



RESURGENCE

What Kind of Fruit Does Your Church Produce?

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The apostle Paul urged the Christians in Galatia, and therefore us, to “live by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16). He also urged them and us to be “led by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:18). And this way of living is clearly contrasted with “the works of the flesh” (Galatians 5:19). And, by way of even further contrast, we are all to grow in producing “the fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22). I have been thinking about how this section of Paul’s letter relates to the local church, particularly to how we *do* church.

I am not talking here about the church as a supra-temporal reality, or as the mystical body of Christ. I am speaking rather of the people being the flock of Christ in community together. I am thinking about the church in exactly the same way Paul writes about it in this Galatian letter; i.e., *as a real live group of people living life in relationship with one another by the life-giving presence and power of the Holy Spirit in their midst*. This is not about ecclesial theory or church doctrine, at least as we have tended to think about it, but rather about life together. When Paul says “you are led by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:18) the “you” that he refers to here is not a lonely, private, singular you-but rather the corporate “you” who are God’s people living in relationship with each another. If this were not true, then the whole passage makes no sense at all. In fact, the very way that we walk in the Spirit, live by the Spirit and then produce the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22) is always in relationship with each other. You can’t love without another person to love. You can’t practice kindness unless there is someone to be kind toward. And you can’t be patient unless there are people you could easily be impatient with.

What Fruit Does Your Church Produce?

Paul is very specific in this context about the fruit that a healthy church will produce. All our communities of faith, with no exception, should produce this particular fruit. God designed churches to be this way. And we can not be mistaken about what this fruit really is since Paul says it consists of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control” (Galatians 5:22-23a). There can’t be a law against such things (Galatians 5:23b) since nowhere in the world would anyone dare pass such a law, especially within a community of Christians. The idea is so absurd that Paul seems to use the very concept of the law here for full effect.

Therefore it seems self-evident that in Galatians 5 that the Holy Spirit is the true and real author of this fruit. It is God who transforms, thus it is the Spirit of God who renews us inside and fills us with love, joy, peace, etc. This is simply a way of saying that Christian character is produced by the Holy Spirit, not simply by the moral discipline and hard work of trying to do what God requires. But the Christian life can’t be one of libertinism, or simply letting go, since God is at work in the believer’s life and in the congregation to work *with* us, not in spite of us. (Some may doubt that the Spirit works in the congregation, but the New Testament presents the church as always fruitful and flawed to varying degrees!)

So my question is actually very simple: “What fruit does your church produce?”

The Greenhouse Effect

I would like to suggest that Dan Kimball gets this right in a recent blog that he wrote at www.vintagefaith.com. Dan, a bright young man who has thought deeply about these things, argues that the leadership of a particular church can "set the greenhouse" for what types of people the church will grow. In other words, leaders cannot produce fruit but we can set the temperature and the effects inside the greenhouse in order to get a maximum yield on a Galatians 5 kind of life.

Inwardly or Outwardly Focused?

Churches are all clearly in constant need of correction. This is why we read the kinds of things that the apostle wrote in his New Testament letters. Churches almost always move to one extreme or the other. Inwardly focused congregations will get very committed to what they do inside the church-worship, fellowship, Bible teaching, preaching, prayer, youth ministry, etc. Before long the leaders will begin argue that these are the really important things in good church life. When this church searches for a new pastor, or for new members for their leadership team (staff, elders, deacons, etc.), they are convinced that they need people committed to this inside agenda first. In this context leaders will always drive the agenda in one basic direction-inward. I can still hear older role-model pastors of my early days telling me that good solid preaching will *always* build a good solid church. "Stay in your study forty hours a week and work hard at preparing solid expositions for the pulpit. Men, nothing else matters quite as much as this." It all sounded like the great line from the movie *Field of Dreams*: "If you build, it they will come." The way to draw people was to make sure that the preacher had an effective ministry of exposition. The way the faithful minister equipped a church was to preach the right doctrine in the right way. We never questioned the conclusion to this assumption since we were insiders who embraced the notion so strongly.

Inwardly focused churches also tend to produce people with strong convictions about *many things*. Such people become very good at pointing out what is wrong everywhere else. They have strong opinions about many subjects, and most of what they believe is of almost equal importance in their arrangement of truth. They are often convinced that the way they do church has to be the right way, maybe even the way the apostles themselves did church. (It never seems to dawn on these folks how positively ludicrous this conclusion really is.)

Other churches will tend to become outwardly focused. Such churches will try to make everything they do relate to reaching those still outside. These churches, much like those in my own Baptist background, tend to produce shallow Christians who know very little Bible and even less theology. A spinoff of this approach is to major on the felt-needs of people as *the avenue* through which we reach them. Such an emphasis will eventually create consumer-oriented churches and consumerist converts. These church members will always choose the church that most satisfies their own desires. If their present church does not do this, they will find another one. Dan Kimball puts this into clear perspective well when he concluded: "All of these things can produce a people who aren't seeing themselves as missional Christians being the church throughout the week-but people who have faulty (in my opinion) definitions of the church and then they 'go to church' for meeting the faulty expectations we have set up for them to define 'church' by."

Creating the Greenhouse Effect That Will Produce Fruit

The question every church leader ought to ask here is rather simple: "Are we producing Galatians 5 fruit in our congregation?" If this criterion is applied faithfully, much of what we do falls way short of the purpose of God for our church. Asked in another way, Dan Kimball

says: "Do we see missional people with hearts broken for those who don't know Jesus? Do we see people caring about their neighbor, the poor and the sick?"

I am convinced, with Dan Kimball and a growing number of emergent church leaders in America, that there is a lot that we do, and believe, about "being the church" that actually hinders us from being the church *biblically*. These things produce people who "go to church" rather than people who seek to "be the church" in a New Testament sense. Kimball lists four such things in his blog. I will only mention two: pastors and preaching.

First, our idea of the pastor hinders us from being the church. Do not misunderstand me. There is no title that I relish more, no role that I respect more, than that of pastor. But we seem to have forgotten what the term actually means. A pastor is, by the meaning of the term itself, meant to be a shepherd. A shepherd is not someone who preaches better than everybody else, or a person who can manage and envision a larger and more effective church. A pastor is someone who *knows* sheep, who *loves* them and *spends time* with them. Remember, Jesus is our model here, and Jesus knew his people by name and cared for them personally. If we use the title pastor only for the one who gets up and preaches week-by-week, and only for such a professional person, we rob the term of its rich, full-orbed meaning. And we rob our people from knowing and finding pastors in their midst who can care for them and protect them. Frankly, this is a primary reason for why so many children from broken and dysfunctional homes are drawn to cult-like groups in our time. They need shepherding, and most churches will not give it to them. We are too busy doing all the things that we think are so important, thus we fail to train and release people who will shepherd others. We have turned pastoring into a profession, and in this system only a few professionals can really do the job.

Don't misunderstand me. I believe in a prepared and recognized ministry of Word and sacrament. I am an ordained minister of the gospel. I take this very seriously. The reaction against this emphasis is harmful in an entirely different set of ways. But I have never believed that the gifts of a pastor were pre-eminently resident in me alone. It is one thing to equip, to support, and to properly call an ordained minister. It is quite another to make these men and women the *only* people who can truly shepherd the church.

Second, our idea of preaching hinders the church from being missional as well. If you do any kind of serious study of the ministry of preaching in the New Testament, you will not find "pulpits" as we have them, or preachers as we have trained them. And you most assuredly will not find a special clergy who do all the work of preaching. What you find is example after example of men and women who "proclaimed" (which is preaching) the good news. In fact, preaching was *primarily* about communicating the faith to those outside the church and many apparently did it in various settings and ways.

To press this point a bit further, in terms of real preaching the goal in the early church was not, quite evidently, to create orators. The plan was not to make a single person (or maybe a few people) intelligent enough and trained enough to be the *professional* preacher/teacher(s). Sadly, we have not equipped people to study for themselves. Most of the flock simply doesn't know the great truths of the Christian faith. God's people perish for a lack of knowledge. And very little is being done about this huge hole in the church's soul.

So I challenge you who are pastors, elders and deacons in specific local churches. Apply these types of questions to yourself and to your flock. Ask if you are creating an environment that leads to fruitfulness as Paul defines it in Galatians 5? Be honest: "Is what you are seeing week-by-week, month-by-month, and year-by-year, an increase in true

fruitfulness?" Stop asking, "How many people joined our church last year?" Start asking, "What kind of fruit are we producing here?" You have to get this right before you can fix almost everything else that you may need to fix. And you will never create a truly missional church until you deal with these matters. People have to know who they are, and what they do is supremely important to the fruitfulness of their local congregation.