to a vast number of people what the kingdom of God is. The Christian left should realize the greatest humanitarian effort they can accomplish is to demonstrate the reality of the kingdom of God. The Christian right has the obligation to demonstrate the reality of the kingdom of God in contrast with the political kingdoms of man. The Catholic Church should realize the kingdom of God does away with the paraphernalia of a human priesthood. The “health and wealth, God wants you to be rich” preachers should realize that we are to “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matt. 6:33). The small, struggling congregations scattered across our land should be encouraged by Luke 11:32 when Jesus said, “Your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom.”

This parable is applicable only if it is the word of the kingdom that is being preached. If, for example, if the church has embraced a

“practical” ministry that stresses psychology, psychiatry, counseling, recreation, and services geared to meet every or imagined need in order to face the stress and conflict of modern society, and its preaching is tailored to gaining interest on a superficial not solid doctrinal teaching, the soil is already polluted with the results the parable speaks of.

Now back to the parable of the soil. The first result of the word being sowed is “when anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart” (ver.19). We have emphasized in many Newsletters the possibility and obligation of understanding the word. The common conception today among many, if not most, church members, and many preachers, is that we just cannot understand the Bible. The idea is that we are not expected to understand, and it just doesn’t make any difference anyway. But is this true? Not if we believe Ephesians 5:17: “So then do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is.” The will of the Lord is revealed in the Scriptures; therefore this is a direct command of God that we are to understand. How can we say the Bible is intended to be “mysterious” and “beyond words” if it is a *revelation* from God? There are some things in the New Testament called “mysteries” but wherever the word is used the “mystery” is revealed and explained. Romans 16:25, 26 states: “Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the *revelation of the mystery* which has been kept secret for long ages past, but *now is manifested* by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been *made known* to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith.” The Apostle Paul further stated: “...When you read you *can understand* my insight in the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now *been revealed* to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit.” (Eph. 3:4,5). Concerning his preaching of the word he said: “that is the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has *now been manifested* to His saints” (Col. 1:26), and “praying...that we may *speak forth the mystery of Christ*.” The mysteries of Scripture were “things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him,” but “to us God *revealed* them through the Spirit.” (I Cor 2:9,10). The Apostle continues: “now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that *we might know* the things freely given to us by God” (ver.12). We are commanded in Ephesians 5:17: “Be not foolish but *understand* what the will of the Lord is.”

The one on whom the seed was sown on the rocky places “hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet has no firm root but is only temporary; and immediately falls away” (ver. 20, 21). Helmut Thielicke, a superlative German preacher, in his book *Waiting Father* describes this seed in these words: “At first when they receive the word, they are enthusiastic. They are not just bare rocks; there is at least a thin layer of soil in which the word germinates. It actually begins to take root. These people have been touched; perhaps can even talk about being converted, or if they prefer the man of the world’s style of conversion, they may say they were ‘thrilled’ or ‘deeply impressed.’” This is a kind of emotional enthusiastic response when hearing the word. It is based on how one feels at the moment, perhaps being influenced

by the eloquent oratory of the preacher, or the thrill of being in the presence of a modern well-oiled seeker friendly religious service geared to offend no one or make any feel uncomfortable about his relation (or non-relation) to Christ. When the word of God really takes root the hearer must die to self because it demands repentance which is more than being “inspired or “thrilled.” This produces “no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, he immediately falls away” (ver.21). This is seed on rocky places.

“And the one on whom seed was sown among thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful” (ver. 22). These people are obviously people in whose soil something besides the word of God springs up. The Greek word for world is *kosmos*, which means “the physical earth,” and the word age is *aionos*, meaning “an unbroken age, perpetuity of time, eternity...the period of consummation at the return of Christ.” (From: *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*). It is the word *aionos* that is translated *world* in this parable. David Wells in his book *God In The Wasteland* states “in the New Testament, the term *world* has three basic meanings: 1. the earth, the created order; 2. the nations, the human community; 3. the ways of fallen humanity, alienated from God and His truth. It is the last definition of the earth to which we give most attention in our teaching and writing, and rightly so.” It is the third definition given by David Wells that is used in this parable described as *thorns*. The chain of faithlessness to which the person who is a thorn is shackled consist of many links. These links are not justifiable reasons, but sins, dependencies, and secret bondage. These are the thorns the Apostle John writes about in I John 2:15-17 when he warns: “Love not the world nor the things in the world, if anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is of the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away and also its lust; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.”

We see the apostle Paul’s definition of the thorns in these words: “Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (I Tim. 6:9-10).

Albert Barnes in his *Notes on Matthew* gives a good summary on what the thorns are: “They represent the cares, the anxieties and the deceitful lure of riches, or the way in which a *desire* to be rich deceives men. Besides, riches allure, and promise what they do not yield. They promise to make us happy; but when gained, they do not do it. The soul is not satisfied. There is the same desire to possess more wealth. And to this there is no end but *death*. Every evil passion is therefore cherished by the love of gain; and it is no wonder that the word is choked, and every good feeling destroyed, by this ‘execrable love of gold.’” The thorns do not heed the warnings of Jesus: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:91-21).

Thus far we have described the deceitfulness of wealth. Now we will consider “the worry of the world.” The Greek reading of this

phrase is: “*the anxiety of the age.*” Psalm 94:19 states: “My anxious thoughts multiply within me.” Paul has a word for the thorns: “Be anxious for nothing, but in *everything* let your requests be known to God” (Phil. 4:6). To most Christians it is easier to worry than it is to pray about their worries and leave them all in the hands of God. Admittedly we live in an age of unprecedented anxiety, but Jesus equates the worries of the world with the deceitfulness of wealth; both choke out the word and causes thorns of unfruitfulness. He warns us: “Do not worry about your life, as to what will you eat, nor for your body, as to what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing...And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life span? If you cannot do even a very little thing, why do you worry about other matters?” (Luke 12:11-27). The thorns of anxiety choke out the word.

Thorn Christians are people in whose soil is so filled with anxiety concerning the everyday things we all face, things that choke out the word of God, there is no time for nurturing the soil (soul) in the word of God. This is illustrated in Luke 10:38-42: Jesus entered the home of Mary and Martha. “Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came to him and said ‘Lord do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me.’ But the Lord answered and said to her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which will not be taken from her.’” The cares of this life are dangerous, even when they seem to be commendable. Attention given to our family, many times, may be the means of choking out the word to our detriment. It is always more important to attend to the word of God than to be engaged in the affairs of everyday life that would steal our attention to the word.

“The seed sown on the good soil is one who hears the word and understands it; who bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundred-fold, some fifty, and some thirty” (ver. 23). This refers back to verse 8. Verse 11 and verse 19 affirm that the seed that is sown must be the *word of the kingdom* in order to produce fruit. Jesus spoke to the people in parables because the kingdom was a mystery that had not been granted to anyone until Jesus revealed it to the Apostles (verses 10-17). These mysteries have now been revealed in the Scriptures and are now to be made known by the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (Eph. 3:9-11). There is, therefore, no reason for not understanding the word of the kingdom when it is preached.

The parable speaks of the soil of individual recipients who receive the word. This means that in the church there are four different kinds of soil and there is always a diverse response to the gospel, from the hardening of the soil to the growth of a hundred-fold to sixty or thirty-fold. Peter J. Leithart in his book *The Kingdom and the Power* comments: “Whenever the gospel is proclaimed, the seeds of the kingdom are sown. Whenever the gospel is proclaimed, men and women are called and enabled to abandon vain idols and serve and worship the living God, invited into the heavenly sanctuary to feast with the Bridegroom, and gathered into the church. When the gospel is sown in good soil, the fruits of the kingdom spring up. The kingdom grows as the powerful and living Word of God is sown.” In spite of the unproductive soil where the gospel of kingdom is sown, there will be those who “hear the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundred-fold, some sixty, and some thirty” (ver. 23).