

ARE WE THERE YET?

The Finish Lines Jesus Never Gave Us

When does a tree accomplish its mission?

Is it when the seed first breaks open beneath the soil? When the first green shoot pushes through the surface? When the sapling survives enough seasons to become a mature tree? When the tree produces its first fruit? Or is it when that fruit releases another seed into the soil?



Surely reproduction means we have arrived. Except now another tree begins to grow.

So is the mission accomplished when that tree reaches maturity? When it produces fruit of its own? When its seeds produce more trees? What happens when those trees begin reproducing? Eventually, what began as a single seed becomes a forest.

So when, exactly, did the first tree accomplish its mission?

We Like Finish Lines

There is something deeply satisfying about arriving. We like knowing where we are going, what success looks like, and when we will finally be able to say, “*We did it.*”

The Church has developed plenty of ways to recognize arrival. We measure attendance, financial stability, organizational strength, biblical knowledge, leadership development, and reproduction. These measurements tell us useful things. But somewhere along the way, some of our measurements became definitions of maturity.

And I wonder if we have been starting the celebration too early. I also wonder if the things we celebrate have something in common.

They often celebrate the self.

The Self-Sufficient Church

For generations, one of the commonly expressed goals of missionary church development has been for a church to become *self-supporting*, *self-governing*, and *self-propagating*.

There are understandable reasons for this. A new church shouldn't remain financially dependent upon the people who started it forever. Local people should eventually lead it. Healthy Kingdom life should reproduce.

But listen again to the language: *self*-supporting, *self*-governing, *self*-propagating. There it is three times.

Self

Somewhere along the way, independence became one of our measurements of maturity. The church has grown up when it no longer needs outside support. It funds itself. Leads itself. Reproduces itself. It has arrived.

But that creates an interesting tension with Jesus.

Jesus used trees, seeds, soil, vines, branches, fruit, vineyards, fields, and harvests to describe the Kingdom. Nothing in those pictures is self-sustaining.

A tree may appear remarkably independent standing alone in a field, but beneath the surface it is completely dependent. It needs soil, water, sunlight, nutrients, and an ecosystem it did not create and cannot control. And here's what fascinates me: the tree doesn't become less dependent as it matures.

A hundred-year-old tree is every bit as dependent upon water as the sapling beside it. Its size doesn't eliminate its dependence. Its strength doesn't eliminate its dependence. Its fruitfulness doesn't eliminate its dependence. Its ability to reproduce doesn't eliminate its dependence.

Maturity never eliminates dependence.

Jesus described our relationship with Him in much the same way: *"I am the vine; you are the branches."* Then He said something that should disrupt any definition of Kingdom maturity centered on self-sufficiency: *"Apart from me you can do nothing."*

The branch never graduates from the vine. Kingdom maturity never reaches the point where we say to Jesus, *"I can take it from here."*

The Accomplished Christian

Churches aren't the only ones we teach to arrive. We do something similar with people. And I believe we begin teaching it much earlier than we realize.

Think about how many children first learn Scripture. Programs like Awana have encouraged generations of children to memorize Bible verses. There is something deeply worthwhile about putting Scripture into the mind and heart of a child.

A child memorizes a verse and receives a badge, patch, award, or some other recognition. We celebrate because they remembered the words.

But imagine that child memorizing, *“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”* Learning those words matters. But what happens the next day when another child humiliates them at school? That’s where the words they memorized have an opportunity to become something more.

Or imagine a child memorizing a passage about kindness and then noticing the lonely kid sitting by himself at lunch. Knowing the verse is one thing. Walking across the cafeteria is another.

We know how to celebrate the first one. I’m not sure we have learned how to celebrate the second.

Then those children grow up. The badges disappear, but the measurement often remains.

Now we attend Bible studies. We fill notebooks. We complete discipleship curricula. We listen to sermons. We read Christian books. We study theology. We learn Christian vocabulary. We become increasingly capable of discussing Scripture with other people who know Scripture.

Eventually, we begin describing someone who has accumulated enough of this knowledge as a *“mature Christian.”*

Once again, look at where the evidence of maturity resides: *I know. I studied. I memorized. I completed. I understand. I can explain.* The self has accumulated something.

A person may have followed Jesus for thirty years. They know the stories. They know the doctrines. They know where to find the verses. They know the vocabulary. They have attended hundreds of Bible studies and listened to thousands of sermons.

But are they growing more loving, more patient, more generous, more peaceful, more forgiving, more compassionate, and more attentive to people everyone else overlooks?

What if someone knows considerably more about Jesus than they did twenty years ago but looks surprisingly little more like Him?

At some point, what we know is supposed to become who we are.

Don’t Mistake the Blossom for the Fruit

This is where the tree helps me again.

A blossom is worth celebrating. It is beautiful. It tells us something is happening. It is evidence of life. But a blossom isn’t fruit.

Scripture memorization is a blossom. Bible study is a blossom. Theological understanding is a blossom. Completing a discipleship course is a blossom. They are worth celebrating because something valuable is happening.

But don't mistake the blossom for the fruit.

Jesus didn't say, "*You will recognize them by how much they know.*" He pointed toward fruit. Paul later gave us language for what that fruit looks like: **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.**

Those aren't subjects to master. They are evidence of transformation.

Love becomes more than something I can define. Patience becomes more than something I have studied. Forgiveness becomes more than a doctrine I believe. Generosity becomes more than a biblical principle I agree with. They become visible in the way I live.

And even then, I don't get to point at the fruit and celebrate what an accomplished Christian I have become. The branch doesn't produce fruit because it finally learned how to do it by itself.

The fruit is evidence that the branch remains connected to the vine.

Two Finish Lines. The Same Self.

Now the connection becomes harder to ignore.

At the institutional level, we celebrate the self-sufficient church. At the individual level, we celebrate the knowledgeable Christian. One says, "*Look what we are now capable of sustaining.*" The other says, "*Look how much I now know.*"

Both are easily measured. Both are easily recognized. Both give us something visible to celebrate. **And both risk placing the self at the center of our understanding of maturity.**

Jesus points us again and again to somewhere else: "*Apart from me you can do nothing.*"

Kingdom maturity isn't the development of an increasingly accomplished self. It is the transformation of a life increasingly dependent upon Jesus.

That dependence produces something: fruit. And fruit changes everything.

Fruit Isn't the Finish Line Either

Now look at the tree again. The seed disappears beneath the soil. Something begins growing. Eventually it becomes visible. Roots deepen. Branches spread. Blossoms appear. Fruit grows.

And inside the fruit are seeds, which means even fruit isn't the finish line. Fruit contains another beginning.

The seed falls into the soil. Another tree begins. That tree grows in a place the original tree may never reach. It encounters different soil, different conditions, different seasons. Eventually it produces fruit of its own. More seeds fall. More trees grow.

Before long, you aren't looking at a tree anymore. You're looking at a forest. And nobody standing in the middle of that forest knows which tree started it.

I love that.

The original tree never needed to become self-sufficient. It needed to remain connected to the source of its life long enough to receive life and give life away.

Are We There Yet?

Maybe that's the wrong question.

We want to know when someone has become a mature Christian. We want to know when the church has become sustainable. We want to know when the ministry has succeeded. We want to know when multiplication has happened.

We want a place called there.

So we create finish lines. Memorize the verse. Complete the study. Learn the theology. Become self-supporting. Become self-governing. Become self-propagating. Produce fruit. Reproduce.

We celebrate when we've made it.

Except the Kingdom keeps moving.

Dependence produces transformation. Transformation produces fruit. Fruit contains seeds. Seeds create new beginnings.

Those beginnings require fresh dependence upon Jesus. Again and again and again.

The Kingdom isn't moving toward an increasingly accomplished self. It is producing people increasingly transformed into the likeness of Jesus and increasingly dependent upon Him for the life they give away.

A Forest Has No Finish Line

Eventually the original tree disappears. It may have produced thousands of seeds. Some never grew. Some became saplings. Some became mature trees. Some produced thousands more seeds that traveled farther than the branches of the original tree ever reached.

Eventually there is life everywhere. The original tree doesn't get the credit. The forest doesn't carry its name. And the life continues.

So when does a tree accomplish its mission?

Maybe the question itself reveals how much we love destinations.

A tree simply keeps receiving life and giving life away. It grows. It blossoms. It bears fruit. It releases seeds. And somewhere beyond the reach of its branches, another beginning appears.

So celebrate the sprout. Celebrate the blossom. Celebrate the fruit. Celebrate the seeds. Just don't mistake any of them for the finish line.

Because in the Kingdom, maturity never reaches the point where we say to Jesus, "I can take it from here."

We never mature beyond dependence. We mature deeper into it.