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Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL  
Pastor David Pfeiffer

### **The Ministry of the Word Cultivates a Christian Community**

1 Corinthians 3:1–9

- 1 And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ.*
- 2 I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able;*
- 3 for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?*
- 4 For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal?*
- 5 Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one?*
- 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.*
- 7 So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.*
- 8 Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.*
- 9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building.*

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Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, dear fellow redeemed, to all who are planted, cultivated, and will be harvested by God,

Looking outside, it seems like the wrong time to be talking about gardening and growth. Things look mostly dead, the weather feels bitterly cold. They say January and February are among the most depressing months of the year.

But, even in the bitter winter months – God causes growth.

What I have here is a bean. Our kids planted this bean last week. It doesn't look like much – nothing more than a jar, a paper towel, a bean and some water. Yet, with a little warmth, a little water, and a little sun – even in the midst of winter, we have life.

It was a community effort. My wife got the jar ready. My kids helped put the bean in. And day by day we have been watering it. With the right people, the right conditions, and the right elements, life is born and growth takes place.

God is the creator of life. It was not my family who made this bean sprout. We didn't invent photosynthesis. God alone has the power to give life, to preserve life, and to end life. However, notice how God does not operate apart from means. I suppose He could. He could make this sprout appear out of thin air. He could remove the need for a seed, the need for a jar, the need for sun, the need for water – He could just make a bean sprout appear in my hand alive and growing.

But what does He do instead? He chooses to work through means. He has chosen to work through the process of cultivation – through people, environment, and earthly elements God accomplishes growth.

*5 Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.*

It is the same God who has caused this bean to grow who also causes another sort of growth. God is the source of life and growth also in a Christian Community. And notice, here too, He does not work apart from means. He cultivates a Christian community through the means He has given – through the ministry of the Word. Someone plants. Someone waters. And God causes growth.

### **1. Someone plants**

It all begins with someone planting a seed.

*5 Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.*

We read in Acts 18 how Paul visited Corinth and met some fellow Jewish believers. That is where the planting happened. The Apostle Paul was responsible for much planting – not only in Corinth. He helped found congregations throughout the Mediterranean world. In many ways, Paul was responsible for the spread of Christianity to the Western world – even to the founding of a small group of Christians who used to meet in a Chicago YMCA some 50 years ago and now call themselves Ascension Lutheran Church. Christian communities are cultivated by the ongoing work of evangelists, pastors, and lay members.

And yet Paul sees himself as nothing more than a minister – literally, a servant. He sees himself as having nothing more than a role to play in the ministry of the Word. Because he knows, the ministry of the word is a group effort. Even the commission to go to

Corinth in the first place was not Paul's decision. It came by means of a call – a call which God cultivated through the congregation in Antioch.

It was back in Acts 13 where Paul was commissioned to this work of planting. Together with a fellow missionary named Barnabas, the Christian congregation at Antioch extended this call. *Acts 13:1–3 Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.*

God operates through means. He has designed this ministry of the word to function within and through a Christian community. The congregation at Antioch had called, commissioned, prayed for, and perhaps also helped fund the planting work of Paul.

God's ministry of the Word was not without means. In fact, we have yet to mention the most important element of planting. This is the ministry of the Word – That is to say, it is a service of God's Word; through His Word, God create life, founds congregations, and the gift of faith to us today –

*1 Peter 1:22–25 [Brethren, you] having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, because "All flesh is as grass, And all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, And its flower falls away, But the word of the Lord endures forever." Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you.*

All flesh is as the fading grass which in the winter months fades and fails. Apostles, missionaries, and pastors will come and go – but one thing will remain: the Word which abides forever.

God has chosen to work through certain people within a certain environment making use of the Word to accomplish life and growth among His people. He cultivates a Christian Community through the ministry of the Word.

## **2. Someone waters**

However, what good would it do to get this little seed started, and simply leave it to itself? Without a community committed to caring and cultivating, this sprout would die. Someone needs to keep on watering.

Apollos watered. Apollos is noted for his eloquence of speech. We read in Acts 18 that he was a Jew, born in Alexandria, eloquent and mighty in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord; he was enthusiastic in spirit, and taught accurately concerning Jesus.

We might all wish we had such gifts. We might think that without the great skills of speech like Apollos, we have no part to play in the ministry of the Word other than to come to church. The temptation is to rely so heavily on a certain pastor or certain leaders in the church that we forget that we each have our own place in this ministry. The calling of Apostle, of missionary, of pastor, are only some of the means by which God cultivated the congregation at Corinth. But there are many more callings; each of us have a place in this one ministry – the ministry of the Word.

Each calling in the church has its place – whether you are a voter, a member of the Ladies group, an usher, a music assistant, a Sunday School teacher, a Sunday School student, each has its place in the work of cultivation. Likewise, each calling in the home has its place – whether you are a father or mother; whether you are a child – a son or daughter; whether you are just entering those college years, thinking about marriage, starting your own family; whether you're past the prime of life, seeing your health fail, a grandmother or grandfather – no matter; its a community effort. Someone plants, someone waters, someone pays attention to a sprout that needs more watering; someone sees another suffering and prays; someone sees a seed in need of more warmth and takes the time to say talk with that person, to listen to whatever is ailing him. Each of us have a place in work of cultivation. And it is all about having the right elements – loving Christians who are called to serve each other, and the water of His Word which gives life to what would otherwise be dead.

It would do no good, to plant the seed and leave it on its own. A newly born child needs to be cared for. A child just baptized needs to be cared for. It is a community effort, it is a family effort. So each calling is designed to help another calling. A husband's calling helps his wife in her calling. A son's calling helps his mother in her calling. A pastor's call is to help members in their callings. And a congregation's call is to water, to water through this ministry of God's Word.

### **3. God causes growth**

This seed is just in the beginning stages of life. It is just a baby. It is perhaps at its most vulnerable stage. It needs a home, to be protected from those harsh winter elements. It needs water and attention. God has put it into our hands to care for each other – as a

community, as a family, he has called us to cultivate. Yet, despite all we might be called to do – there is something we just can't do – We cannot make this seed grow. We do what we can to care for it with the means God has given us. But ultimately, it is up to God to give life and to cause growth.

And I'm not talking just about this seed. I'm talking about each individual seed of faith, planted in the heart of each believer; and I'm talking about a community that is cultivated through the ministry of the Word. God has given it to us who are filled with His Spirit to care and cultivate with the means He has given us. And we leave it to God. We leave it to God to cause the growth.

*1 And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. 2 I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able;*

Like a baby who is not yet ready for solid food, each of us begin with milk. Growth is a gradual process as God we learn to digest more and more of God's word and appreciate more and more the blessings of the gospel. The ministry of the Word takes time, and it involves an ongoing community effort. It goes on through Sunday School and Bible Class. It happens through each of us taking time to share the Word with those we love. The more and more we come into contact with the Word of God, hear the preaching of it, discuss questions with each other, the more and more God causes growth – not just growth in our learning, but also growth in our behavior

*3 for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? 4 For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal?*

We do live in an individualized culture. So much of the way we consume has become about the individual. It is the basic human instinct – self-preservation and self-fulfillment. And how much has the culture invaded our thinking too – its none of their business, you have your interpretation, I'll have mine; they can make their own decisions, what do I care?

Where envy and divisions occur, where stubbornness or human reasoning takes over – where I see only my way only and don't take the time to listen to or care for a fellow brother in Christ, I am behaving as a mere human – nothing more than flesh.

But we are God's field – something that is being cultivated by God's Spirit; something cultivated so as to no longer think as mere flesh, mere self-preservation – but we are

Spirit-filled. As Paul writes just verses earlier: *This things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual.*

Through the Word, the Spirit cultivates. God is not afraid to get His hands dirty. He reaches into our ugly situations and takes into His own hands, our fleshly sins. In the Word we learn of our Lord Jesus, who rooted Himself in our worst sins and failures – our individualized attitudes, our self-centered motives – He made our filthiness His own. God Himself took on our mere humanity that He might carry your sins to the cross and to death. He gets His hands dirty, that He might make us clean.

And so life is born. In this ministry of the Word, God gives us life. He gave life to His Son who was once dead. And right here, God is working through the means He has chosen to give that life to you also. Right here, in this service of the word, a resurrection takes place, sprouts are watered, and a Spirit-filled growth takes place in each of us. As we preach it, as we hear it – as we believe that this good news is true, God puts our flesh to death, and raises our new man to life by His Spirit. It is a community effort – together we share burdens, we share the cross, we share our Savior's death, and we share the good news that He has risen. Together we come into God's presence, we receive His body and blood today, and God cultivates a community of Christians.

Yes, things out there might look rather bleak. Winter can drag on, and we wonder when we'll see more growth in our life. But even in the dark winter months, God causes growth. In those cold winter months, when the days seem to drag, God is at work. He brings us inside, gives us a home, keeps us warm, watered, and looked after. And He does so through means. Through the ministry of the Word and Christian Community.

This seedling might not look like much. Nothing more than a jar, a paper towel, a little water, and a bean. But in just such simple means, even in ugly circumstances, God goes to work – cultivating, giving life. He's not afraid to get His hands dirty. May God grant that same attitude in us also. Amen.