

Fruits of the Spirit in Paul's Letter to the Galatians

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Recently a friend phoned to ask for advice in preparing a Bible study for a group of laypeople. The topic of the discussion was "The Fruits of the Spirit," and one of the questions my friend was supposed to answer was this: For Paul what is the difference between gifts of the Spirit and fruits of the Spirit?

My immediate and not very thoughtful response was that the gifts and fruits of the Spirit were pretty much the same thing. In 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 Paul is writing about spiritual gifts, and in Galatians 5:22-26 he is writing about the fruit of the Spirit; in each case he is drawing a picture of the character of Christian community, and the difference is not in the content but in the context.

I realized after our conversation that I had spent most of my professional life trying to persuade congregations and seminary students that context makes a very great difference indeed. The Gospel writers tell the story of Jesus somewhat differently because they write out of different contexts, and they write for different communities. Paul is not a systematic theologian who worked out an outline of the implications of the Gospel followed by "Questions for Further Discussion." He is the first and foremost practical theologian discovering and applying the good news of what God does in Jesus Christ in varying circumstances to differing people in diverse locations.

So context is key to understanding. Put briefly the context of 1 Corinthians is some dissension within the community about the various worth of the skills and sensibilities that the Corinthian believers bring to their common life. Paul encourages deeper community by insisting that the variety of attributes in the Church is a variety of gifts, not a variety of accomplishments. Furthermore the gifts are all gifts of the one Spirit, and as they come from one source, they lead to one goal, the upbuilding of the church as the Body of Christ.

In writing to the Galatians Paul wants to insist that the characteristics (the virtues) of Christian life are not the cause of our redemption; they are the result of our redemption. They are fruit, not seed. The reason Paul writes about the Spirit to the Corinthians is that they are suffering internal divisions. The reason Paul writes about the Spirit to the Galatians is that they are in danger of following after intruders.

The commentaries by J. Louis Martyn and Hans Dieter Betz help us to reconstruct the situation among the Galatian churches.¹ Passing through Galatia, Paul took ill, and kind Galatians cared for him. He took full advantage of the opportunity that his convalescence provided and preached the Gospel among the Galatians.

While we can only guess at the content of his preaching, we can be sure that Paul insisted that God's goodness was now revealed in Jesus Christ. And he told the Galatian men (who were Gentiles) that they did not need to undergo the Jewish rite of circumcision in order to be fully welcome in the community that followed Jesus, and presumably he told all the Galatian believers that they did not need to observe kosher dietary rules and perhaps that they did not need to accept the calendar of Jewish holy days in order to be among God's chosen people. In brief Paul insisted that the Galatians did not need to become Jewish in order to become Christian.

Paul is well aware that other apostles, probably especially James the brother of Jesus and Peter, were more committed to the continuity between the laws of the Jewish covenant and the new covenant that came in Jesus Christ. But he insisted that his call to preach did not depend on the approval of those more conservative apostles and that, as a matter of fact, they had given him their blessing to preach the Gospel as God had called him to do.

Paul loved the verse about Abraham in Genesis 15:6; in fact sometimes it seems as though this verse provided the seed for the elaborate and beautiful expression of the gospel that flourishes in Galatians and later in Romans. Genesis 15:6 says that “Abraham had faith; and his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

In a similar way God asked for faith from the Galatians, and when they received the gift of faith, the men did not need to be circumcised, and the whole community did not need to keep kosher table. On the basis of their faith they were baptized; on the basis of their faith they were reckoned righteous; as a sign of their faith they received the Holy Spirit.

Sometime after Paul recovered his health and moved on, another group of teachers arrived among the Galatians. They too claimed to preach the gospel, and it may be that they insisted (Paul to the contrary notwithstanding) that they preached the kind of Gospel that James and Peter and the other apostles would have approved.

Their message was something like this: “All right, Galatians, you’ve made a good start by accepting Jesus as Lord and by being baptized. But Paul forgot to tell you that there are also prerequisites for following Jesus.” Some students of Paul think that these teachers were telling the Galatians that they had to obey every bit of the Jewish law before they could be really Christian. I am one of those who think that these Teachers had a shorter version of the law that they thought required obeying—most obviously they thought the Jewish men had to be circumcised. If they were trying to promote the whole law, they hadn’t made that very clear, because it is Paul and not his opponents who insist that when it comes to the law, it’s all or nothing: “Once again I testify to every man who allows himself to be circumcised that he is obliged to follow the entire law” (Gal 5:3).

Unfortunately, from Paul’s point of view, some of the Galatians have been persuaded (Paul says they’ve been “seduced”) by these teachers. (3:1. Either they’ve been “seduced” or they’ve been “bewitched”—neither redounds to their glory.)

Paul almost certainly wrote more letters than those we still have (see 1 Cor 5:9, for instance), but of the letters we have, this is the only one that is flat out angry. In his typical letter Paul finishes greeting his audience, and then he prays a prayer or Thanksgiving for them, grateful to God for their steadfast faith. In Galatians there is no such thanksgiving section. After Paul finishes the greeting, he launches into the attack: “I am astonished (and not in a good way) that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ.”

It is as if you open a letter from an about-to-be-former lover and discover that the letter does not begin “My Darling” but “Hello. I need to tell you something.” Paul is trying desperately to call the Galatians back to the real Gospel—the Gospel where God reaches out to humankind in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and humankind (Jews and Gentiles alike) responds in faith. It is with that gospel in mind that Paul will come to write about the fruit of the spirit. In order to understand his great claim we need to look at the difference between flesh and spirit in this letter, then at the

Spirit and community, and then at the difference between works and fruit.

Flesh and Spirit

For Paul the distinction between “flesh” and “spirit” is not primarily a psychological distinction, but an eschatological one. For Paul the whole of human history is divided in two by the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Romans he describes this division primarily as the division between the age of sin and the age of righteousness. In Galatians he describes the division primarily as the division between the age of the flesh and the age of the spirit.

I have never found any evidence that Paul was explicating the verse from Joel 2:28 that we find at the beginning of Peter’s Pentecost speech in Acts 2:17: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.” But the verse captures beautifully Paul’s insistence that the age of the Flesh is passing away and the Age of the Spirit is breaking in.

In any case for Paul the new age is not simply an improvement on the old; it is a radical new creation. For Israel, and by extension for all of humankind, the age of the flesh was the age of obedience to the law. Flesh and law stand against Gospel and Spirit. It is of course particularly appropriate that in the Galatian situation the primary sign of life under the flesh is circumcision, where the foreskin is both literally and symbolically a mark of fleshly devotion. If as the dispute with Peter in Antioch suggests, another sign of the old age is obedience to dietary laws, then the old age that is passing away is the age when people are devoted to what you feed your flesh as well as whether to cut your flesh (see Gal 2:11-14). In the age of the Spirit, neither being circumcised or not being circumcised (nor kosher table nor pork roast) counts for anything, but a new creation (Gal. 6:15).

Furthermore the history of the believers in Galatia replicates the history of the world. They too lived once in the age of the flesh but live now in the age of the spirit. For the world the great turning point is God’s “invasion” of history through Jesus Christ.² For the Galatians the turning point is the preaching of the Gospel received by them through faith. When they receive the Gospel, they receive the Spirit, and the face of all the world is changed. When they insist upon circumcision for Gentile believers or insist on eating only kosher diet, they mistake their place in God’s history, and they deny their own identity. “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Christ was publicly displayed as crucified. The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing works of the law or by believing (having faith in) what you heard?”

One thing more. For human history, the age of the flesh was the age of law and sin; in the Galatian community, the age of the flesh was the age of distinctions. “Flesh” not only marked off circumcised from uncircumcised; “fleshly” concerns marked off male from female, slave from free person. We do not know precisely what sort of polity Paul envisioned for the community under the Spirit, but we know the theological conviction that was to define that community. Quite possibly quoting a phrase from their baptism service, Paul reminds the Galatians of the unity of the new creation: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

The Fruit of the Spirit: The Building of Community

Some Christians and many critics of Paul's Christianity think that in criticizing life in the flesh, Paul is criticizing some of the richest pleasures of created life—especially sexual relationships. Paul's understanding of sexuality and marriage is complicated and perhaps not always as instructive as it might be, but life in the flesh for him is not marked by sexuality but by selfishness. Rudolf Bultmann long ago convinced many of us that for Paul the term "flesh" referred in large measure to any form of self-absorption, self-promotion, or inappropriate pride.

In the context of Galatians, we can be even more specific. In Galatians "flesh" is what divides community, and "spirit" is what (or who) brings community together.

It is probably worth noting in an age when there is a deep concern for spiritual values that Paul's concern is always for spiritual values. That is to say, for him the spiritual life is life driven, shaped, and enticed by the Holy Spirit of God. He is not a very good guide to the somewhat different quest for spiritual practices. He is a great guide to life formed by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In particular it is the Holy Spirit that inspires the most fundamental spiritual practice, the prayer that begins "Abba," Father. Paul clearly refers here to some spiritual practice the Galatians all recognize (see Galatians 4:6). Perhaps it was a kind of ecstatic crying out in worship; perhaps it was the common praying of the Lord's prayer. Certainly when Jesus addresses his father in Mark's gospel, he begins the address "Abba, Father," and this may reflect the ongoing pattern of the Greek speaking churches, which retained the Aramaic "Abba" at the beginning of prayer and followed with the Greek translation (see Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15).

The realm of the flesh is the realm of self-promotion and boastfulness. The preachers who came to Galatia insisted that as circumcised believers, they were more truly members of the covenant community. They promoted a division within the Galatian churches between Gentiles who were circumcised and those who were not. By extension we see that the realm of the flesh can include self-satisfaction being male rather than female, master rather than slave, Jew rather than Gentile.

"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh (the NRSV uses "self-indulgence," thereby moving the interpretation from the homily into the text and losing the entire eschatological framework of the phrase), but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" In this letter the opposite of love is not hate; the opposite of love is life according to the flesh. The Spirit builds community; the flesh reaps discord.

With this in mind we look at the works of the Spirit in Galatians 6. "Fornication, impurity, idolatry, drunkenness and carousing" sound like a list of personal infractions, self-indulgences that fit with a more conventional understanding of "the flesh." But the majority of the works of the flesh are marked primarily by their tendency to promote division: "enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy." With this list in mind, we wonder whether even the more traditional lists of personal wrongdoing are not listed so much for what they do to the person as for what they do to a friendship, a marriage, the community of faith. In the contemporary myth of the isolated self, fornication, impurity, idolatry, drunkenness and carousing notably do harm to the autonomous individual. In the world of the Galatian churches and Presbyterian, Catholic, and Baptist churches today, these personal infractions still break trust, fracture relationships, wound the Body of Christ.

Works of the Flesh; Fruit of the Spirit

We are now in a position to return to my friend's question with which we began. Why "fruit" of the Spirit in Galatians and "gifts of the Spirit" in 1 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians Paul is responding to a set of disputes about the value of individual giftedness—especially the boasting of those who speak in tongues. In Galatians Paul is responding to a different set of questions, questions about whether Gentiles who follow Jesus are bound by certain commandments of the Jewish law.

Paul's term for following the law, especially those concerning circumcision and diet, is a "work." From his standpoint that when I do a "work," I seem to provide grounds for my own self-satisfaction and evidence for boasting: "I do good work."

Boasting violates my relationship to God and to the neighbor. "I do good work," I say, thinking that as good work used to please my Latin teacher, surely good work will earn an "A" from God on the great report card at the end. "I do good work," I say, contrasting my "A" in Latin to the B minus of my linguistically challenged neighbor. This neighbor of course can beat me handily on the tennis court, and soon enough we're arguing about whose work counts for more. I write this essay in a season of political debates where the first minutes of every debate are devoted to self-congratulatory listing of works by each candidate with the not very subtle implication that my works are more important than yours. Long ago Paul noticed the correlation between reliance on works and devotion to factions.

So of course when it comes to living by the flesh, the proper word for the practices of fleshliness is *work*—or more correctly "works" (Gal. 5:19). The *work* is the appropriate word because it reminds us that the very mark of fleshliness is self-satisfaction and the attendant division. The plural is the appropriate number because it reminds us that I've got my work and you've got yours, and the strategy for self-satisfaction and its attendant division is to fight over whose list is better and whose list is longer. We not only are divided—circumcised and uncircumcised, male and female, slave and free, capitalist and socialist, pre-lapsarian and post lapsarian, gay and straight, infant baptizer or believers' baptizer—we boast of the "works" that divide us.

When it comes to living by the Spirit, the proper word for the practice of life under the Holy Spirit is *fruit*, and the proper number of the noun is singular. "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" are not the conditions for life in the Spirit; they are the result of life in the Spirit. They are not the seed from which faith springs, but the fruit that springs from faith.

The noun is in the singular because the life of the Spirit does not consist in obeying a disparate list of commandments—like the college honor code or Roberts' Rules of Order. The life of the Spirit is an integrated manifestation of the grace of the one God revealed in the one Lord, Jesus Christ. The description of the fruit of the Spirit is not a list of the different gifts different people bring to the body (as in 1 Corinthians). The list is not really a list at all; it is a portrait. Here is what life in the Spirit looks like. Here is the life that builds community. Here is the fruit that is seeded, nurtured, and brought to consummation by the goodness of our God.

Notes

1 J. Louis Martyn, "Galatians," *Anchor Bible* (Garden City, Doubleday, 1997). Hans Dieter Betz, "Galatians," *Hermeneia* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

2 This phrase is J. Louis Martyn's.