

November 11, 2007

What is God Doing Underground and When will We See It?

A recent newspaper article reported that scientists now believe they understand the origins of the HIV virus and how it came to the United States. A lot of false rumors have circulated over the years that they hope to correct.

The best evidence now suggests that the HIV virus jumped from chimpanzees to humans, possibly when hunters in Africa butchered animals infected with a version of the virus. This virus began to proliferate in Africans around 1930. Researchers believe they have 99.8% certainty that the virus moved from Africa to Haiti and then to the United States.

The virus appeared in Haiti around 1966. It may have traveled to Haiti after the Democratic Republic of Congo won its independence in 1960 and many Haitians sought work there. There were a lot of Haitian teachers in the Congo, and it is probable that some of them brought the virus back home with them.

The HIV virus first appeared in the United States around 1969. Once it got into the U.S. population, Americans traveling to other countries and people traveling to America allowed it to flow to Europe, Canada, Latin America, Australia, Japan, and other parts of the world. The United States probably served as a worldwide hub for this spread.

The newspaper article concluded by saying that scientists now believe that HIV arrived in the United States much earlier than was previously thought. It takes as many as ten years after infection for most people to get sick, which would have allowed the virus to spread before health authorities became aware of it. The virus was “underground”, present among us, and we didn’t even know it.

In Mark 4:1-9, 26-34, Jesus tells some parables about the Kingdom of God being like a person who sows some seeds in the ground. Some of the seeds do not grow, some grow briefly, and some grow and produce quite a harvest. But, it doesn’t tell us how long the seeds are at work underground before any growth appears above ground. How long does it take to put down its root system, before it can begin to grow up? Does it stay underground ten years like the HIV virus does before it surfaces?

This raises some interesting questions for our missional church conversation. If you are a church leader or a ministry leader, how long will the seeds you are planting in your people remain underground before God brings them to the surface? Ten years? More? Less? If you are seeking to plant and spread missional seeds in a denominational system, how long will they remain underground before their fruits begin to surface? Ten years? More? Less? If you are seeking to be missional in the community in which you live, how long will your efforts remain underground before you begin to see results? Ten years? More? Less?

I believe the missional conversation can have a positive effect on the western church, but it is not a quick fix. It will not produce an overnight success. You can’t order it at a fast food drive-

through or cook it quickly in your microwave. And because so much of the growth takes place underground, we can't even see it happening. We have to operate by faith. We have to keep planting, fertilizing, cultivating, and watering, trusting in the Lord to produce the growth. If the HIV virus can travel in our bloodstream undetected for ten years before coming to the surface, perhaps God can get under our skin and work underground for years, before we begin to see its tangible results.

To what can we compare the kingdom of God? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches. (Mark 4:30-32).

Clark Cowden

Executive Presbyter

Presbytery of San Diego