

Gospel Growth

by J. Van Vliet

The word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing (Col. 1:5-6).

Botany and theology seem to work well together. Just think of how the prophet Isaiah exhorted the people of Judah by comparing them to a vineyard that only produced wild grapes (5:1-7). Similarly, our Lord Jesus Christ taught people the importance of hearing and heeding the Word by describing a sower who went out to sow (Matt. 13:1-23). Another example of the connection between botany and theology is Col. 1:5-6 where the apostle Paul describes the gospel, which is the word of the truth, as something that “is bearing fruit and increasing” all over the world.

This means that the gospel must be alive because only living things can bear fruit and increase. Trees bear fruit and grow bigger. But what about words? Words are things that you find printed on a page, and normally speaking, once they are printed, that’s that: there they sit. However, the gospel is different. It is the “*living* and abiding word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23). Because it is alive, it does produce fruit and increase.

In fact, it increases a lot. One of the fascinating, inspired threads in the book of Acts is how the growth of the church is described as the increase of the Word. It starts in chapter 6: “And the word of God continued to increase” (v. 7). It continues in chapter 12: “But the word of God increased and multiplied” (v. 24). Finally, it is confirmed once more in chapter 19: “So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily” (v. 20). As thousands of people are added to the church, both in the past and the present—think, for example, of China—the Holy Spirit demonstrates that the gospel has the power to produce a spiritual harvest that rivals any bumper crop in a farmer’s field.

This raises another question: what kind of fruit is the apostle Paul speaking about? When we think of fruit, we normally think of apples, oranges, bananas, and the like. However, in Scripture fruit also includes wheat, barley, and oats. This is how Jesus Christ speaks in the parable of the sower

when he concludes that the seed sown into the good soil “bears *fruit* and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty” (Matt. 13:23). So we might also speak of *produce*, which includes all kinds of different, healthy food that grows on plants and trees.

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This vast variety of produce in the realm of botany also teaches us something in the realm of theology. The fruit produced by the gospel is not exactly the same in each and every Christian. Some are very open about their faith and feel free to speak about Christ to almost any stranger. They are bold and colourful, like oranges and apples. Others are more shy, and serve the Lord in a less public but no less profound way. One example might be a quiet mother of three young children who faithfully visits a widow in her congregation every month. Her service might be compared to a head of wheat. It doesn’t necessarily catch your eye right away, but when you stop and look more closely you see the subtle beauty of “pure and undefiled religion” (James 1:27).

Beyond this, the apostle makes another interesting connection in this chapter. Both verses six and ten contain the same words: *bear fruit* and *increase*. As the gospel bears fruit and increases, it does so “in every good work” and “in the knowledge of God.” Notice how the Holy Spirit pulls doing and knowing together. Both grow from the gospel, and one is not privileged over the other. To truly know God is to be filled with a desire to act in accord with his will, and to do truly good works requires an accurate knowledge of who God is and what he wants from us.

Today there is a lot of emphasis on doing good deeds of charity and service for our neighbours. And so there should be! Yet there should be just

as much emphasis on rightly knowing the Lord our God. After all, to know “the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom [he] sent” is nothing less than “eternal life” (John 17:3). Sometimes we hear the (internal) criticism that Reformed folk are good with their heads, since they know their doctrine so well, but they forgot about their hands, since their lifestyle does not always match up with their confession. The apostle does not let us play one off against the other. Always and everywhere it should be equal parts of *head* and *hand*, both motivated and invigorated by a *heart* in which the Holy Spirit has planted the gospel of God’s grace.

In closing, it should not escape our attention that this bountiful harvest growing from the imperishable seed of the living Word is surrounded by and grounded in prayer. Paul prayed often (“we always thank God” v. 3) and eagerly (“from the day we heard” v. 9). His prayers began with thanksgiving (v. 3) and continued with petitions (v. 9). Prayer, more prayer, and then yet more prayer: that is of primary importance in order for the gospel to bear fruit. Yes, we can plant, as Paul did, and we can water, as Apollos did, but only God can give the growth (1 Cor. 3:7).

As you begin turning over the soil, planting, and transplanting this springtime, remember: there is an inspired connection between botany and theology. Enjoy your plants, but more importantly, pray to our God for a harvest of abundant spiritual fruit, growing from the gospel, all over the world.



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