

The Parable of the Apple Trees

Craig Ott;Gene Wilson. Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication. Kindle Edition.

Once upon a time there was a land where many people were starving. It was a terrible time of suffering, and no one seemed to know what to do. The apple trees of the town were moved with compassion, especially as they saw the many hungry children with gaunt faces. They decided that they could be part of the solution. Each tree would try to increase its harvest to provide more food.

One particular tree had an especially great vision to become the largest and most productive tree that could feed hundreds of people. He determined to extend his branches wider and sink his roots deeper. And he did. He grew greater and stronger, with broad and graceful branches. His trunk was stately as a Corinthian column, his roots sinuous and muscular. He became very productive, the envy of all other apple trees, doubling, even tripling, the number of apples that he could grow, feeding more and more people. And the apples that he bore were the tastiest and largest apples to be found. He was also very concerned that no fruit go to waste. So he developed a way to hold on to his fruit until the harvesters arrived, not letting a single apple drop to the ground. It was a brilliant plan. Many children were nourished and survived the winter thanks to him.

This tree became quite a sensation among apple growers and was admired by everyone in town for his commitment to feeding the hungry. Soon apple growers were coming from far and wide to discover how this tree could produce so much and such wonderful fruit. He became known as "Mega-tree."

But Mega-tree gradually became frustrated. His branches grew so wide and heavy that each year when the fall winds would blow large branches would crack. Some would come crashing down, wasting precious fruit and slowing production. These would have to be regrown if the same number of apples were to be harvested next year. One year the winds were so strong, and Mega-tree had grown so large, that he was nearly uprooted altogether. That gave him a pretty big scare. But what disturbed Mega-tree most was his realization that he had reached his productive capacity. No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't increase production any more. And worst of all, he realized that there were many hungry people he still could not feed.

Mega-tree remained faithful to his task and continued to produce many good apples, but the once-grand vision faded and his joy began to wane. Over time his trunk became gnarled, and his fruit wasn't quite as sweet as in the early years. Apple growers stopped visiting him and looked for other large, productive trees from whom they could learn.

Meanwhile there was another apple tree in town. This tree was also moved with compassion and wanted to feed as many hungry people as possible, but he was rather small and unseemly. His fruit was not very sweet, and sometimes it was even a bit wormy. And he didn't produce a tenth of the harvest that Mega-tree produced. He was embarrassed by the fact that his fruit often fell to the ground and rotted before it could be harvested, so of the little fruit that he did bear, less still went to feed the hungry. Apple growers of course took no notice of him and would walk right past him on the way to visit Mega-tree. So unbeautiful was this tree that he received the nickname "Twiggy."

Twiggy began to feel sorry for himself. "You're a poor excuse for a tree," he would woefully say to himself over and over, shaking his boughs sadly. "You'll never be able to feed many of the hungry." Looking over at the elegant and expansive branches of Mega-tree, he'd see the many crates of large, beautiful apples being harvested, and that made him feel even more like a failure. It also made him a bit jealous, which he didn't like to admit to himself. Sometimes he'd make excuses for himself: "It's the soil. If I had the soil that Mega-tree has, I could do what he does." But he knew in his heart it wasn't really true.

One day as Twiggy's eyes were cast toward the ground in a sulk, he noticed something quite odd. There not far from his roots grew a little plant. Upon closer inspection, it proved in fact to be a little baby apple tree. At first he thought, "Oh no! That's just what I need now-someone with whom I have to share this lousy, unfertile soil! I'll probably bear even less fruit once he grows up. His roots will probably get tangled with mine. He might even block my sunlight."

Twiggy's resentment grew toward both Mega-tree and Baby-tree until suddenly he was struck by a thought, as if struck by lightning (and for a tree that's a pretty shocking experience). He realized that Baby-tree was a result of one of Twiggy's apples falling to the ground. As if that thought wasn't earthshaking enough, another followed quickly: "If I just keep letting some of my apples fall so that their seeds grow into trees, there could be lots of new apple trees bearing fruit and feeding many more people." Though Twiggy was not very good at math, he knew enough to reason, "In fact, the sum of all those apples on trees growing from my seeds will be more, yes, much more, than even Mega-tree is producing. We could feed many more people."

"But wait!" Twiggy mused further. "What if my baby trees also let some of their apples fall to the ground? Then they would grow into even more new trees bearing even more fruit and feeding even more people. And then those trees could also drop some fruit, and then ... by golly, we could feed the whole world at that rate!" And so it was that Twiggy gladly began letting some of his apples fall to the ground. Some passersby sneered, "How wasteful! You'll never amount to anything." Or they jeered, "Why don't you take a lesson from Mega-tree?" But Twiggy just kept on quietly, faithfully letting some apples fall, and as he had hoped, some of his offspring followed his example. Soon enough there were apple trees growing throughout the whole land. And though none of the new trees ever was as impressive as Mega-tree, no children or grownups ever needed to go hungry in that town.

The moral of the story: If you want to feed more people, don't merely grow more apples, bigger apples, and sweeter apples; rather, plant more apple trees that in turn can reproduce yet more apple trees to grow exponentially more fruit. And if we want to feed a spiritually hungry world, we must seek to not merely grow bigger and better churches that reach more people (though that is certainly a good thing to do) but to plant churches that in turn reproduce more churches, that reach exponentially more people.