

## In Praise of Ignorance: Knowledge in the Parable of the Growing Seed (Mark 4:26-29) and Its Implications for Proclamation in Mark's Gospel

By Kara J. Lyons-Pardue, Associate Professor of New Testament, Point Loma Nazarene University (San Diego, CA)

To the extent that interpreters of the Parable of the Sower and its explanation (Mark 4:1-20) focus on the human analogues to the various soils—pathway, rocky, weed-covered, and good—the result tends toward over-confident sense of individual control over receptivity to the gospel. Within Mark's parable chapter is another seed-growing parable that ensures a counter-balance: the Parable of the Growing Seed (4:26-29). In the latter seed parable, the divine role in seed-growth is both vitally active and unfathomable from the perspective of the human sower. The sower of 4:26-29 is "ignorant" of ways in which the seeds grow and the earth produces on its own (αὐτομάτη). The nature of the latter sower's ignorance and "not knowing" in the context of Mark's Gospel will inform my interpretation of this parable and help draw implications for proclamation, transformation in the church, and Christian discipleship.

The Parable of the Sower and its interpretation—and nestled between them Jesus's enigmatic statements about the purpose of parables—dominate parable studies in Mark's Gospel. Yet, close at hand in Mark's arrangement, is another parable of sowing that tends to escape our notice. In part, that lack of attention is due to the Parable of the Growing Seed being only found in Mark's Gospel (4:26-29).<sup>1</sup> Further, despite containing seed, a sower, earth, and growth, the focus of the latter parable seems quite different than its more famous neighbor. Here, instead of the sower representing a divine figure (as in the Parable of the Sower), the sower in 4:26 seems to represent the average person. The latter sower continues on with everyday life—sleeping and waking (v. 27)—while the seed begins to grow as the earth produces *on its own* (αὐτόματος) without any further human intervention. Readers are told that the sower does not even know how (ὥς οὐκ οἶδεν αὐτός) the seed grows (v. 27). This lack of knowledge of the process does not prevent the successful growth of the plant, nor impede the impending harvest.

In fact, the verb used for the sower's knowledge (in this case, the sower's lack thereof), οἶδα, appears 21 times in Mark, with a high frequency of its occurrences in adversarial or negative contexts. One might say that "understanding" seems as likely to be inimical to faithfulness in the Second Gospel as it is to promote faith. I am far from advocating for widespread ignorance in our churches; I propose that "ignorance" is only exemplary when taken as an impulse against "knowing how" God should work in Mark's Gospel. The implications of a "pro-ignorance" stance are best restricted within contexts of evangelism and proclamation, as is fitting for seed-sowing parables.<sup>2</sup> That is, in Jesus's mission across Mark's Gospel, those who know or purport to *know how* the world works, who is eligible for God's attention, and how God wishes to accomplish God's purposes are those most adept at ignoring the Way of the Lord right before their eyes (e.g., Mark 6:20; 10:19, 38; 12:24). This parable, then, praises the human sower of the seed, but places all of the credit for growth outside of the sower's hands.

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<sup>1</sup> The Parable of the Growing Seed (which will be the title I use for Mark 4:26-29 throughout) is the only Markan parable to have the distinction of being *not* included in either of the other Synoptic Gospels.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Ann Tolbert expresses the basic typology at work in sowing-earth parables: that of hearing (planting) and response (growth). This typology, she argues, is "fundamental to the plot of the entire Gospel" (*Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 150).

That is, it puts the emphasis on the divinely-directed “Thy” of Charles Wesley’s hymn: “*Thy* grace restore, *Thy* work revive; ... *Thy* servant’s steps attend” (italics added).

My paper attends to these sowing-centric parables, with an emphasis on the Parable of the Growing Seed. Markan episodes in which “knowing” or “not knowing” feature prominently provide further context for interpretation. I will also press into implications for evangelism and Christian discipleship, especially within Wesleyan-Holiness circles of broader Methodism. This exegetical exploration attempts to serve as a reminder that transformation must not be prescribed to particular processes or action-steps, but is the work of the Holy Spirit. In increasingly diverse contexts, at the very least, the Spirit’s transforming work will not conform to prescribed, one-size-fits-all patterns. I suggest that there is something exemplary in this parable of the ignorant sower who must sit back and marvel at the unexpected ways in which the seed grows. Perhaps believers are to respond to what we observe, rather than seeking to control, as does the unknowing sower of this parable. In doing so, what we observe of God’s Kingdom-activity in the world may surprise us and allow us to follow the work of God into unconventional spaces. These ways—we must imagine—are far more magnificent, resilient, and divinely-ordained than the ways the sower could have cultivated alone.

#### Greek Text of Mark 4:26-29

**26** Καὶ ἔλεγεν· οὕτως ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ ὡς ἄνθρωπος βάλῃ τὸν σπόρον ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς **27** καὶ καθεύδῃ καὶ ἐγείρηται νύκτα καὶ ἡμέραν, καὶ ὁ σπόρος βλαστᾷ καὶ μηκύνεται ὡς οὐκ οἶδεν αὐτός. **28** αὐτομάτῃ ἡ γῆ καρποφορεῖ, πρῶτον χόρτον εἶτα στάχυν εἶτα πλήρη[ς] σῖτον ἐν τῷ στάχυϊ. **29** ὅταν δὲ παραδοῖ ὁ καρπός, εὐθὺς ἀποστέλλει τὸ δρέπανον, ὅτι παρέστηκεν ὁ θερισμός.

#### Author’s Translation of Mark 4:26-29

**26** And he was saying, “The Kingdom of God is like if a person should throw a seed upon the earth **27** and sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow; [the sower]<sup>3</sup> does not know how. **28** The earth produces crops<sup>4</sup> on its own, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. **29** But when the crop should yield,<sup>5</sup> immediately [the sower] sends the sickle, because the harvest is here.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I have supplied “the sower” to make more specific a Greek text that uses a lot of “he” or unspecified subjects. The term ἄνθρωπος (person) is the only one used to designate the individual who casts out the seed. This person is not identified by gender, although the masculine pronoun αὐτός gets used at the end of v. 27 to refer back to the person (clarifying the person as the subject of the not-knowing, rather than the seed (σπόρος), which was the subject of the previous verb.

<sup>4</sup> Lit., *fruit* (Gk. καρπός)

<sup>5</sup> The term παραδίδωμι is literally “delivered” or “handed over,” which is not how we conventionally refer to a crop that is ready for harvest in English. “Yield” is a fitting a synonym, while retaining the more literal sense as well. This verse contributes to the web of associations with the word παραδίδωμι, which occurs 20 times in Mark. The term appears in morally neutral situations (like this one in the Parable of the Growing Seed; 4:29), for instance, to describe passing on traditions (7:13). More often, however, it connotes betrayal. The term παραδίδωμι expresses what happens to John when he lands in jail (1:14). When Jesus describes his own betrayal (9:31; 10:33; 14:21, 41-42) and the future betrayals of his followers (13:9, 11, 12), this is the word in use. The narrator uses παραδίδωμι to describe both Judas’s and Pilate’s handing Jesus over (3:19; 14:10, 11, 18, 44; 15:1, 10, 15).

<sup>6</sup> The Greek term παρίστημι is in the perfect tense here, which could be “has come.” But the term itself is employed to describe bystanders and people who are present in Mark chs. 14 and 15 (see 14:47, 69, 70; 15:35, 39). Combining the concept of “standing by” with an impersonal *harvest* pressed me to translate it as “is here.”

## The Parable of the Growing Seed as Interpretive Counterbalance

Chapter 4 is called Mark's Parable Chapter for good reason.<sup>7</sup> In it, the first, most substantial, and most famous of these collected parables is the Parable of the Sower (4:3-8). Despite modern Christians' sense of familiarity with it, the disciples have lingering questions (4:10-12), which spark the parable's allegorical explication from the mouth of Jesus (4:13-20).<sup>8</sup> After shorter aphorisms of lamps and measuring (4:21-25), the Parable of the Growing Seed returns to the agricultural setting and the imagery of seeds. It and the Parable of the Mustard Seed are also the first to be explicitly pointing to the Kingdom of God (4:26, 30).<sup>9</sup> Mark 4:33-34 provides us with important information that bears retroactively on how we read the parables that precede it. Mark informs us that this recorded teaching represented a pattern of Jesus's behavior: "With many parables like these Jesus used to speak [ἐλάλει] the word to them ..."

Within its Gospel arrangement, the so-called Parable of the Growing Seed (4:26-29) has many thematic connections to the Parable of the Sower (e.g., a sower, seed, earth, and plant growth).<sup>10</sup> In my reading it tethers, counterbalances, or redirects popular misinterpretations of its more famous counterpart.<sup>11</sup> In popular receptions of the Parable of the Sower, everything comes down to the "soil" (or the hearer) and its receptivity to the seed (or the word). A seed's withering or flourishing is entirely dependent on the soil on which it happens to land. But most Christian interpreters are uncomfortable with the deterministic implications of reading the unproductive and productive soils as representing fixed groups of people. Instead, the metaphor is often spun in a way to give credit and/or responsibility to humans to be the right kind of receptive (or "good") soil. One sermon I surveyed online suggests that the field represents the individual and imagines that all four "soils" reside in one person. That person is challenged to undertake a "soil test" to determine which degree of receptivity she or he is exhibiting on any given day.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Only ch. 13 rivals it in quantity of Jesus's overall teaching within the Second Gospel.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Farrar Capon reminds, "As a result of two thousand years of familiarity, we find [the Parable of the Sower] oddly redundant. We assume all too easily that the disciples must have been particularly dense to have had so much trouble understanding such a simple story. . . . Despite what we may think, the parable as Jesus first gives it is not at all obvious to people hearing it for the first time" (*Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 57).

<sup>9</sup> Mark 4:11, in which Jesus tells his disciples that they have been given the mystery (often translated as "secret") of the Kingdom of God, may indicate that the Parable of the Sower was a Kingdom parable, but that is not clear from the outset. Between the two kingdom parables in Mark 4:26-32, the Growing Seed and the Mustard Seed, Joel Marcus notes a crucial difference in perspective. The former, the main text under discussion in this paper, focuses on the "interim stages of growth" in contrast to the Parable of the Mustard Seed, which highlights the "difference between the initial stage of sowing and the final stage of fruit-bearing" (*Mark 1-8* [AYBC; New York: Yale, 2002], 326). Marcus continues, "The Parable of the Seed Growing by Itself, moreover, has much to say about the activity (and inactivity) of the sower, who is not mentioned in the Parable of the Mustard Seed" (*ibid.*).

<sup>10</sup> Capon notes several "remarkable differences" between the Growing Seed and the Sower parables: 1) The imagery is tied directly to the kingdom; 2) The presence of the kingdom coming not as a result, but from the start—"the kingdom is presented as the very thing sown"; 3) The this-worldly emphasis of the place where the kingdom takes root (*Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, 77).

<sup>11</sup> See also Matt 13:1-9, 18-23; Luke 8:4-8, 11-15.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Adams in his July 9, 2000 sermon at Redlands Baptist Church: "... Jesus was saying that this does not necessarily represent four different types of people but four different responses in the same person. And when you think about it, all of us have times in our lives when our hearts are HARD or SHALLOW or OVER-INVOLVED or even OPEN. Our lives are a blend of many responses to God at times callous to His voice. . . . [T]here are those rare times when we are like the warm and fertile soil—productive responsive to His bidding. In times like this, we grow

Admittedly, I have put forward unsatisfactory interpretations of the Parable of the Sower, which may well be merely anecdotal and not as prominent as I perceive. It is not as if this represents all that is ever said about the parable. Further, it is not as if I am the first to try to read the two sower parables in concert with one another. In parable studies there is, unsurprisingly, wide variation in opinion on how to read this chapter.<sup>13</sup> In the allegorical interpretation of Parable of the Sower (4:13-20), for instance, there is significant disagreement about what is the “word” (λόγος) that is sown signifies (v. 14).<sup>14</sup> Most biblical scholars’ interpretations of the Parable of the Sower (or the Parable of the Soils, as it is often renamed) avoid the pitfall of assumed control of outcomes. For another example, John R. Donahue finds more in common than separating the two parables of sowing and seeds. In 4:3-9, he focuses on the repetitious nature of the story of seed falling on four different soils a “rhythmic and ascending progression involv[ing] the hearer in the unfolding mystery of growth.”<sup>15</sup> For Donahue, similar rhythms mark the second sower’s sleeping and rising in the Parable of the Growing Seed, but he notes a transition between human time and divine time: “God’s power and activity have their times and rhythms, and human activity does not hasten their full manifestation. Yet the hearers are summoned to think of a new time when God’s reign and time may intersect their lives and shatter the tranquil rhythms of life. Only then is the time for immediate response.”<sup>16</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott draws attention to the normalcy of the good soil’s productivity<sup>17</sup> and argues that the parable emphasizes the seeds’ failures.<sup>18</sup> In opposition, Tolbert comments that “seed planted in the earth *should* produce fruit; success is the natural, expected result.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, for Tolbert’s reading of Mark’s perspective, the parable’s focus is on

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in His likeness and bear much fruit in His kingdom. Now which soil are you most like this morning?” (Accessed online 7/23/18: <http://www.redlandbaptist.org/sermon/of-seed-and-soil-the-parable-of-the-sower/>; capitalization original).

<sup>13</sup> Attentive readers will notice that I sailed right over Mark’s so-called “Parable Theory” in vv. 11-12, in which Jesus quotes from Isaiah 6:9-10. Tolbert estimates that “[v]erses 10-12 have probably elicited more scholarly debate than any two similar verses in all of the New Testament” (*Sowing the Gospel*, 160). Sharyn Dowd points out sharply that “[m]uch like the various quests for the ‘historical’ Jesus, recent parable scholarship has revealed more about the interpreters than about the texts allegedly being interpreted. Despite inflated claims that parables ‘subvert’ and ‘shatter’ the world of the complacent hearer, this is far more often the ambition of the scholar than the effect of the texts themselves” (*Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel* [Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2000], 38).

<sup>14</sup> E.g., William L. Lane identifies the “word” with Jesus’s words as he proclaims the Kingdom (*The Gospel of Mark* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974; 2d ed.], 161). On the other hand, Capon argues extensively that the sower should be seen to represent God the Father (not Jesus) and the “word” that is sown should be read in harmony with the “primary meaning of the phrase the *Word of God* in the New Testament, and in Christian theology as well ... one that is consistent with the Johannine teaching that the Word is one who was in the beginning with God and who is, in fact, God himself” (*Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, 60-61). This is a significant claim and Capon picks it back up in his next chapter to clarify what he is and is not claiming about the canonical interpretation he undertakes (see *idem*, 62-63).

<sup>15</sup> John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 34.

<sup>16</sup> Donahue, *Gospel in Parable*, 36.

<sup>17</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 359-360.

<sup>18</sup> “In failure and everydayness lies the miracle of God’s activity” (Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 362).

<sup>19</sup> Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 159.

the “why” of the portions of earth that fail, both in the parable and in the Gospel.<sup>20</sup> Some have even taken the pattern of the Parable of the Sower to be a blueprint for Mark’s Gospel itself.<sup>21</sup>

Yet for our present discussion of reformation, transformation, growth (or lack thereof) in the church, there is a renewed need to hear this lesser-heard parable anew. Tolbert points to the *earth* (not the seed or sower) as the crucial focus of all of the so-called seed parables, which she says should be called “earth parables” instead.<sup>22</sup> She is right: in the Parable of the Growing Seed, the crucial and even wondrous element is the earth and its interaction with the seed. We find another sower. This sower is comparatively clueless to the mechanisms or processes of plant-growth (v. 27). After sowing, the sower continues with the monotony of daily life, sleeping and rising.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, the seed does the miraculous thing seeds do: it grows. The soil, or earth (γῆ; the same term used in 4:5, 8, 20), does not interfere this time, neither do birds snatch nor weeds crowd. Instead, the earth bears fruit “in itself” (or, as the Greek renders it, “automatically”/αὐτόματος).<sup>24</sup> Verse 28 spells out the stages of growth: “first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head” (NRSV). Marcus points out that the discrete stages to the growth, each of which represent a degree of disclosure along with a degree of hiddenness.<sup>25</sup> C. Clifton Black takes the steady stages of growth in the plant to indicate an inevitability in the kingdom’s coming.<sup>26</sup> Yet the seed and the earth could not have brought this crop to fruition without the small task of sowing that the person undertook. Only at the point when the grain is fully formed, does the sower have another job to do. Then this sower “sends the sickle” to harvest this miraculous growth.<sup>27</sup>

The duty of this sower was simply to sow, observe and wait, and then harvest. Suppose we were to view this sower as God (as in the Parable of the Sower). The resulting deistic vision of a God whose only involvement in our world resembles bookends—God sets everything in motion, lets the seed and earth function by established natural laws, and then waits for the end—is a poor fit with the God whom we meet in Scripture. Indeed, such an identification does

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> John Drury, *The Parables in the Gospels: History and Allegory* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 51-52; Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 346-347.

<sup>22</sup> Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 149. She includes the parables conventionally called the Parable of the Sower, Parable of the Growing Seed, and Parable of the Mustard Seed in this earth-centric class.

<sup>23</sup> So Capon: “As Jesus depicts it, once the man in the parable has sown the seed, he does nothing more than mind his own and not the seed’s business” (*Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, 79).

<sup>24</sup> Scott gathers a selected list of LXX passages in which something is accomplished αὐτόματος (automatically), incl. Josh 6:5; Wis 17:6; Job 24:24; 2 Kgs 19:29, several of which point to the gracious provision of God (*Hear Then the Parable*, 368-369). Dowd identifies in the automatic growth “a sharp contrast with most Hellenistic notions of paideia, where the emphasis is on the human effort necessary to produce the ‘fruit’ of genuine education” (*Reading Mark*, 41).

<sup>25</sup> Further, Marcus provides examples to demonstrate that the division of the growth period resembles the precise divisions of time in much apocalyptic literature (*Mark 1–8*, 328).

<sup>26</sup> C. Clifton Black, *Mark* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2011), 127.

<sup>27</sup> Many interpreters point out the inescapable eschatological reading of the imagery of harvest, particularly given the OT and extracanonical apocalypses that utilize the image (see Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 329). A small allusion to Joel 3:13 (LXX 4:13) may be here, as it has a small amount of vocabulary common with Mark. The terms in common from LXX Joel are [ἐξ]αποστέλλω (*send out*), δρέπανον (*sickle*), and παρίστημι (*be present*). Scott resists the stark alternatives in interpretation, which Dodd had previously established, between taking this parable eschatologically (letting the quotation from Joel 3:13 dominate) or evolutionarily (in the 19<sup>th</sup> C. Liberal Theology sense of God’s upward-progress in society), but insists that God is at work in our midst in the meantime (*Hear Then the Parable*, 364, 370-371).

not fit the tone or detail of this parable. God is not the sower who “does not know” how the seed grows (v. 27b). Instead, God is the one responsible for bringing the Kingdom to bear in our midst. We should see God in the inexplicable and wondrous growth that goes on while we live our lives.<sup>28</sup>

The miracle of growth happens while we are not forcing it. It cannot be forced. It cannot be prodded or controlled by us. Nevertheless, if we wait and watch, the growth happens. Only the God who gives life can be given credit for this. This parable attributes the processes of sustaining and growing life to God. Our job here is minimal but necessary: plant and harvest. God takes care of the hard part. Capon takes this impulse all the way:

The kingdom grows ... because the kingdom is already planted. It grows of itself and in its own good time. Above all, it grows *we know not how*. Any bright ideas we might have about the subject will always and everywhere be the wrong ideas. Indeed, their wrongness will be proved simply by our having them; because if the kingdom could have been made to grow in this world by bright ideas, it would have sprouted up all over the place six times a day ever since Adam. But it never did and it never will, except in a mystery that remains resolutely beyond our moralizing, score-evening comprehension.”<sup>29</sup>

In contemporary American culture, ignorance is either maligned or weaponized. Anti-intellectualism in popular Christianity is reaping the dangerous harvest of what it has sown. This parable cannot be used to justify a rejection of available knowledge. Instead, I wonder whether we can elevate the image of the interested sower, who observes carefully the plant growth— noting its distinct stages with wonder—but does not presume himself to be managing it. He plays a vital role, but is not orchestrating (or even aware of) *how* the growth takes place. The parable neither apologizes for nor explains his ignorance. The matter-of-fact expression of the limits of the sower’s knowledge sparked in me a curiosity about a broader perspective on the value and limits of knowledge throughout the Gospel According to Mark. Could there be a Markan epistemology afoot here?

### **Knowing in Mark’s Gospel**

The human actor in the Parable of the Growing Seed sets in motion a process that he can neither control nor fully grasp. He knows enough to put the seed where it goes (upon the earth; v. 26) and to gather it when it is time for harvest (v. 29). Beyond that, this sower *does not know how* [ὡς οὐκ οἶδεν αὐτός] the sprouting and growing happens. Readers may speculate that he does not know about the processes of growth because they are beyond human knowing—at least prior to the modern era—belonging instead to the realm of natural processes that can be observed but not artificially replicated.<sup>30</sup> After all, “the earth produces crops on its

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<sup>28</sup> Larry W. Hurtado sees a resonance here with the ancient Jewish prayer that says, “Blessed are you O God, king of the world, who brings forth bread from the earth” (Mark [NIBC; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1989], 77).

<sup>29</sup> Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, 82.

<sup>30</sup> In his *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, John Wesley takes this approach. He observes the lack of knowledge on the part of the one sowing, but also emphasizes the human “toil” in planting and harvesting in cooperation with the natural mechanism of growth (and its analogous spiritual processes): “Even he that sowed it cannot explain how it grows. For as the earth by a curious kind of mechanism, which the greatest philosophers cannot comprehend, does as it were spontaneously bring for first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the

own” (v. 28). Human intervention will only interrupt the processes set in motion upon planting. The human sower knows that he does not understand and is not in control of the process, but can start and respond to the growth appropriately.

Insofar as sowing metaphors pertain to the reception of the good news throughout Mark’s Gospel, the implications are broader than pertaining merely to ancient agricultural understanding and practices. In fact, the term that describes the sower’s lack of knowledge in v. 27 is one also used throughout the Second Gospel. In its 21 appearances in Mark, the verb οἶδα is often found in settings rife with tension. Frequently, this term intersects with particularly adversarial contexts, as many of the supplied examples will illustrate.<sup>31</sup>

In several instances people or entities either know or *claim to know* something, but behave in ways that are in discord with the knowledge they possess. Demons are the first entities in Mark to be described as *knowing*. Mark acknowledges demonic knowledge—“I know who you are [οἶδά σε τίς εἶ]

 (1:24)—even as the Evangelist reports that Jesus disallows the demons to speak as a result of that knowledge (v. 34). In this context, it is obvious but needs stating: knowledge, and even knowledge of Jesus’s identity, is not an unqualified good. It depends who knows, what they know, and what they attempt to do with that knowledge. In the human realm, Herod<sup>32</sup> knows that John the Baptist is righteous and holy (εἰδὼς αὐτὸν ἄνδρα δίκαιον καὶ ἅγιον; 6:20), yet fears him and imprisons him (6:17-20). The conflicting circumstances continue, as Herod likes to listen to John (v. 20), but ultimately permits his execution (vv. 25-28). Knowledge did not lead to reverence; even though Herod’s knowledge sparked fear, it was not enough to compete with his desire to maintain the honor of a foolishly-made oath (v. 26).

Fear and knowledge are not always inimical to one another or to righteousness, as another story illustrates. The woman with the hemorrhage stands in contrast to Herod in nearly every way, in terms of her character and station in life. But she has been healed already of her 12-year affliction when she comes to Jesus in fear and trembling (φοβηθεῖσα καὶ τρέμουσα; 5:33). Jesus asks who touched him (v. 30) and the woman comes forward, “knowing [εἰδυῖα] what happened to/in/for her” (v. 33). Falling in reverence, she tells Jesus the “whole truth [πᾶσαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν]” (v. 33). Jesus confirmed the accuracy of what she knew internally, recognizing her faith, and honoring her with the title “Daughter” (v. 34). Viewed from another angle, however, what the hemorrhaging woman “knew” when she lunged for the fringe of Jesus’s garment would not fill the lines of even our sparsest Christological creed. A trust that Jesus would be the source of her wellness compelled the woman forward. Her subsequent knowledge resulted from honesty about what had happened within her.

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ear: so the soul, in an inexplicable manner, brings forth, first weak graces, then stronger, then full holiness: and all this of itself, as a machine, whose spring of motion is within itself. Yet observe the amazing exactness of the comparison. The earth brings forth no corn (as the soul no holiness) without both the care and toil of man, and the benign influence of heaven” (Note on Mark 4:26; John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament* [New York: J. Soule and T. Mason, 1818; 4<sup>th</sup> American ed.], 110).

<sup>31</sup> The Second Gospel notoriously frustrates treatments that try to systematically demonstrate a particular theme or specific use of a term. I would not want to claim that Mark restricts the term οἶδα to a narrow set of uses only or suggest that the Evangelist filtered his terminology with strict consistency in mind.

<sup>32</sup> This Herod is called “king” (ὁ βασιλεὺς Ἡρώδης) in 6:14, but should be identified as Herod Antipater (i.e., “Antipas”), tetrarch of Galilee and Perea.

Adversarial stories of Jesus's conflicts with opponents provide more instances of the word οἶδα, but again vary in their outcome. In the dispute that arises amidst Jesus's healing of the paralyzed man in 2:1-12, Mark tells us that some scribes question Jesus "in their hearts" regarding his declaration that the sins of the man with paralysis are forgiven (vv. 6-7). Although the narrative never tells us that these accusations of blasphemy get spoken aloud, Jesus responds to the scribes (vv. 8-10). Afterward, he speaks to the paralyzed man in what seem, by comparison to forgiveness of sins, purely physical terms—rise, pick up your bed, go to your home (v. 11)—with the expressed purpose that the scribes *should know* (ἵνα δὲ εἰδῆτε) the Son of Man's authority (ἐξουσία) to forgive sins upon the earth (v. 10). The final verse of the pericope reports emphatically that everyone (πᾶς) witnessed the former paralytic follow Jesus's instructions exactly. This resulted in all (πᾶς) being amazed and glorifying God (v. 12). There is no indication that the group of scribes mentioned in 2:6 were excluded from the "everyone" who sees and gives glory. In this instance, Jesus's words were chosen to inspire knowledge of the Son of Man's authority; the concluding verse signals their effectiveness. Scribes reappear soon after, but their designations vary: scribes of the Pharisees (2:16); scribes who came from Jerusalem (3:22; 7:1, 5).<sup>33</sup> The text presents the possibility that some scribes learned what Jesus wished them to know.

In chapters 11 and 12, four more occurrences of οἶδα intersect with situations of conflict between Jesus and his challengers (11:33; 12:14, 15, 24). Jesus's authority (ἐξουσία) is in question again (11:28), just as Jesus understood it to be in the previous passage we examined (2:10), but this time chief priests, scribes, and elders approach him in the temple and ask him directly. In the repartee that follows, Jesus returns a question about the origins of John's baptism (11:30). His opponents argue among themselves, recognizing the political ramifications of discrediting John (v. 32), but also realize that their response to John did not seem to acknowledge his divine commission (v. 31). As a result, the leaders claim not to know (οὐκ οἶδαμεν), rather than take a stand on John the Baptist. Jesus follows their dodge and makes no claims about his own authority in their presence (v. 33). In 12:14, what the Pharisees and Herodians *say* they know about Jesus—"we know [οἶδαμεν] that you are true and concern yourself with no one"—stands in direct opposition to what Mark tells us they are attempting to do, catch or trap Jesus (v. 13). Jesus sees through their insincere "knowledge," knowing (εἰδῶς) that they are hypocrites (v. 15). None of these were teaching moments, apparently.

The disciples of Mark's Gospel are infamously clueless and inconstant.<sup>34</sup> Mark seems not to spare their egos in his account of their foibles and misunderstandings.<sup>35</sup> When the verb οἶδα occurs in reference to one or more disciple, it is nearly always negated, expressing lack of knowledge. Within the narrative context of chapter 13 Jesus is addressing four disciples (Peter, James, John, and Andrew; v. 3) when he declares "you do not know" (vv. 33, 35). These are not

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<sup>33</sup> "Scribes," οἱ γραμματεῖς, seems to function as a blanket category from ch. 8 onward, beginning with Jesus's first passion prediction (8:31). They appear often among opponents of Jesus (e.g., 11:18). It is noteworthy that, perhaps, when Jesus sets his sights on Jerusalem in 10:33 the subsequent references to scribes are presumed to be from there (and, thus, among the more adversarial scribes of 3:22 and 7:1, 5).

<sup>34</sup> See C. Clifton Black, *The Disciples according to Mark: Markan Redaction in Current Debate* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 319-328.

<sup>35</sup> For some selected examples, see Mark 6:51b-52; 8:14-21, 32; 9:33-34; 10:13; 14:37-41, 50. Matthew and Luke both seem to soften their depictions of the disciples relative to Mark's (e.g., Mark 8:31-33, par. Matt 16:21-23; cf. Luke 9:22).



intended to be disparaging instances, since those declarations are prefaced by the statement that *no one* but the Father knows, not even the angels or the Son (v. 32).

More disparagingly, the verb οἶδα occurs to describe one or more disciples not knowing something they should. When, after Jesus tells a large crowd the Parable of the Sower, his followers ask him about parables, Jesus responds incredulously: “Do you not know [οὐκ οἶδατε] this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?” (4:13). This inquiry proves prescient, as the disciples’ lack of knowledge recurs.

During the Transfiguration narrative, the three disciples accompanying Jesus are understandably awestruck by Jesus’s metamorphosis and the appearances of Moses and Elijah. But when Peter stammers out the suggestion that they should pitch three tents, Mark explains away his misplaced suggestion with a quick “for he did not know [οὐ γὰρ ᾔδει] what to answer, for they were terrified” (9:6). The voice from heaven reinforces the need to listen to Jesus rather than speaking (9:7).

When James and John request the seats of authority in Jesus’s glory (10:37), Jesus insists that they do not know (*you* [pl.] *do not know*; οὐκ οἶδατε) what they are asking (v. 38). Their ignorance is reinforced when they double-down and insist that they *are* able to drink the same cup and receive the same baptism as Jesus (v. 39). If that were not enough, the ten remaining disciples illustrate their own lack of understanding when they respond indignantly to James and John, who requested an honor that the others seem to wish they had thought to ask for (v. 40). One of the few times Jesus expects his disciples *to know* something follows immediately on their annoyance: Jesus tells them that they know (*you* [pl.] *know*; οἶδατε) how the Gentile rulers lord it over their people (v. 42). The disciples’ collective desire for positions of control and recognition confirms the truth of Jesus’s comment.

In Gethsemane, Jesus retreats to pray and instructs his disciples to sit, stay, keep awake, and pray (14:32-38). Three times they fail (v. 41). It is in the midst of their failure to follow Jesus’s simple instructions in his time of need that Mark informs readers that the disciples’ eyes were heavy and “they did not know [οὐκ ᾔδεισαν] what to answer to him” (14:40). This is a possible reprise of the Transfiguration narrative, but instead of seeing Jesus in his resplendent glory, the disciples are witness to the depths of his despair and vulnerability. In both circumstances they lack the knowledge to respond appropriately.

The most dramatic use of οἶδα comes in the words of Peter himself, disavowing his knowledge of Jesus when asked (14:68, 71). From Peter’s lips, the pronouncements—οὔτε οἶδα and οὐκ οἶδα—function ironically: for perhaps the first time, Peter is in full possession of the necessary knowledge about Jesus, but he seeks to distance himself from his Lord. Further compounding the irony, Jesus knew in advance that Peter would respond in this way (14:29-30), knowledge Peter vehemently denied (v. 31).

In many of these examples, the concept of knowledge is intertwined with the desire to control. Whether it is the disciples’ inability to grasp the appropriate answer, a desire to secure one’s future, or Peter’s desperate disavowal of knowledge of Jesus in an attempt to fix an unraveling and life-threatening scenario, the disciples are most certainly *not* in control. I suggest that when this lack of knowledge (and concomitant lack of control) is acknowledged—as in Jesus’s statements in Ch. 13 about the timing of apocalyptic events or the Parousia—ignorance is not in itself a bad thing in the perspective of Mark’s Gospel. In the Parable of the Growing Seed, it is as Tolbert says: “[T]he sower does not know *how* the earth accomplishes [bringing forth the harvest of itself], only *that* it does, and knowing how is of little value when

the aim is to harvest ripened grain.”<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, when one attempts to remain in charge, while simultaneously not knowing how or pretending not to know what one knows, there is danger.

### **Good Ignorance in Evangelism and Christian Discipleship**

It was likely unnecessary to trace every use of the verb for knowing, οἶδα, throughout Mark for us to know what is as true now as it was then: knowledge and action are often in conflict. Our desires shape what we know or acknowledge, just as any knowledge we have about how something works does necessitate control over its working. Nonetheless, given the ambivalent and often self-deceptive function of knowing in Mark’s Gospel, I am left wondering whether not knowing (and yet observing) how God works, particularly in our parable, might be set up as exemplary. What one does not know, one cannot claim to control. What one does not know, one cannot manipulate. What one does not know, one cannot intentionally disregard and reject. In the case of the growing seed, ignorance leads to wonder and the need for more careful observation. The one who sows must keep watch over growth processes of which he is aware he has no mastery.<sup>37</sup> His is the task of planting and then noting the signs of necessary harvest.

Perhaps my paper topic can be attributed to my church-background in a small denomination that fully embraced the Church-Growth movement.<sup>38</sup> In some way, I am certain that this exegetical exercise serves to give voice to what many of my generation have found empty and dissatisfying in the easy equation of Christian discipleship with attendance numbers. My Wesleyan-Holiness denominational home, the Church of the Nazarene, has started to call into question—at least on many fronts—the idea that simply increasing attendance signifies growth in Christ. Churches full of Christians who know nothing of the difficult upward call of sanctification or, for instance, of our historical identity as a church that ordains women testify that this growth entailed a loss of valuable distinctives. Other relics—in the form of massive and

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<sup>36</sup> Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 161-162.

<sup>37</sup> So Black: “For all their mystery, some consistent strands are discernible in Mark 4. Most obvious is the claim that God’s sovereignty subverts in the most preposterous manner all human expectations” (*Mark*, 130).

<sup>38</sup> For an example of the systematization of church growth, see the “Seven Principles” that help restart stalled growth in Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1990), 269-275. For more examples of McGavran’s work see *How Churches Grow: The New Frontiers of Mission* (New York: Friendship, 1966); McGavran with Win Arn, *How to Grow a Church* (Ventura, Ca.: Regal, 1973), esp. 7; 176. In his 1976 book, C. Peter Wagner notes that McGavran’s techniques for church growth through “People Movements” developed in international settings were only newly being recognized in the American context (*Your Church Can Grow* [Ventura, Ca.: Regal, 1976], 11-13. See his lists of “Qualities of Church Growth Leaders” or “Vital Signs” (idem, 32-35). Wagner credits the modern Church Growth Movement with being sparked by Donald Anderson McGavran’s book *Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (New York: Friendship, 1955). Even in that book, in 1955, McGavran addresses the question of whether too much value is put on numbers (see idem, 97-98). His perspective has greater nuance than many of his successors, but it is unfair to caricature the Church Growth Movement as only concerned with numerical growth. But to some degree, in the church circles I encounter most frequently, a church that is said to be “doing well” or “growing” or “healthy” is almost always code for “increasing in numerical attendance.” More recent conversations on church growth are available in this title from my denominational press: Tom Nees, *Best Practices of Growing Churches: Profiles and Conversations with Ministry Leaders* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill, 2007).

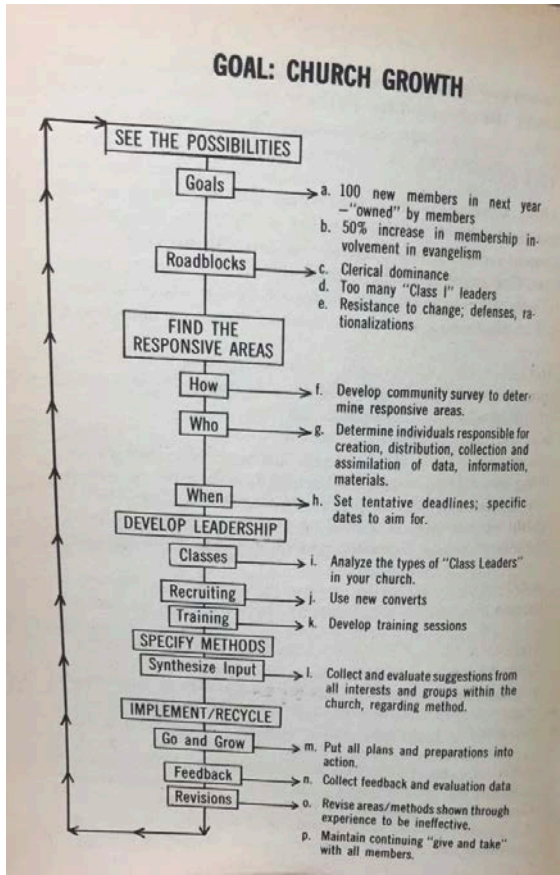


Image p. 176 in McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*

expensive church building projects now abandoned or left to bankruptcy as crowds left for the next big thing—bear witness to our inability to predict and control growth.

Two readings of the Parable of the Sower I remember hearing as a young person concerned either *being* the right kind of soil that allowed the seed to grow (which really disrupted the metaphor, as if a soil can choose its location or nature) or figuring out where to sow the seed in order to ensure that healthy growth would result. The latter strikes me as far more dangerous than the former. But when read in concert, the Parable of the Sower shares many theological implications with the Parable of the Growing Seed. In the parable, the Sower—who clearly stands metaphorically for a Divine Person—does not attempt to control where the seed lands. Likewise the divine sower seems to have absolutely no control of what happens to the seed once it is sown. If the parable speaks of the divine sower in such terms, it seems foolish or even idolatrous to think that we might have more control over the outcome of evangelism.

This recognition of “ignorance” regarding the mechanism of growth of the seeds in 4:26-29 sends the reader back to 4:1-20 with any sense of certainty of *how* one might optimize the ideal harvest severely called into question. For, although diverse soils are classified with some specificity, one must recognize the remarkably indiscriminate actions of the sower. The sower spreads seed in a shockingly unmethodical way, allowing it to fall among the weeds and on the path, as well as good soil. It seems that this sower is either ignorant about or refuses to predict or determine which seeds will or will not take root. Planning for efficiency and estimating success rates are not involved in this sowing of the word, but instead a lavish generosity motivates the sower’s actions.

There is another avenue for hearing these two parables of sown seeds jointly that is instructive for our present question of how to best understand the church’s growth and movement in our time. That is, many of us, even among those of us who recognize the vacuity of church growth strategies and would disavow them, may fall victim to the temptation to claim that we can *know or direct how* growth takes place in discipleship of Christians.<sup>39</sup> For instance, in the multi-ethnic, urban, predominantly young church-plant I attend, the people drawn to our church are typically giving church a second, third, or fourth chance. If they grew up in a church environment, it is one they have since abandoned. That means that the circumstances that lead

<sup>39</sup> In his commentary, Douglas R. A. Hare takes note of the potential encouragement that Christian ministers can glean: “This parable has brought comfort to many a preacher, who has faithfully planted the good news without seeing much in the way of results. In some cases it takes years for the seed to germinate! The work of the Spirit is invisible. We must not assume that nothing is happening when no dramatic changes can be seen” (*Mark* [WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996], 59).

to, or the life choices that follow, a rejection of childhood faith come with them. For our church, this has meant people in the midst of messy divorces, pregnant outside of a committed relationship, living in drug-recovery group homes, and, particularly, LGBTQ+ individuals who have been wounded by faith leaders, family, and friends. Woodenly reading them into the storyline of the Parable of the Sower would likely place them in the rocky soil or path categories. Mapping their faith-stories onto an idealized timeline of predictable growth would be both discouraging and unfair. Instead, our church community bears witness to growth in faith and grace that does not follow the processes we might neatly or even ideally prescribe. Setting external benchmarks for our regulars to “earn the right” to lead might, likewise, deter and discourage growing believers. Some deep and treacherous wounds may never be healed in this growing season, so to speak. Instead, it seems, that the Spirit is at work in causing growth in ways and at a pace that we would have to confess that we do not understand, just like the human sower of Mark 4:26. Releasing our grip or control on knowing how Christian growth in grace “should” go provides more room for holy surprises.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, do we or do we not trust that God’s Kingdom is at work among us? If so, then we can afford to admit we do not quite know how God does it. Even so, we can put our hands to working the things we do know. It is good to remember this message that Sharyn Dowd reinforces, one that resonates with many other scriptural affirmations: “This theme of God’s reign as gift, not achievement, is present in the parable of the seed that grows automatically.”<sup>40</sup>

For some, the Parable of the Growing Seed is evidence for a divine sovereignty that has *no need* for human activity; the Kingdom is something that God will work out without us. These interpreters seize on the period of passivity of the part of the sower in the parable, extrapolating the theological take-away to reinforce divine sovereignty at the expense of human action/cooperation. Such a reading has a corresponding praxis, in which proclamation of the gospel and actively seeking Christian transformation is naïve at best and, at worst, detrimental. This is no better than the overly programmatic readings of the Parable of the Sower that have us labeling one another as rocky, thorny, heavily-trodden soils, and strategizing to guarantee maximum harvest potential.

For Wesleyan readers of Scripture, while we have much to learn from our Reformed sisters and brothers who acknowledge the absolute sovereignty of God, our tradition celebrates that God chooses to work through and in God’s people by the Holy Spirit.<sup>41</sup> The Parable of the Growing Seed reminds of each party’s part in the cooperative project of Kingdom proclamation.

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For further discussion suggestions, see the next page.

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<sup>40</sup> Dowd, *Reading Mark*, 42.

<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Wesley would have bristled (and did) at what he called “quietism,” that is a spiritualization of matters of faith that he perceived as inaction.

Three questions (or clusters of questions) linger with me:

1. How would a church put into action the dual convictions that, first, God is the one who truly transforms *and*, second, that humans are responsible, like the sower, to plant, and take note of growth, and respond?
2. How can we challenge, encourage, and celebrate the sprouting, blooming, and full-flowering of those in our midst, without being restrictive or woodenly-prescriptive of *how* the might Spirit work differently in varied social locations?
3. In writing about this matter, I find I continue to default into individualistic language. But in Mark 4:26-29, the picture is of the Kingdom, a collective vision of the world when God is in charge, not of isolated Christian persons' individual paths of faith? How can we talk about growth in a way that honors individual differences, but that recognizes collectivity in the Kingdom?