# The Mustard Tree and the Leaven

*Paper 7 in a 12 Part Series*

*by Escape the Mustard Tree*

## Introduction

On a single day in His ministry, Jesus went out of a house, sat down beside the Sea of Galilee, and — with the crowd pressing so close He had to get into a boat and speak from the water (Matt. 13:1-2) — told seven parables. Four of them He spoke outside, to the multitude. Three He spoke back inside the house, to His disciples alone. The third and fourth of the seven run to a total of four verses:

> "Another parable He put forth to them, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven $$ the heavens $$ is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.'Another parable He spoke to them: 'The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.'" (Matt. 13:31-33)

Ask a dozen pastors what those four verses teach and the answers will run together. A tiny seed becomes a great tree: the church started with twelve men in an upper room and now numbers in the billions, on every continent, in every language. A pinch of leaven works silently through a batch of dough until the whole of it rises: the gospel works quietly through a culture, through a family, through a life, until everything is changed. Small beginnings, enormous endings. Two short parables of encouragement, told to a handful of fishermen who had every reason to wonder whether any of this was going anywhere.

Word of the Kingdom theology reads both parables as warnings. Not warnings about the world — warnings about the institution that would be built in Jesus' own name, and specifically about what would happen to one body of teaching inside it. The mustard plant becomes a tree, which no mustard plant in nature has ever done, and the birds that had been snatching seed in the first parable of the day settle down in its branches. A woman hides leaven — the one substance Israel was commanded to purge from every house — inside the meal from which bread is made, and it works until the whole batch is corrupted. On this reading, the two parables give a history of Christendom in advance, and they end where the seven letters to the seven churches of Revelation end: with a church that thinks itself rich, and with Christ outside its door.

That reading carries a verdict, and this paper hands it on rather than softening it: what institutional Christianity became over the centuries is what those two parables said it would become. A verdict that broad needs its terms pinned down first, though, because the word everyone reaches for — *church* — names too many different things at once.

One phrase needs a word before going further. Matthew wrote *the kingdom of the heavens* — plural, every time he used the phrase, and he is the only writer in the New Testament who used it at all, which is why Mark and Luke say "the kingdom of God" in the parallels quoted later on. Most English Bibles, the New King James among them, render that plural as a singular. So this paper

keeps the plural, glossed in brackets at the block quotation above and left unmarked after that. The plural is not a curiosity of grammar. The heavens are a place, and that place has a present occupant — which is what the third parable turns on.

Past that definition, the paper takes three steps. First the mainstream readings, each stated as its own defenders state it. Then the Word of the Kingdom reading, worked out through every place the mustard seed and the leaven appear in Matthew, Mark, and Luke — and the three accounts don't say the same thing in the same words, which turns out to be where a good deal of the teaching happens. Then the historical record, measured against what the parables said to expect.

## What Is Being Critiqued

The word English Bibles render "church" is *ekklesia*, and it's a general word for a summoned assembly. It carries no built-in religious content at all, and the context it sits in decides which assembly is meant. Luke uses it three times in one chapter of a rioting pagan mob jammed into the theater at Ephesus, a crowd in which "most of them did not know why they had come together" (Acts 19:32, 39, 41); the New King James renders it "assembly" there. Stephen uses the same word of Israel gathered at Sinai, rendered "congregation" (Acts 7:38). So the word itself predicts nothing — not a building, not a clergy, not a hierarchy, not an institution, and not, on its own, a company of the redeemed. That the Body of Christ consists of the saved is true and is taught plainly in Scripture (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:4-6; 1 Cor. 12:12-13; Col. 1:18), but it's taught by the passages that teach it, not smuggled in through a root meaning.

Which means the drift this paper traces can't be caught by chasing a word. What changed over the centuries was never *ekklesia*. It was the thing the word came to name. In the New Testament the word names people, gathered: Paul greets "the church that is in their house" at Rome (Rom. 16:5), sends greetings from Aquila and Priscilla "with the church that is in their house" (1 Cor. 16:19), and names Nymphas "and the church that is in his house" at Laodicea (Col. 4:15). In ordinary speech today the same word names a building you go to, an organization you belong to, or a brand that distinguishes your congregation from the one down the street — and nothing in the New Testament's use of the word has any of that in it. The fragmentation the word now carries, thousands of organizationally separate bodies all claiming it, is itself one of the things this paper is about.

So the critique can be stated precisely. It is not aimed at the Body of Christ, and it is not aimed at Christians who gather. It is aimed at institutional Christianity — the organizationally distinct, denominationally branded bodies that took up the word, and more particularly at what happened to one body of teaching inside them. That teaching is the subject of this whole series: the word of the kingdom, the message Jesus named when He explained the first parable of that day — "when anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it" (Matt. 13:19) — and the message the apostles carried after Him. It has to do with a coming kingdom, the conditions for entering it, and what awaits those who press on toward it. Keep it in view, because the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven are not about institutions in general. They are about what became of that.

# The Mainstream Landscape

Three traditions are heard in this paper: Reformed, Wesleyan-Arminian, and Catholic. That is the cast this series engages wherever the question is doctrine rather than authority, and the question here is doctrine — what two parables teach, and what the visible church's history amounts to. Eastern Orthodoxy answers the authority question differently enough from Rome that it's heard on its own, in a companion paper of its own.

One thing holds across all three. The positive reading of the mustard seed and the leaven is the majority reading, it's ancient, and it rests on real texts. Anyone who dismisses it as careless will be unable to answer those texts.

## Reformed

The Reformed tradition draws a line down the middle of the word "church." The Westminster Confession puts it this way: the universal church "which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head"; the visible church "consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, and of their children" (WCF 25.1-2). Those are two different lists of names. The invisible church is known to God alone and contains only the saved. The visible church is the thing you can point at on a street corner, and it contains genuine believers and false professors together, mixed, with no reliable way to sort them until the end.

The Confession is blunt about what follows from that: "The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan" (WCF 25.5). A Reformed believer is not obliged to defend the institution's record. He expects it to be mixed, and he expects some of it to go bad.

On the two parables, though, Reformed commentary has generally followed the majority line. Calvin, in his harmony of the Gospels, reads the mustard seed as a picture of the gospel's beginnings — contemptibly small, easy to dismiss, and certain to outgrow every estimate men made of it — and reads the leaven the same way, as the hidden working of a word that looks like nothing and ends up permeating everything. On this reading the parables were given to men who would shortly be scattered and killed, precisely so they wouldn't measure the kingdom by its first appearance.

Postmillennial writers within the tradition lean on the pair harder than anyone. Loraine Boettner's *The Millennium* treats the mustard seed and the leaven as the two parables that most clearly teach what he calls the gradual conquest of the world by the gospel: not a sudden intervention from outside history but a long, uneven, mostly quiet process inside it, in which nations are Christianized the way dough rises — slowly, from within, and completely. On that account the sheer size of institutional Christianity is not an embarrassment to be explained. It is the parable coming true.

What happens, on this view, when a church shows no fruit? The Reformed answer runs through the visible/invisible distinction. A professing member who lives in settled disobedience and shows nothing of Christ gives evidence that he was never among the elect to begin with — the profession was real, the regeneration behind it was not. The elect themselves cannot finally fall away (WCF

17.1), though they can fall into serious sin for a season, and the Confession says so without flinching. Where the whole visible institution rots, the tradition reads it as a visible church degenerating, while the invisible church inside it is untouched.

## Wesleyan-Arminian

The Wesleyan tradition shares the positive reading and arrives at it from a different direction. Where the Reformed reading stresses what God does invisibly, Wesley's stresses what God does *through* people, and what people must then do with it.

In his notes on Matthew, Wesley takes the leaven as a picture of the gospel's power working first in a single heart and then outward from it, the way leaven works through dough it was buried in — invisible, active, and unstoppable once it's in. And he takes the mustard seed to mean what its size means: a thing so small it looks like nothing, which God grows into something that shelters multitudes. His sermon "The General Spread of the Gospel" extends the same expectation across the whole earth: the work moves outward from person to person and nation to nation, and it won't stop until the knowledge of God covers the earth as the waters cover the sea. Growth of the visible church is, on that reading, the Spirit's own work becoming visible.

Fruit matters more sharply here, because it's tied to salvation itself. Wesley held that a man truly justified can fall away and be lost, and that he can be restored (Articles of Religion X, XII). Grace is resistible, and a man who resists it long enough loses what he had. So a visible church with no fruit in it is not, in Wesleyan terms, merely a church with unregenerate members. It may well be a church of people who had something and let it go. The tradition's emphasis on social holiness follows directly: faith that stays interior and produces nothing in the world is faith in the process of dying.

## Catholic

Catholic tradition holds the strongest form of the positive reading, and it holds it structurally rather than as one exegetical option among several.

The Catechism teaches that the kingdom Jesus announced is present now in the Church: Christ "inaugurated" the kingdom on earth, and the Church "is the seed and beginning of this Kingdom" (CCC 541-543, 567). The Second Vatican Council's constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, makes the growth parables the picture of it directly — the Church receives the mission to announce the kingdom of Christ and "becomes on earth the initial budding forth of that kingdom," citing Mark's parables of seed and growth as it does so (LG 5). A seed that becomes a tree filling the earth is, on this reading, exactly what the Church is and exactly what Christ said it would be.

Then comes the doctrine that settles the matter. The Church is held to be indefectible: she "is believed to be indefectibly holy" (LG 39; cf. CCC 823), and the Magisterium, teaching definitively, is protected from error (CCC 889-892). That is not a claim that Catholics behave well, and the tradition has never said it was; the Catechism freely grants that her members sin (CCC 827). It is a claim about teaching. The Church cannot bind the faithful to a false doctrine. Which means an interpretation of the mustard seed and the leaven as the corruption of the institution's own

teaching is not an interpretation Catholic tradition weighs and rejects. It is one the framework rules out before the exegesis starts.

As for fruit: the Catholic account makes works intrinsic to salvation's working out rather than evidence of a settled verdict. Grace comes through the sacraments, mortal sin severs a man from it, and confession restores him; a baptized Catholic who dies in unrepented mortal sin is lost (CCC 1855-1861, 1033). Persistent fruitlessness, then, is spiritual danger in the plainest sense, and the remedy is the Church's own sacramental life.

## The case for the positive reading, from the text

Set the three traditions aside and the exegetical argument for the positive reading stands on its own, mostly on two Old Testament passages.

The first is Ezekiel 17. God promises to take a tender sprig from the top of a cedar and plant it Himself:

> "On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it; and it will bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a majestic cedar. Under it will dwell birds of every sort; in the shadow of its branches they will dwell." (Ezek. 17:23)

A small thing planted by God, grown into a great tree, with birds dwelling in the shadow of its branches — and the passage is unambiguously a promise, not a threat. The second is Daniel 4, where Nebuchadnezzar sees "a tree in the midst of the earth" whose height reached to the heavens, and "the birds of the heavens dwelt in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it" (Dan. 4:10-12). The tree is a kingdom, and birds lodging in it means peoples finding shelter under that kingdom's reach.

Put those two together and the mainstream case is straightforward. Scripture already has a tree that grows from a small planting and shelters birds, and it means a kingdom established by God. So when Jesus says the kingdom of the heavens is like a seed that becomes a tree where birds nest, He is using a figure His hearers already knew, in the sense they already knew it. The growth is the point and the birds are the Gentiles.

The leaven gets a parallel defense. Leaven is used negatively elsewhere, the argument runs, but a figure takes its meaning from its use, and here the thing compared to leaven is named in the first line: the kingdom. Leaven's property — a small amount that works invisibly until it has changed the entire mass — is exactly the property being illustrated, and nothing in the parable says the change is for the worse.

That identification of what the parable's opening line names will matter later in this paper.

# The Word of the Kingdom Position

Word of the Kingdom theology reads the first four parables of Matthew 13 as one continuous account rather than four separate lessons, and reads that account as a history of Christendom given in advance. The same history, on this reading, was given a second time — to John, in the seven short letters to the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3, after the church existed. A warning this specific, delivered twice, decades apart, by two different means, is the reason this paper treats the outcome as foretold rather than merely regrettable.

Everything in that reading depends on getting one thing straight at the outset, so it goes first.

## The day these parables were spoken

The parables didn't begin in a vacuum. Matthew 13 opens with a date — "On the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea" (Matt. 13:1) — and the day in question is the one Matthew has just spent a whole chapter describing.

Matthew 12 runs three confrontations in a row. Jesus' disciples walk through grainfields on the Sabbath and pluck heads of grain to eat, and the Pharisees object (12:1-8). He goes from there into their synagogue, where a man with a withered hand is waiting, and they ask whether it's lawful to heal on the Sabbath so they can accuse Him; He heals the man, and they go out and take counsel on how to destroy Him (12:9-14). Then a man who was demon-possessed, blind, and mute is brought to Him, and He heals him — and the crowd, watching, asks out loud the question the whole nation had been circling: "Could this be the Son of David?" (12:23).

That question is the hinge, and the religious leaders wouldn't let it stand. Rather than answer it, they attributed the work to the wrong source: "This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons" (12:24). They had watched Him do it. They credited it to Satan. And Jesus' answer to that accusation is unlike anything He had said to them before — this particular word, He told them, "will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come" (12:32). When they came back asking for yet another sign, He refused them one and spoke for the first time of His own death, under the sign of Jonah (12:38-40).

That is the day. The nation's rejection of its King is now out in the open, and the leaders who brought it about have been told there's a limit they have crossed.

So when Jesus leaves the house, sits down by the sea, and starts speaking in parables — which the disciples' own question shows was something new — the disciples want to know why, and His answer ties the new method directly to what has just happened:

> "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." (Matt. 13:11)

He then quotes Isaiah on a people who hear without understanding and see without perceiving (13:14-15; Isa. 6:9-10). The parables are not a friendlier teaching style adopted to reach a wider audience. They conceal from a nation that has just crossed a line, and they disclose to the disciples alone. Whatever the mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens turn out to be across the seven parables that follow, this moment defines them as something granted selectively.

The mustard seed and the leaven inherit that setting along with everything else in the sequence.

## What the parables are about

Each of these parables opens the same way in English — "the kingdom of heaven is like" — and taken at face value, as a flat statement about the kingdom itself, the phrase buries a problem the positive reading never has occasion to notice.

The problem is that the kingdom of the heavens is a real domain with a current occupant. This series establishes it at length elsewhere and the Scriptures state it directly: the heavens over this

earth are presently ruled by Satan and his angels. Paul calls him "the prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2) and names the Christian's actual opponents as "principalities," "powers," and "spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12); Daniel is shown the arrangement from the inside, with angelic rulers contending over Persia and Greece while Michael stands for Israel (Dan. 10:12-21). Nothing about that realm is like a mustard seed, and nothing in it is waiting to be leavened. The kingdom of the heavens is not growing. It is going to change hands.

What *is* in view, from the first parable of the day onward, is the message about that kingdom. Jesus says so when He explains the first parable: the seed sown is "the word of the kingdom" (Matt. 13:19). Mark, recording the same explanation, calls the same seed simply "the word" (Mark 4:14), and Luke calls it "the word of God" (Luke 8:11) — three accounts, one message, the thing Jesus Himself had been preaching since He began: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17), the same sentence John the Baptist had opened with before Him (Matt. 3:2).

So the opening formula in each of the next three parables is doing what a parable does — setting one thing alongside another to open a truth already in play. Read in sequence, the sense is: *the message of the kingdom of the heavens continues on like* a man who sowed good seed, like a mustard seed, like leaven hidden in meal. Matthew's own wording supports the continuity. He doesn't restart the subject each time; he writes "another parable" (13:24, 31, 33), hanging each one on the last. And the Greek word itself says what the method is: *parabole* is *para*, "alongside," with *bole*, "to cast" — something cast alongside another thing to open it up.

Read that way, the four parables are four angles on one subject rather than four chapters of a story. The word of the kingdom goes out and meets four kinds of hearing. Where it takes root and bears fruit, it comes under a specific kind of attack. That attack explains how the growth went unnatural. And the unnatural growth explains how the corruption reached the whole of the message. Each one opens up the one before it, which is what a parable does — and not one of them waits its turn. All four describe conditions that began while the apostles were alive and have been running side by side ever since.

Matthew says where they end, and he says it twice. The tares explanation lands on "the harvest is the end of the age" and "so it will be at the end of the age" (13:39-40). The last of the three parables Jesus told inside the house, the dragnet, lands on the same words: "So it will be at the end of the age" (13:49). Parables in both halves of the seven reach that terminus on their own. They are not links in a chain; each one runs the whole length.

## The sower: four grounds, one message

The first parable supplies the vocabulary the other three never redefine. A sower scatters seed; it lands on the wayside, on rocky ground, among thorns, and on good ground; only the last bears fruit, "some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty" (Matt. 13:3-8, 23). Jesus explains this one to the disciples before moving on, which is itself a signal — lay the foundation wrong and everything built on it leans.

Two details in His explanation carry straight into the parables that follow. The first is the identification of the seed already noted: the word of the kingdom. The second is what happens on the wayside:

> "And as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them." (Matt. 13:4)"When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside." (Matt. 13:19)

The birds are not scenery. Jesus names them: they're the work of the wicked one, and their business is taking the message away before it can root. Hold onto them. They come back in the third parable, and when they do they aren't passing overhead any more.

One further point, since the four grounds get sorted into saved and unsaved so routinely. The seed is the word of the kingdom, and a man has to be able to hear spiritual things before that message reaches him at all (1 Cor. 2:14) — which is why Jesus was speaking it to Israel, a nation God had redeemed long before. The capacity was there; the hearts Jesus called dull would not use it (Matt. 13:14-15). And the parable's own measure is a matter of degree: the good ground's yield came in three sizes, a hundredfold and sixty and thirty. Saved and unsaved has two values; fruit has many, and fruit is what every ground here is tested for.

## The wheat and the tares: the method, and who the tares are

The second parable narrows the frame rather than restating it. Where the first covered all four grounds, this one picks up where the first left off — with the good ground, the ground that actually bore fruit — and asks what happens to those people next.

> "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn."'" (Matt. 13:24-30)

Jesus gives the key for this one too, back inside the house: the sower is the Son of Man, the field is the world, the good seeds "are the sons of the kingdom," the tares "are the sons of the wicked one," the enemy is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, the reapers are angels (13:37-39).

Two things in the parable decide how it's read.

The first is the method. Satan does not attack the fruit-bearers head-on. He plants his own men among them — men who look, while everything is still green, exactly like wheat. Wheat and tares are indistinguishable in the early growth and separate only at maturity, when one produces edible grain and the other doesn't. And the landowner forbids an early sorting, because pulling the counterfeit now would tear up the real crop with it. The whole arrangement is designed to be undetectable for a long time, which is the point.

The second is who the tares are, and this is where the parable is most often turned inside out. The common reading takes "the sons of the wicked one" as unsaved men planted next to Christians to make trouble. Scripture's own use of the word "son" rules that out. There are two Greek words for it: *teknon*, a child, a matter of birth; and *huios*, which carries the sense of one who exhibits his

father's character and does his father's bidding. The tares are *huioi* — sons by resemblance and by conduct.

And Jesus Himself uses that construction of men whose standing He has just affirmed. He tells Jews He acknowledges as "Abraham's descendants" that because of what they're doing they are "of your father the devil" (John 8:37, 44). He calls Peter blessed for naming Him the Christ, and within a few verses, when Peter tells Him He will not suffer and die, says to Peter's face — not past him to Satan, but to Peter — "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me" (Matt. 16:17, 23). He tells the scribes and Pharisees that they make a convert "twice as much a son of hell $$ Gehenna $$ as yourselves" (Matt. 23:15), locating the sonship in what the man has been taught and does rather than in what he is by nature.

So the sons of the wicked one in the field are saved men doing the devil's work. And that is not a softening of the parable; it's what gives the parable its teeth. Everything that follows in the sequence happens inside Christendom, carried out by men who had the message and turned from it. Scripture has a word for them. "Apostasy" is the Greek *apostasia*, from *apo*, "from," and *stasis*, "to stand" — to stand away from a place a man once occupied. A man cannot stand away from the word of the kingdom without having stood in it first.

Which is exactly how the New Testament's warnings run. Paul tells the Ephesian elders that savage wolves will come in after he leaves, and then says where the worse danger lies: "also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves" (Acts 20:29-30). Peter and Jude both open their letters urging Christians to strain every muscle in the race, and both name the reason in the next breath — false teachers already in their midst (2 Pet. 1:5-11; 2:1; Jude 3-4). Peter describes men who "have escaped the pollution of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" and then became entangled again, "and the latter end is worse for them than the beginning" (2 Pet. 2:20). The word for knowledge there is *epignosis*, mature knowledge, knowledge upon knowledge. A man who never had it cannot lose it.

Together the first two parables establish everything the third and fourth build on: a specific message, a selective audience, a specific method of attack on that message once it takes root, and a long delay before any of it is sorted out. The mustard seed and the leaven don't change the subject. They show what that method produces, and it has been producing it for a very long time.

## Matthew's mustard seed: a tree it was never meant to be

> "Another parable He put forth to them, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.'" (Matt. 13:31-32)

Start with the plant, because the parable's hearers knew it and most modern readers don't. Mustard was a common field and garden crop in Palestine, grown for its seed. It germinates from a seed small enough to be proverbial, it seeds prolifically enough that farmers treated it as a weed, and at full maturity it stands as a tall, bushy shrub with many thin branches — somewhere around eight feet in good conditions. That's what a mustard seed grown to its proper end produces, and it's exactly what Jesus says: when it is grown, it is "greater than the herbs."

And then the sentence keeps going, into something no mustard plant has ever done. It "becomes a tree."

The two words sit in the same breath, and they're different words for different things. The herbs are *lachana*, garden plants, the things a man grows in rows and cuts. A tree is a *dendron*, with a trunk and a canopy and branches a bird can nest in. A mustard plant is the greatest of the first kind. It does not become the second kind — not in Palestine, not anywhere, not then and not now. So the parable has already told the reader that something has gone wrong before a single word of interpretation is applied to it. A seed that outgrows its own species is not a seed doing well.

Then there's the question of what a tree means in Scripture, and the answer is remarkably steady. A tree stands for a national power.

The oldest parable recorded in Scripture is built on it. Jotham stands on Mount Gerizim and tells the men of Shechem about trees that went out to anoint a king over themselves — the olive, the fig, and the vine all decline, each because it has fruit to bear, and the bramble accepts, with an offer and a threat: "If in truth you anoint me as king over you, then come and take shelter in my shade; but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon" (Judg. 9:8-15). Trees are nations. The one that takes the crown is the one with no fruit to lose.

Daniel's king is told the same figure about himself. Nebuchadnezzar dreams of "a tree in the midst of the earth" whose height reached to the heavens, where "the birds of the heavens dwelt in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it" (Dan. 4:10-12), and Daniel's interpretation leaves nothing to infer: "It is you, O king, who have grown and become strong; for your greatness has grown and reaches to the heavens, and your dominion to the end of the earth" (Dan. 4:22). Ezekiel runs the same picture over Assyria, a cedar in Lebanon whose branches shaded the forest, where "all the birds of the heavens made their nests in its boughs" and "in its shadow all great nations made their home" (Ezek. 31:3-6) — and then has God cut it down. Joel calls Israel a fig tree (Joel 1:7). Jesus uses the fig tree of Israel Himself, cursing one with leaves and no fruit on His way into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:18-19), and a few days later tells His disciples to learn the parable of the fig tree and, in Luke's account of the same moment, "the fig tree, and all the trees" (Matt. 24:32; Luke 21:29) — Israel and the Gentile nations around her, in one figure.

The symbol is consistent enough to use. So the mustard seed becoming a tree is not a picture of a church getting large. It's a picture of something that was called out of the world becoming a power *in* the world — a political entity among the nations, during the age when the nations are governed from a heaven Satan still holds (Dan. 10:12-21). Any thought of Christians exercising that kind of power belongs to a day after the present ruler has been put down and Christ has taken the scepter. The parable shows it happening early, in the wrong age, in the wrong sphere.

And once it happens, the parable's last clause falls into place. "The birds of the air come and nest in its branches" — the same birds from the first parable of that day, the ones Jesus had already identified as the wicked one's work, snatching the word away before it could root (13:4, 19). In the first parable they were overhead, taking seed off a path. Here they have a lodging place. The men who had been scattering the message now live inside the thing that grew up where it was supposed to be sown, and they don't have to come and go any more. That's the end the third parable

reaches: not merely a growth gone wrong, but a growth gone wrong in a way that gives Satan's own men a permanent address.

## Mark's account: the word dropped, the thing kept

Mark has the mustard seed too, and he tells it differently enough to repay a careful reading.

> "Then He said, 'To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it? It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth; but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade.'" (Mark 4:30-32)

Mark never uses the word "tree." He keeps the smallest-of-seeds opening and the greater-than-all-herbs growth, and then, where Matthew writes "becomes a tree," Mark writes that it "shoots out large branches." A reader who wanted to argue that Matthew's "tree" is loose language, a figure of speech for a big plant, could point here and say Mark proves it — Mark described the same thing without the word.

Except that Mark replaced the word with its meaning. His birds do not nest in the branches. They nest "under its shade."

Go back through the tree passages and watch what the shade does. The bramble, bidding for a crown, offers the trees exactly one thing: "come and take shelter in my shade" (Judg. 9:15). Nebuchadnezzar's tree is the one where "the beasts of the field found shade under it" (Dan. 4:12). Assyria's cedar is the one in whose "shadow all great nations made their home" (Ezek. 31:6). And the tree God Himself promises to plant on the mountain height of Israel is the one where "in the shadow of its branches they will dwell" (Ezek. 17:23). Four passages, four dominions, and in every one of them the shade is what a kingdom gives and what those who come under its rule receive.

So Mark kept the substance and let the label go. His plant has large branches and casts a shade that others shelter in, which is a description of a ruling power whether or not the noun appears. Mark's wording tightens the reading rather than loosening it.

Mark's arrangement says something too. He places this parable immediately after one found in no other Gospel: a man scatters seed, sleeps and rises, and "the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how," until the grain ripens and the sickle goes in (Mark 4:26-29). That is a seed doing precisely what a seed is for — growing by a power the farmer neither supplies nor understands, and ending in a harvest of grain. Mark sets it directly beside a seed that outgrows its kind and ends in lodging for birds. Nothing is harvested from the second plant.

One more feature of Mark's account is an absence. Mark has no parable of the leaven at all. The four-part sequence that runs sower, tares, mustard seed, leaven in Matthew runs sower, lamp, growing seed, mustard seed in Mark, and stops. Whatever else that means, it means the leaven parable's sense cannot be settled by cross-reference to Mark — which makes the one other Gospel that carries it that much more important.

## Luke's account: the pair, and the quarrel they come out of

Luke has both the mustard seed and the leaven. He puts them together, in the same order, in two sentences each — and he sets them in a scene Matthew never mentions.

> "Then He said, 'What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches.'And again He said, 'To what shall I liken the kingdom of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.'" (Luke 13:18-21)

Two details in Luke's mustard seed. He drops the comparison with the herbs entirely and goes straight to the outcome: it "became a large tree." Luke states as a bare fact what Matthew builds to. And his man puts the seed not in a field but "in his garden" — a *kepos*, a garden plot rather than an open field. A large tree in a vegetable garden is out of scale with everything around it.

Now the setting, because this is where Luke adds what the other accounts don't have. Matthew's pair comes out of the day the leaders credited Jesus' work to Satan. Luke's comes out of a quarrel in a synagogue:

> "Now He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And behold, there was a woman who had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bent over and could in no way raise herself up. But when Jesus saw her, He called her to Him and said to her, 'Woman, you are loosed from your infirmity.' And He laid His hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God.But the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath; and he said to the crowd, 'There are six days on which men ought to work; therefore come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day.'The Lord then answered him and said, 'Hypocrite! Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or donkey from the stall, and lead it away to water it? So ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound — think of it — for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath?' And when He said these things, all His adversaries were put to shame; and all the multitude rejoiced for all the glorious things that were done by Him." (Luke 13:10-17)

A woman bent double for eighteen years stands up straight in front of everyone, and the man who runs the synagogue is indignant — not at the devil who bound her, but at the day it happened on. He doesn't even address Jesus. He turns to the crowd and lectures them about scheduling. Jesus answers him with one word, and it's the word to hold onto: *Hypocrite.*

Luke has used that word before, and he used it of leaven. One chapter earlier, with a crowd so large that people were trampling each other, Jesus turned to His disciples first of all and said: "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy" (Luke 12:1).

So follow Luke's own order. He defines leaven — hypocrisy, a man teaching one thing while being another. He then shows it in a named officeholder, caught in the act, in the place where the Scriptures were read and taught. And out of that scene, with the man still standing there shamed, Jesus likens the kingdom of God to a mustard seed that became a large tree and to leaven a woman hid in meal until the whole batch was leavened. A reader who has Luke 12:1 in hand cannot hear Luke 13:21 as a promise. Luke told him what the word meant before he used it.

And Luke's sequel goes where the sequence has been heading all along. A few verses later a man asks Him a question about numbers — "Lord, are there few who are saved?" (Luke 13:23) — and Jesus doesn't answer the arithmetic at all. He answers with a door:

> "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to

> stand outside and knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open for us,' and He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know you, where you are from,' then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.' But He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.' There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out." (Luke 13:24-28)

The men He is speaking to are Israelites, a people God had already redeemed through the substitutionary provision He had always required, and their claim at the door is not that they believed something but that they were present — they ate and drank with Him, He taught in their streets. Proximity is what they plead, and proximity is what fails. What they lose is entrance into a kingdom, standing outside a door that someone else is inside.

So Luke frames the two parables with a leader's hypocrisy on one side and a shut door on the other. The subject on both sides of them is the offer of the kingdom and what a man does with it — the same subject Matthew's day was about. Luke's placement isn't a second theme. It's the same one, reached by another road.

## Leaven: what the word already meant

> "Another parable He spoke to them: 'The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.'" (Matt. 13:33)

Jesus uses "leaven" here for the first time in the New Testament, in a symbolic sense, and He doesn't explain it. He doesn't have to. The men listening had a lifetime of one meaning behind the word, put there by the Law itself.

Leaven is a foreign substance worked into dough to make it rise. The word enters Scripture by its absence: Lot, with two angels at his table in Sodom, "made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread" (Gen. 19:3). Then it enters the Law as something to be driven out. On the night the firstborn died in Egypt and Israel walked out, God gave the nation a permanent ordinance about it:

> "Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses. For whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel.... For seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses, since whoever eats what is leavened, that same person shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is a stranger or a native of the land." (Exod. 12:15, 19)

Note the penalty. Not a fine, not a wash, not a week outside the camp — cut off from the nation, for eating bread that had risen, for seven days following the blood on the doorpost. And the same substance was barred from what the priests brought to God: "No grain offering which you bring to the Lord shall be made with leaven, for you shall burn no leaven nor honey in any offering to the Lord made by fire" (Lev. 2:11). What is offered to God is to be pure, and the absence of leaven is how God taught the nation to picture purity.

Three passages in the Law and the prophets do command leaven in an offering, and at first glance each of them looks like a counterexample. A man bringing a peace offering of thanksgiving offers leavened bread with it (Lev. 7:13). At the Feast of Weeks, Israel brings two wave loaves "of fine flour, baked with leaven" as firstfruits (Lev. 23:17). And Amos, centuries later, names an offering of thanksgiving made with leaven (Amos 4:5).

Look at what's actually happening in each. In every one of them the leavened bread stands alongside a blood sacrifice, and in no case does it go on the altar — Leviticus is explicit that leaven and honey "shall not be burned on the altar" (Lev. 2:12), and the loaves of the Feast of Weeks are waved before the Lord rather than burned. Which means the symbol hasn't flipped. Leaven in an offering shows the corruption inside the man bringing it, brought into God's presence and openly acknowledged there, and accepted only because blood was shed alongside it. An offering without leaven pictured purity; an offering with leaven pictured a worshipper who had none of his own.

The Feast of Weeks is the clearest case, and it's also the richest, because that feast is Pentecost. Two loaves, not one, baked with leaven, waved as firstfruits at the end of a count of fifty days (Lev. 23:15-16) — and fifty days on from the week the Lamb was slain, the Holy Spirit came, and two peoples who had never been one thing before were joined into one new man in Christ (Acts 2; Eph. 2:14-16). Two loaves, two peoples, both of them men with corrupted natures still in them, both accepted on the basis of blood already shed, neither one put on the fire. Even at Pentecost, leaven means what leaven has always meant. What is new is that God takes the loaves anyway.

Then the New Testament, where three different Gospel writers hand the word three different definitions, and all three of them point the same direction.

**Matthew says doctrine.** The Pharisees and Sadducees come demanding a sign, and when Jesus and the disciples have crossed to the other side He warns them: "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees." The disciples think He's talking about lunch. He asks how they can still be thinking about bread, repeats the warning, and Matthew closes the scene with the disciples finally catching up: "Then they understood that He did not speak to them concerning the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matt. 16:6-12). Matthew's word is *didache* — teaching, doctrine, the content of what a man says.

**Mark attaches it to a ruler.** Mark records the same warning on the same crossing, and his version names a different second party: "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod" (Mark 8:15). Herod was no theologian. He held civil power, and he held it as a client of Rome. Mark sets a religious party's leaven beside a politician's in one sentence, which is a useful thing to have in a sequence of parables about something becoming a power in the world.

**Luke says hypocrisy.** Already quoted, and it's the plainest of the three: "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy" (Luke 12:1). A hypocrite is a man whose teaching and whose life are two different things, and Luke shows one in action a chapter later.

Paul uses the word twice, and both times he uses it as a settled symbol needing no defense. He writes to Corinth about sin the assembly had been tolerating and left unaddressed — "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump" — and then sends them back to the feast they already understood: "let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Cor. 5:6-8). And he uses the identical sentence against the Galatians, who were being talked into a righteousness of law-keeping: "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (Gal. 5:9).

Doctrine, a ruler, hypocrisy, tolerated sin, a law-based righteousness. Scripture never once uses leaven of something good.

## Three measures of meal

So a corrupting agent is hidden inside something. The parable says what.

"Three measures of meal" is ground grain — the material bread is made from — in the quantity Scripture uses for divine perfection. And bread, in Scripture's own usage, stands for the Word of God. Jesus said so to the devil in the wilderness, quoting Moses: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). He said it of Himself as well — "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35) — and John opens his Gospel by calling Him the Word made flesh (John 1:1, 14).

Scripture measures meal out in threes one other time. Three strangers stand at Abraham's tent door, and he runs inside: "Quickly, make ready three measures of fine meal; knead it and make cakes" (Gen. 18:6). Two of the three go on to Sodom as angels; the one who stays with Abraham is the LORD (Gen. 18:22; 19:1). Three measures of meal, in the one other place the phrase occurs, is what a man prepares when God has come to his house. The Greek of the Old Testament uses different words for both "measure" and "meal" there than Matthew does, so the link is a resonance rather than a quotation — but it's the sort of resonance Scripture tends to make on purpose.

What the leaven is hidden in, then, is the Word — and not the Word in general. The parable sits fourth in a sequence whose subject was named in the first one. The seed was "the word of the kingdom" (Matt. 13:19), and that's the part of God's perfect revelation this corruption goes into: the doctrine of the coming kingdom, the conditions for entering it, and the reward awaiting those who press on toward it.

That narrowness is the whole force of the parable, and it's what separates this reading from a vague complaint about decline. The fourth parable does not say the world got worse. It doesn't even say, primarily, that the church got immoral. It says one body of teaching got corrupted, all the way through, until nothing of it was left uncorrupted.

And the parable says the leaven was *hidden*. Not announced, not debated, not voted on — worked in, out of sight, by someone who didn't want it found. Which is how false teaching actually gets into a body of doctrine. No assembly has ever been asked to approve the removal of the word of the kingdom from its teaching. The subject simply stopped being raised, and then stopped being known, and then stopped being recognized when it was raised.

Scripture names the method and names who uses it. Paul tells the Corinthians that false apostles transform themselves into apostles of Christ, "and no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:13-14) — a counterfeit works by resembling, not by opposing. The first words out of the serpent's mouth in Scripture are a question about what God said: "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?" (Gen. 3:1). He did not bring a rival revelation. He altered the one that was there.

And Scripture puts the two bodies of knowledge side by side in exactly parallel language. Paul tells the Corinthians that the Spirit searches "the deep things of God" (1 Cor. 2:10). Jesus, in the letter to

Thyatira, speaks of those "who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say" (Rev. 2:24). A depth that can be set against the deep things of God, in the same words, can only be a counterfeit of them — a corrupted form of what God actually said.

## "Faith as a mustard seed"

The mustard seed turns up twice more in the Gospels, away from the parable. Both places bear on this one, and both bear on it only so far.

The first is after the disciples failed to cast a demon out of a boy and asked why. Jesus told them: "Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matt. 17:20). The second is in Luke, when the apostles asked Him to increase their faith and He answered, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you" (Luke 17:6).

In both, the mustard seed is Scripture's own emblem of the smallest beginning. That's what the figure is for, and the parable uses it the same way — "the least of all the seeds" (Matt. 13:32). The point in both sayings is that what matters about faith is what it is rather than how much of it a man has, which is why Jesus answers a request for *more* faith by naming the smallest seed there is. A mustard seed is sufficient because of its kind.

Set that beside the parable and one thing lines up. The mustard seed in the parable is not faulted for being small; it is faulted for not staying what it was. The thing that made it capable of bearing was never its size.

Luke's version has a detail that's hard not to notice: in it, mustard-seed faith is set against a tree, and the tree comes up by the roots. That's a striking arrangement given everything above. It is also not the subject Luke is teaching there — the apostles had just been told to forgive a brother seven times in a day (Luke 17:3-4) — so this paper notes the arrangement and leans nothing on it. The two sayings establish what the mustard seed signifies and no more than that, which is all they're being asked to do here.

## The same history, given a second time

Everything above was spoken before the church existed, to twelve men who had no idea yet that there would be one. Decades later, with the church in place and most of those men dead, Jesus gave the same account again — this time to John, as seven short letters to seven real assemblies in Asia (Rev. 2-3). The two accounts run the same road from two vantage points, and the second one names the stops.

The letters open with Ephesus, and Ephesus is the right place to start because it's the assembly whose instruction the New Testament documents best. Paul spent three years there (Acts 20:31), going "from house to house" and keeping nothing back (Acts 20:20), and the letter he later wrote them starts without foundations — straight into adoption, redemption, and an inheritance "in the dispensation of the fullness of the times" (Eph. 1:3-14), and from there into the mystery and the fellow-heirship of Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 3:1-11). A man doesn't open a letter that way to people who need the elementary things explained. These were Christians who knew the word of the

kingdom, taught by a man who had warned them to their faces that the danger would come from inside the room (Acts 20:29-31).

And here's what Jesus says to that same assembly, a generation later:

> "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love." (Rev. 2:2-4)

They were still testing claims. They were still refusing liars. And something had already gone out of them. That's the first letter — the leaven at work in the best-taught assembly on record, this early.

The last letter is Laodicea, and there's no commendation in it anywhere:

> "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing' — and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked." (Rev. 3:15-17)

Two things in that letter decide how it reads. The first is the self-assessment. This assembly's own account of itself is that it has everything it needs, and Jesus' account of it is five words of destitution. They are not in distress about their condition; they're unaware of it, which is what a hidden corrupting agent produces. The second is the temperature. Leaven does its work fastest in dough that's kept lukewarm — too cold and it goes dormant, too hot and it dies. The one condition in which leaven thrives is the exact condition Jesus names.

The structure of the seven letters tells you what they're measuring. Every one of them is built the same way: "I know your works" at the front (Rev. 2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15), and "to him who overcomes" at the back (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). Works, with a view to overcoming — and every one of the overcomer's promises reaches forward into the coming kingdom, the last of them offering a seat on Christ's own throne (3:21). So the seven letters are not a survey of church life in general. They take up the one subject the leaven was shown attacking, and they take it up as a judgment of works with the kingdom in view. Read that way, Revelation 2-3 is both a prophetic portrait of Christendom from Ephesus to Laodicea and a picture of the Judgment Seat of Christ, where Christians stand before Jesus as their Judge.

Which brings the second account to the same endpoint as the first. And it ends with Jesus outside:

> "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me." (Rev. 3:19-20)

Notice who the invitation is addressed to. Not the assembly — "if *anyone* hears My voice." The letter is written to a church, and the door is opened one person at a time. He isn't telling that man to go find a better assembly, either, and the parable of the leaven explains why: the whole lump is leavened, so there's no unleavened lump to go to. The man is told to stay where he is, hear, and open. What follows is fellowship between Christ and that individual, in a room full of people who left Him standing outside.

And set that door beside the door in Luke 13. There, men stood outside a shut door and knocked, pleading that they had eaten and drunk in His presence while He taught in their streets, and were told, "I do not know you, where you are from" (Luke 13:25-27). Here it's Christ outside the door of His own church, knocking, asking to be let in to dine. The two scenes are the same two parties on opposite sides of the same threshold — and which side a man finds himself on turns on whether he opened when he heard.

# The Historical Record

A reading like this one makes a claim history can check. If the two parables describe a called-out people becoming a power in the world and a body of teaching being corrupted from within until nothing of it survived, then both things happened somewhere, to someone, on dates. This section sets the record beside the parables. The genealogy of the particular doctrinal shift — how a literal future kingdom came to be read as the present age — is traced in its own paper in this series; what follows is the institutional story, and the verdict the parables pass on it.

## The tree: Rome, and what persecution could not do

For most of three centuries Christianity was an illegal religion in the Roman world, and in some quarters Christians were reckoned guilty of treason. The charge made a kind of sense. Rome practiced emperor worship, and within that practice religion and state were one thing; Christians were monotheists who spoke of a King other than Caesar and a kingdom other than Rome. Periodic persecution ran for generations on exactly that collision.

It produced growth. Tertullian, writing from inside the persecution, left the line everyone still quotes in one form or another: the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church (*Apology* 50). Rome attacked the entity directly, and the entity multiplied.

Then the barriers came down. Constantine stopped the persecution early in the fourth century and later embraced Christianity himself. In 380 Theodosius I issued the Edict of Thessalonica, making Nicene Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. At that point Christianity found itself completely enmeshed within a world power in the sphere of governmental authority — the one sphere the nations are governed from, and the one sphere a called-out people had no business occupying in this age.

That is the tree. Not a church that got large; a church that acquired the thing a tree stands for.

The 380 edict also did something to the word this paper started with. It ordered every people under Roman authority to hold one specified faith, authorized those who complied to be called Catholic Christians, and branded everyone else heretics whose gatherings could not legally be called churches at all. *Ekklesia* had been a word whose context decided which assembly was meant. After 380, in the Roman world, law decided. A body men had joined at real cost became a body men belonged to by default, and being a Christian became, for most, a matter of where a man was born rather than what he was persuaded of.

Which is the irony the parables predicted. Rome's attack was aimed at the church's existence and it failed. The attack that succeeded came from inside, and it was aimed not at the entity but at what fed the entity.

The empire went. The arrangement it created did not. What began with one emperor's edict became the ordinary shape of Christendom for the next millennium and a half, in whatever form the century had to offer — established churches, confessional states, princes settling their subjects' religion by treaty. England wrote the fusion into constitutional law and has never unwritten it: the Act of Supremacy of 1534 made the Crown head of the Church of England, and twenty-six bishops still sit and vote in the House of Lords. Where nothing is established, the same instinct works by alignment rather than by office — Christians reaching for the levers instead of holding them, which the figure covers just as well, since a tree needn't be planted by the state to cast a shade. And this claim can be tested the way the other one can. The leaven is checked by listening for the word of the kingdom on a Sunday morning. The tree is checked by asking which age a Christian expects to exercise authority in.

## The leaven: how the teaching was handed upward

The two figures are not two stories. The leaven was already at work when John wrote to Ephesus, and the tree did not start it. What the tree added was reach, and the record compresses the two into a single year: 380 made one faith exclusive by law, and in 381 Theodosius convened a council at Constantinople to settle what that faith was.

Nothing in that is an objection to what Constantinople decided. The objection is to what proximity to power does to teaching. A church with no access to the state has only the text to appeal to. A church holding governmental authority has something else to appeal to, and from 380 onward it did.

The parable of the leaven says a specific body of doctrine was corrupted quietly. A corruption like that needs a mechanism — some arrangement by which an error can get in, settle, and stay settled for centuries without anyone going back to check. The record supplies one, in four changes, none of them decreed and none of them sudden.

Two questions make them legible, and they're the questions to keep in hand: *who decides what is true*, and *how does an ordinary person get at Scripture?* In the New Testament both answers sit on the surface of the text. Leadership was plural and local — Paul calls for "the elders of the church" at Ephesus and tells those same men the Holy Spirit has made them "overseers" (Acts 20:17, 28); Titus slides from "elders" to "a bishop" two verses apart (Titus 1:5, 7); Peter tells "the elders who are among you" to shepherd the flock "serving as overseers," then points them all to "the Chief Shepherd" (1 Pet. 5:1-4). One office, three English words, and exactly one title above it, held by Jesus alone. And the text was public: Paul charges that his letter "be read to all the holy brethren" (1 Thess. 5:27) and tells Colossae to trade letters with Laodicea so both assemblies have both (Col. 4:16). The Bereans "searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11) — they audited an apostle against a text anyone present could hear read, and Luke calls them more fair-minded for it.

Four changes moved all of that, and this series dates them in detail elsewhere.

**One man set over the assembly.** By the early second century a single bishop presiding over the elders, rather than standing among them as one of them, begins showing up in the record. It took roughly a century to spread. The arrangement is now so ordinary that most Christians have never

considered it might be an innovation — a congregation today has *the* pastor, he sets the teaching, and the plural local eldership of the New Testament has become a board that supports him.

**Authority relocated from the text to a lineage.** Around 180, facing teachers who claimed the apostles had passed down secret instruction, Irenaeus answered by naming what the apostles had handed on in the open: he listed bishops in unbroken order and invited anyone to go compare what the apostolic churches taught. Against that particular crisis it worked. But notice the shape of the test. It settles a disputed question by asking who has taught a thing, and in what line, rather than by going back to the text. The crisis passed. The habit didn't. To this day the most common answer to "why do you believe that?" is a name, a denomination, or a tradition.

**A priesthood, and a professional class of readers.** By the middle of the third century church leaders were being described in the sacrificial, priestly terms the New Testament never applies to any officer in an assembly — a striking thing, since *hiereus*, the word for a sacrificing priest, is used in the New Testament of Israel's priests, of pagan priests, of Jesus as High Priest, and of believers together as "a holy priesthood" and "a royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:5, 9), and never once of a man holding office over other believers. In the same decades interpretation itself became a trained discipline, housed in schools and staffed by men educated in Greek philosophy. Two things happened at once: a man came to stand between the believer and God, and a credential came to stand between the believer and the text. The Reformation formally rejected the first. The second is alive and well, and the working assumption in most congregations is still that understanding Scripture is the trained man's job and the ordinary Christian's job is to receive the result.

**Belonging by law rather than by conviction.** That's 380. And with it, both questions got their finished answers: what was true would be settled by councils and written into canon law, and a man's membership no longer depended on his being persuaded of anything.

Then access narrowed. The Latin Bible stayed fixed in Latin long after Latin had stopped being anyone's mother tongue, and a series of regional rulings restricted or forbade ordinary people to own Scripture in the language they actually thought in — Toulouse in 1229, Tarragona in 1234, Oxford in 1408. No universal papal or conciliar ban on vernacular Scripture ever existed, and claiming one would overstate the record. The pattern in these rulings still repeats too plainly to miss: wherever ordinary people started reading Scripture in a language they thought in, a ruling followed limiting their access to it. Valdes of Lyons commissioned vernacular translations and was excommunicated. Wycliffe drove the first complete English Bible and was condemned after his death, his bones exhumed and burned. Jan Hus was burned alive after being promised safe conduct.

Every one of those four changes moves in the same direction. Each takes the responsibility for knowing what Scripture says and hands it upward — to an office, to a lineage, to a credential, to a council — and each one makes the ordinary believer a recipient rather than a reader. That's a mechanism by which a doctrine can be dropped and stay dropped. And the tragedy in it is not that the men holding those positions were all frauds. Many were sincere. A sincere man passing along what another sincere man handed him can carry an error for fifteen hundred years without anyone once going back to check.

## Doctrine formalized under pressure

The same window that produced the institutional merger produced a doctrinal consolidation. In 382, two years after Theodosius's edict, a formal Old and New Testament canon list first took shape in the West at the Council of Rome under Damasus I — authority, institutional standing, and canon settling within the same two years, under the same political conditions.

The pattern set there recurs. Leo I articulated papal primacy as formal doctrine in the mid-fifth century. Several sources credit the pontificate of Gregory I (590-604) with the teaching that became purgatory; the Council of Lyon confirmed purgatory as settled doctrine in 1274, nearly seven centuries later. The Fourth Lateran Council adopted "transubstantiation" as the term for what occurs in communion in 1215. Trent declared church tradition co-equal in authority with Scripture and bindingly dogmatized the deuterocanonical books for the first time (1545-1563). The First Vatican Council defined papal infallibility (1869-1870). The Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption were declared by papal authority alone, in 1854 and 1950.

In each case a doctrine's binding definition arrived centuries — in several cases well over a millennium — after anything resembling direct New Testament grounding, and arrived under institutional or defensive pressure rather than out of renewed engagement with the text. Which is the leaven's own logic run forward through history. A corrupting agent hidden in the meal doesn't announce itself. It gets recognized by the deterioration it leaves behind, and then ratified by decree centuries later instead of caught in the moment by exegesis.

## A case study: indulgences, the Fuggers, and Trent

One episode shows the mechanism in detail, though the popular version of it needs correcting first. The Medici banking house that had once managed papal accounts collapsed and was liquidated in 1494, nearly twenty years before Giovanni de' Medici became Pope Leo X in 1513; there was no Medici bank propping up the papacy during his pontificate. What did happen is more directly damning. Leo X inherited a full treasury and drained it within roughly eight years on wars, family enrichment, and art patronage, then moved to expand indulgence sales to cover the shortfall and help finish St. Peter's.

The 1517 scandal that provoked Luther involved a different banking house entirely — the Fuggers, from whom Albrecht of Brandenburg had borrowed heavily to purchase his archbishopric. The indulgence sales Leo authorized in Germany, marketed aggressively by Johann Tetzel, were structured so that half repaid Albrecht's debt to the Fuggers and half funded Rome. That is what the Ninety-Five Theses answered. And Trent, convening under Paul III nearly three decades later (1545-1563), was the institution's delayed reckoning with the rupture Leo X's spending had triggered.

The doctrinal stakes of that reckoning were direct. Among the books Trent dogmatized for the first time as binding Scripture is 2 Maccabees, whose account of prayers offered for the dead (2 Macc. 12:44-45) had long supplied the textual basis for purgatory — the doctrine the indulgence system existed to address. Luther had already moved those books out of the Old Testament proper in his German translation and into a separate section headed "Apocrypha," reviving a distinction Jerome himself had drawn eleven centuries earlier: Jerome, translating the Vulgate around 405, called

Maccabees, Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, and Sirach apocrypha and doubted their canonical standing even while including them in deference to established practice. Trent's binding dogmatization of exactly those books, in the decades right after Luther's rejection of both the books and the doctrine they supported, is hard to read as anything but reactive — doctrine hardened because a challenged revenue practice needed cover, not because fresh study of the text had newly confirmed it.

## Not a Catholic pattern only

None of this is a brief against Rome. The identical dynamic shows up on the Protestant side of the ledger, and this series documents one instance of it at length in its paper on authority: the King James Bible did not come out of a theologically neutral process. James I commissioned it partly to sideline the Puritan-favored Geneva Bible, whose marginal notes he considered politically seditious, and the translation rules he approved in 1604 forbade marginal notes and required that "the old ecclesiastical words" be kept — "church" rather than "congregation" for *ekklesia* — because those renderings supported the structure of bishops he headed. Institutional and political concerns shaped what readers received as simply "the text" — at the level of translation this time rather than doctrine. The leaven crosses the Reformation divide without slowing down.

## Where the record stands now

Walk into almost any congregation in the country and listen for teaching on the coming kingdom, the conditions for entering it, and what is at stake for a Christian concerning it. The listening is the same in a fundamental church and a liberal one. Neither proclaims that message, and in most cases neither will have anything to do with it when it's raised.

That silence is the one thing the two have in common, and it has a first-century parallel. When Jesus was here the first time there were two main religious parties in Israel, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and they were worlds apart on nearly everything in their theology. On the message of the proffered kingdom they were one. Neither would have any part in it. Jesus named them together for exactly that reason, in one phrase, as one leaven (Matt. 16:6, 11-12).

So a Christian today can attend faithfully for thirty years, hear the Scriptures read every week, and never once be handed the thing the first four parables of Matthew 13 were given to explain. Those occupying the pulpit are silent on it, and those in the pew know little to nothing about it. When it does surface, the response is usually to put it down quickly, because the message runs against the training the man in the pulpit received.

Which is what the fourth parable said would be there at the end: not an institution that opposes the word of the kingdom, but one in which the word of the kingdom cannot be found.

# Where They Align

Set the position back alongside the three traditions — Reformed/Calvinist, Wesleyan/Arminian, and Catholic — and the common ground runs wider than the disagreements suggest. Four points:

- **All three hold that Scripture warns of corruption arising inside the visible church, not only outside it.** Peter says false teachers will rise among the people, bringing in destructive heresies (2 Pet. 2:1-3); Jude writes about men who crept in unnoticed (Jude 3-4); Paul tells the Ephesian elders the danger will come from among themselves (Acts 20:29-30). No

tradition compared here disputes any of that. The disagreement is over whether the two parables in Matthew 13 are a statement of that danger or a statement of something else.

- **All three distinguish, in some form, between the visible body and something more essential inside it.** The Reformed do it most formally, with the invisible church of the elect inside the visible church of professors. The Wesleyan tradition does it as a distinction between real and nominal Christianity, and Wesley preached it hard. Catholic teaching does it by separating the Church's own holiness from the sin of her members (CCC 827). That is structural agreement with the wheat-and-tares reading, whatever is made of the parables that follow it.
- **No tradition here denies that specific historical episodes were genuine corruption needing correction.** The sale of indulgences stands at the head of the list. The Reformation is Protestantism's own testimony on the point, and Trent's reform decrees are Rome's.
- **All three agree that leaven is used negatively everywhere else Scripture uses it figuratively.** Nobody disputes the leaven of the Pharisees, or Paul's use of the figure at Corinth and in Galatia. The entire dispute over leaven's sense is confined to two verses, Matthew 13:33 and Luke 13:21.

That's a substantial amount of agreement, and it means the disagreement that follows is narrower than it first appears. Nobody here is defending the institution's record wholesale, and nobody is claiming leaven is generally a good thing. The question is what two short parables are about.

# Where They Diverge, and Why

## The fork: the kingdom, or the message about it

Everything traces back to what "the kingdom of heaven" names in Matthew 13:31 and 13:33.

Read the phrase as the visible institutional church — the present, imperfect form of Christ's kingdom on earth — and growth is blessing by definition. A seed became a tree, the tree fills the earth, the birds have somewhere to go, and the leaven worked all the way through the batch. On that reading the only possible verdict on two thousand years of expansion is gratitude.

Read it instead as what the parables' own sequence makes it — the message about a kingdom still future, named by Jesus in the first parable of that day as "the word of the kingdom" (Matt. 13:19) — and the same details read the opposite way. Growth beyond a thing's own kind is deformity. Leaven worked all the way through a batch is a batch that cannot be offered.

That is the whole fork, and every other disagreement in this paper runs back to it.

## Leaven in two verses against leaven everywhere else

Where the traditions read the leaven positively, they do it on the strength of a figure's property: a small amount changing an entire mass. The property is real, and Scripture does use it — "a little leaven leavens the whole lump," twice, from Paul (1 Cor. 5:6; Gal. 5:9).

Both times he says it to name a disaster.

So the divergence here is about method as much as meaning. A symbol Scripture has used one way from Genesis through the epistles, under a law that cut a man off from the nation for having it in his house, is given the opposite sense in two verses — and given it not because either verse says so,

but because the opening line of the parable was taken to require it. The position in this paper lets the established usage govern the two verses rather than letting the two verses overturn the usage. That is not a preference for gloom. It is Scripture read as its own commentary, precept upon precept, line upon line (Isa. 28:9-10).

## Growth as such is not the accusation

The critique here is narrower than it usually gets heard.

The claim is not that the visible church grew, and not that growth is inherently suspect. Word of the Kingdom theology does not read numerical increase as corruption; the first parable's good ground produces a hundredfold, sixtyfold, thirtyfold, and that is the outcome Jesus wanted (Matt. 13:23). The claim is specific: the growth in Matthew 13:31-32 is growth past the plant's own kind, flagged by the parable itself in the one sentence where "greater than the herbs" and "becomes a tree" sit side by side — and what the tree stands for, everywhere Scripture uses it, is a national power. That transformation has a date and a mechanism, which is what makes it a claim about history rather than a mood about institutions.

## Indefectibility against a claim history can check

Catholic teaching's position on these parables is secured by something prior to the parables. If the Church cannot bind the faithful to doctrinal error, then no episode in the record — however documented, however reactive, however plainly driven by money or politics — can count as evidence that her teaching was corrupted. The conclusion is protected before the evidence arrives.

The reading in this paper has no such protection, and it shouldn't want any. It says specific things that can be checked: that tree symbolism in Scripture signifies national power, that leaven signifies corruption, that a called-out people became a political entity in the fourth century on datable terms, and that the particular doctrine the parable names as the leaven's target is not taught across institutional Christianity today. Each of those could be shown false. Show tree symbolism running positive apart from a kingdom God Himself establishes, or produce a figurative use of leaven that means something good, or find the word of the kingdom widely taught in the churches of the land, and the reading is in trouble.

## Doctrine received is not exempt from testing

One more divergence, and it reaches past institutions to individuals.

The leaven in Matthew 13:33 is hidden in meal — not in a building, not in a hierarchy, not in a denominational structure, but in the material bread is made from. What the parable describes being corrupted is teaching: content, the substance of what is believed and passed on. A denomination can carry that corruption by formally codifying it, and a single Christian can carry it by simply having received it and never gone back to check.

Which means length and breadth of belief prove nothing by themselves. A doctrine held by every tradition compared in this paper, unchanged for centuries, accepted without controversy by millions of sincere people, is not for those reasons out of reach of this critique. The governing method of this whole series already requires that much: Scripture is its own best commentary,

precept compared with precept, line upon line, here a little and there a little (Isa. 28:9-10), however widely or however long a given reading has been held since. And Jesus commends the Ephesians for exactly this — they "tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars" (Rev. 2:2). What they tested was a claim, not a credential. The standard applies with full force to a doctrine an ordinary Christian has received and never once weighed against the text, whether it reached him through a confession, a respected teacher, or the quiet assumption that something so commonly believed could hardly be wrong.

# Answering the Objections

## Objection One: Scripture already has a tree like this, and it is a good thing

**The charge.** Ezekiel 17 has God promising to plant a tender sprig that becomes "a majestic cedar," with birds of every sort dwelling "in the shadow of its branches" (Ezek. 17:23). Daniel 4 has a tree reaching to the heavens with birds in its branches and all flesh fed from it. A small planting that becomes a great tree sheltering birds is therefore a figure Scripture already uses, and uses of a kingdom God Himself establishes. Jesus was drawing on a picture His hearers knew, in the sense they knew it — which makes the mustard seed a promise and the birds the Gentiles streaming in.

**The answer.** The objection is right about the figure, and that's what settles the matter. In Ezekiel 17 the tree is a kingdom. In Daniel 4 the tree is a kingdom, and Daniel says whose: "It is you, O king" (Dan. 4:22). In Ezekiel 31 the tree is a kingdom, Assyria, and God cuts it down (Ezek. 31:3-6, 12). In Judges 9 the trees are kingdoms bidding for a crown (Judg. 9:8-15). The figure means *dominion*, consistently, whether the dominion in view is one God plants or one He fells.

So the question the objection raises is not whether a tree can be a good thing. It's *whose* dominion, and *when*. The tree of Ezekiel 17 is planted by God, on the mountain height of Israel, in a prophecy of the kingdom still to come. Nothing in this paper disputes that a tree is the right figure for that kingdom. What the parable shows is a mustard plant becoming a dominion in the present age, in the sphere a different ruler presently holds (Eph. 2:2; Eph. 6:12; Dan. 10:12-21) — taking in this age the very thing Ezekiel 17 promises in the next. Granting the objection's reading of the figure is what makes the parable readable. A called-out people was never meant to be a dominion yet.

And one detail the objection has to account for. Ezekiel's cedar is planted by God and grows into what God made it to be. Matthew's mustard seed grows into something else — a plant that outgrows its kind, which Ezekiel's cedar never does. The parable goes out of its way to say so.

## Objection Two: the parable's own first line names the kingdom, not a message about it

**The charge.** "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed." That is the parable's own subject, stated by Jesus in the first clause. Substituting "the message of the kingdom" for "the kingdom" replaces what the text says with what an interpretation needs it to say, and once that substitution is allowed, a reader can make these parables mean nearly anything.

**The answer.** The formula is a parable formula, and Jesus uses it of things the kingdom manifestly is not. The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed (Matt. 13:24), like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls (13:45), like a dragnet (13:47), like a householder (13:52), like a king who settled accounts with his servants (18:23), like a landowner hiring at daybreak (20:1), like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out (25:1). The kingdom is not a merchant or a net or ten young women. In every case the formula introduces a comparison that opens up some aspect of the kingdom matter, and the surrounding material tells the reader which aspect.

Here the surrounding material could hardly be plainer. Jesus explained the first parable of the day Himself and named what was being sown: "the word of the kingdom" (Matt. 13:19). He then chained the next three to it — "another parable," three times (13:24, 31, 33) — rather than restarting the subject. And the realm itself will not serve as the subject, because the realm is not in the condition the parables describe. The kingdom of the heavens has a present occupant (Eph. 6:12; Dan. 10:12-21). It is not a seed, it is not growing, and it is not awaiting leaven. It is awaiting a change of hands.

So the reading does not replace the kingdom with a message. It takes the subject Jesus named when He explained the first parable and carries it through the three He attached to it.

## Objection Three: a reading this pessimistic cannot be tested

**The charge.** A framework that interprets the church's growth as corruption, its doctrinal definitions as corruption, and the absence of its own distinctive teaching as the proof of corruption has arranged things so that nothing can count against it. Success is evidence, failure is evidence, and silence is evidence. That is not exegesis. It is a closed loop.

**The answer.** The loop is open at four points, and each one is a claim about something outside the framework.

The first is lexical and historical: that tree symbolism in Scripture signifies national or political power. That's checkable passage by passage, and the objection's own best texts (Ezek. 17; Dan. 4) confirm it rather than breaking it.

The second is also lexical: that leaven figuratively signifies corruption. One positive figurative use anywhere in Scripture would damage the reading badly. The commanded leaven in Leviticus 7:13, Leviticus 23:17, and Amos 4:5 is the place to look, and what's found there is leavened bread beside a blood sacrifice and kept off the altar (Lev. 2:12) — the symbol intact, not reversed.

The third is datable: that a called-out people became enmeshed in governmental authority in the fourth century. Those dates are 380 and 395, and the edicts say what they say.

The fourth is observable right now: that the word of the kingdom is not taught across institutional Christianity. That one can be checked this Sunday, in any building, by listening.

A reading that rests on four claims of that kind is not a closed loop. Indefectibility is a closed loop, and it's held as a doctrine rather than offered as an argument.

## Objection Four: if the whole lump is leavened, how can you claim to have the message?

**The charge.** The parable says the leaven worked "till it was all leavened." If that's true, and if it has already happened, then whoever is making this argument is inside the leavened lump along with everyone else, and his teaching is as corrupted as what he is criticizing. The claim refutes itself the moment it's made.

**The answer.** The objection reads the parable as though the leaven had gotten into the Scriptures. It did not. What the parables describe is the corruption of a message *as it is proclaimed and held in Christendom* — the teaching, the preaching, the thing a man in a pew is handed. The text itself sits open on the table, in his own language, in print, in a way no Christian in the fourteenth century could have imagined. A corrupted body of teaching and an available text are two different things, and the second is why recovery is possible at all.

Which is exactly the shape of Christ's own instruction at the end of the seventh letter. He does not tell the man who hears to go find an unleavened assembly, because there isn't one. He stands at the door and says, "if anyone hears My voice and opens the door" (Rev. 3:20) — singular, individual, inside a church that left Him outside. Recovery in that letter is never institutional. It is one man at a time, hearing and opening.

And the claim in this paper is submitted to the same test it applies to everyone else. The Bereans searched the Scriptures daily to see whether what Paul preached was so, and Luke calls them more fair-minded for it (Acts 17:11). They were auditing an apostle. Nothing in this series asks for gentler treatment than that, and a reader who takes these two parables back to the text and finds this reading wanting is doing precisely what this paper is asking him to do.

## Objection Five: this amounts to a rejection of Christian fellowship

**The charge.** A critique of institutional Christianity this severe functions, whatever its intentions, as a call to withdraw. It isolates believers from the very assemblies where the New Testament tells them to gather — "not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together" (Heb. 10:25) — and it does so on the strength of a text often read as commanding exactly that separation: "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14).

**The answer.** That text turns on one word, and the word is usually assumed rather than checked.

The Greek behind "unbelievers" is *apistos* — *pistos*, "faithful" or "believing," with the negative prefix *a-* on the front. Faithless. Unbelieving. Nothing in the word specifies an unsaved person. It specifies a person, saved or not, who is not presently exercising faith.

Paul's own usage two chapters earlier settles it. He writes that the gospel is veiled "to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe" (2 Cor. 4:3-4) — and that last phrase is *apistos*. Read as a description of the unsaved in general, that line is unremarkable. But Paul has just told the reader who he means. The veil in question is Moses' veil, and the minds in question are Israel's: "even to this day, when Moses is read, the veil is taken away" only when a man turns to the Lord (2 Cor. 3:14-16). Israel at Christ's first coming was a people God had already redeemed, each one possessing spiritual life through the substitutionary

provision God had always required, fully acceptable to Him until the true Lamb was slain. Their unbelief was not the unbelief of the unsaved. It was a redeemed nation refusing to believe that Jesus was the One the promises had been pointing at. So "unbelieving," in Paul's own hand in the same letter, names a condition rather than a class.

Hebrews says it more bluntly still, about the generation that came out of Egypt. Those people had "all passed through the sea," had "all eaten the same spiritual food," and had "all drunk the same spiritual drink" (1 Cor. 10:1-4). And the writer of Hebrews says to Christians, "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God" (Heb. 3:12), and then names what that generation forfeited: "So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief" (Heb. 3:19). They did not lose their standing before God. They lost the land — an inheritance God had promised them and they never set foot in.

So *apistos* is not a synonym for the unsaved person outside the assembly. It names anyone, saved or unsaved, inside institutional Christianity or out of it, who is presently walking in faithlessness instead of trust and obedience. Which means 2 Corinthians 6:14 is a warning about close partnership with faithlessness and lawlessness wherever it is found, and not a mandate to separate from fellow Christians because they remain inside a corrupted institution.

The critique in this paper was never a call to withdraw, and the seventh letter forecloses the possibility anyway. Christ addresses the Laodiceans as loved — "as many as I love, I rebuke and chasten" (Rev. 3:19) — and invites any one of them to open the door to Him, where they are, in the church they're in. What He asks for is discernment inside the assembly, which is the thing He commended at Ephesus (Rev. 2:2), and a renewed proclamation of the one doctrine the leaven was shown attacking. He does not ask anyone to leave.

## Why It Matters

Three things follow from this reading, and the first two are reasons the rest of this series exists.

**It explains an absence.** The near-total silence on kingdom reward and kingdom entrance across institutional Christianity is the thing that provokes this whole project, and the question it raises is how a subject so prominent in the New Testament letters came to be missing from the churches those letters were written to. The parable of the leaven answers that question, and the answer is not that everyone got careless. One body of teaching was targeted, by men inside the assemblies, early, quietly, and with complete success.

**It explains why the absence stayed.** A doctrine doesn't vanish on its own; it needs a structure that keeps anyone from going back to check. Four changes built exactly that structure, and each of them took the responsibility for knowing what Scripture says and handed it upward. That is why an error can ride for centuries on nothing but sincerity.

**It puts the work on the reader.** If the leaven got into teaching rather than into the text, then the remedy is in the text, and it's available. That is not a small thing to say to a Christian who has sat under faithful-sounding preaching for decades and feels, without being able to name why, that the Sunday morning he knows and the New Testament he reads are not obviously the same thing. The feeling is worth trusting. The parable predicted it, and the door in Laodicea is opened one man at a time.

## Conclusion

Two parables, four verses, spoken on the day Israel's leaders credited the work of God to Satan and told to men who didn't yet know the church would exist. A mustard seed outgrows its own kind and becomes a tree, which no mustard plant has ever been, and the birds that had been stealing seed off the path move into its branches. A woman hides leaven in the meal that bread is made from, and works it through until the whole batch has risen.

Mark tells the first one without the word "tree" and keeps the shade a kingdom casts. Luke tells both out of a quarrel in a synagogue, a chapter after defining leaven as hypocrisy, and follows them with men standing outside a shut door. Matthew calls leaven doctrine, Mark sets it beside a politician, Luke calls it hypocrisy, and Paul uses it twice of things that ruin churches. Scripture never once uses it of something good.

Then history did what the parables said it would. A people that had been illegal for three centuries and had grown under persecution was made the official religion of an empire in 380, and found itself holding exactly the kind of power a tree stands for. Over the centuries that followed, authority over what was true moved from a text any assembly could hear read to an office, a lineage, a credential, and a council — and the message those first four parables were given to explain stopped being taught, then stopped being known, and then stopped being recognized when it was raised.

The disagreement with mainstream tradition here is not about whether Scripture warns against corruption inside the visible church. Every tradition in this paper affirms that it does. It is about whether these two parables are that warning, and whether the record since confirms it.

And it's about what a Christian does next, which the seventh letter settles without any help from this paper. He does not go looking for a clean assembly. He hears, and he opens the door.

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*Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.*