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“Ruminating on the ‘Fruit of the Spirit’ (Gal 5:22):
Origins and Theological Significance of a Pauline Phrase”

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Setting the Table: the problem

Most of us don’t reflect a lot on our good deeds, but we experience the doing of good in quite different ways; sometimes it’s almost spontaneous, like it just flows out of us with joy and desire; other times, we do what’s right, out of obligation, perhaps grudgingly, but also sometimes, even when out of obligation, with a gladness to do the right thing.

Those of us who have raised children have replayed scenarios like this hundreds of times: “Michael, don’t take Bridgit’s blocks, you know what mom and dad have said about sharing toys”; OR, on the other hand, I watch Michael hand over a favorite toy to his sister without being reminded, and then watch him smile with an inner satisfaction

¹ The freedom to pursue this research was due largely to a Faculty Research Leave granted by George Fox University (2010-2011).

So, which of Michael’s responses would line up with what Paul calls the “fruit of the Spirit”? The obedience he works at or the obedience that seems to flow naturally and without effort?

These fundamental ethical questions—how do we know what is the good and how do we do it?—lie at the heart of the section of Scripture which speaks of “works of the flesh” and “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal 5:16-26).

These modern ethical reflections are actually not so far removed from Paul’s own situation in dictating his letter to the Galatians. When Paul led these mostly non-Jewish hearers to Christ, he had told them they were not under the Jewish Law; these converts did not need to become Jewish in order to be part of God’s eschatological Israel, the body of the Messiah; they did not need to be circumcised, keep Torah’s food laws, etc.

More traditional Christian Jews (Paul’s “Judaizers”) were aghast at this advice to pagans, and for good reason . . . With the well-known Gentile proclivity to idolatry, greed and sexual immorality, and now also without the boundaries and guidance of God’s Law, what would keep these pagans from living like the devil

and bringing both Israel’s God and the new Jesus-movement into fatal disrepute in the Roman world?

Paul’s letter is sent primarily to address this fundamental ethical question . . . How will Gentile converts know how to live rightly without the Law of God, and what gives Paul any confidence that they will actually do what is pleasing to God? The apostle’s careful argumentation in chapters 1-4 has proven that Gentile converts do not need to become Jewish . . . but that has simply prepared the way for Paul’s climactic positive answer to the ethical challenge.

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.

For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. (Gal 5:16-18 NRSV)

Paul’s Spirit-ethic immediately raises a host of questions. Here are two:

- Is there no longer a place for laws, rules, concrete ethical guidance? Is it all a matter of internal guidance?

- That is hardly the implication for Paul, as a quick glance at the evangelical *torah* in the next chapter (Gal 6) makes clear: “bear one another’s burdens,” share materially with your teachers, “work for the good of all,” etc.
- Does this obedience happen automatically, spontaneously, or is human effort involved?
 - 6:10 suggests the latter: “So then, whenever we have an opportunity, *let us work for the good of all*, and especially for those of the family of faith.”

Allow me, however, to step back for a moment from all this fascinating, larger ethical field, and drill down to the actual topic of my research: Paul’s “fruit of the Spirit” language in 5:22. This passage, especially this phrase, has played an important role in Christian ethical reflection.

Here are a few of the conclusions not infrequently drawn from this passage, most of which I hope to challenge, or at least nuance differently.

1. Christians’ actions are different in their very nature from the actions of non-Christians. Christian behavior is the “fruit” of the indwelling Spirit; non-

Christian actions are “works.” Thus, one of our questions will be, did Paul intend such an essential difference when choosing to oppose “fruit” and “works”?

2. Closely related to this is his use of the singular “fruit” for Christian behavior, but the plural “works” for the fleshly deeds characteristic of non-Spirit-led persons. Is Christian behavior a single, harmonious whole, a single “fruit of the Spirit,” whereas non-Christian behavior is better described as a conglomeration of disparate, even chaotic, acts. That is, what is the significance of Paul’s use of singular “fruit” versus plural “works”?
3. And, finally, when Paul says the one is “fruit” while the other is “work,” does this suggest that Christian behavior has more the character of an organic outgrowth of the Spirit’s working, not of our own effort? What apple tree has to strain to produce apples? Bearing apples seems to simply happen without much observable effort on the part of the tree. As not a few biblical commentators and Christian ethicists have concluded, Christian obedience is fundamentally a passive affair . . . the Spirit of God produces his fruit in and through us. The result is his action, not ours; it is all divine grace, not human works. This has

led some theologians even to claim, Christians do no works; God bears fruit through them.²

Singular “fruit” versus plural “works”

Let me begin with the singular “fruit of the Spirit” versus plural “works of the flesh” contrast, since that is, perhaps the easiest to deal with.

In both biblical Hebrew and Hellenistic Greek, not unlike English, “fruit” (Heb. פֶּרִי; Gr. καρπός) was typically a collective noun. Thus,

Anyone who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit (sg.). (Prov 27:18)

Obviously, more than a single fig was expected.³

Paul follows this widespread collective usage when formulating “the fruit (sg.) of the Spirit.” He certainly knows the difference between a collective, that is

² “Der Christ hat keine Werke.” Lieselotte Mattern, *Das Verständnis des Gerichtes bei Paulus* (Zürich: Zwingli, 1966), 151.

³ This same collective sense appears in the oft-repeated phrase in the MT “fruit of the ground” (e.g., Deut 26:2a), and in the DSS’s (e.g., 4Q88 IX.10, 12), in Hellenistic Greek texts (e.g., Diodorus Siculus 3, 24, 1) and later in rabbinic sources.

pluralizing, singular and a true singular concept. In chapter three, for instance, he made an important argument based on just such a distinction:

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring [Gk. σπέρμα]; it does not say, "And to offsprings [Gk. σπέρματα]," as of many; but it says, "And to your offspring," that is, to one person, who is Christ. (Gal 3:16)

He is aware that such an argument is conceptually specious; every reader of the Hebrew OT or the LXX would instantly read this singular “seed” as collective offspring. Thus, to make his point he camps on the grammar very explicitly. By the way, although Paul’s hermeneutic may appear strained to us, he was in good rabbinic company in doing this. Thus, returning to the “fruit of the Spirit,” had he wanted to make a point of the grammatically singular “fruit,” his typical procedure would be to point it out explicitly. This, along with the fact that he quite happily refers to Christian’s working elsewhere—using both singulars and plurals⁴—makes it highly unlikely that he intends anything by the contrast of singular “fruit of the Spirit” and plural “works of the flesh” here.

⁴ Rom 2:7; 13:3; 2 Cor 9:8; Phil 1:6; Col 1:10; 3:17; 2 Th 2:17; Gal 6:4; Eph 2:10 “created in Christ Jesus for good works.”

An essential difference between “fruit” (good) versus “works” (evil)

Returning now to another of our exegetical questions, does Paul imply some essential difference between “fruit” and “works”? Is “fruit” an essentially positive, good, concept, versus an essentially negative, or evil, concept supposedly inherent in “works”?

Without question “fruit of the Spirit” in Gal 5 is meant as a positive image in contrast with the warning against “works of the flesh.” The content of the associated lists—love, joy, etc. versus fornication, impurity, and so on—makes this unmistakable as do the qualifiers, “of the Spirit” versus “of the flesh.” But just as clear should be the fact that this contrast of nuance lies in these contextual factors and not in the words *fruit* and *works* themselves. In fact, both terms can be used with positive or negative connotations throughout biblical literature, and in Paul’s writings. Thus, positively disciples are to “bear fruit” (John 15: 5, 8) and Paul desires to “reap some harvest” (lit. have some fruit, Rom 1:13) in Rome, while negatively God can punish evildoers “according to the fruit of [their] doings” (Jer 21:14), and Paul can speak of the negative fruit (NRSV: advantage) which comes from slavery to sin and which leads to death (Rom 6:21). Similarly, works can be a quite positive image (Rom 2:7; 13:3; 2 Cor 9:8; Phil 1:6; Col 1:10; 3:17; 2 Th

2:17; Gal 6:4; Eph 2:10 “created in Christ Jesus for good works”) as well as negative (“unfruitful works of darkness,” Eph 5:11).

Thus, the terms are largely overlapping in this area of their semantic range, and more or less synonymous.⁵ The Colossians, for example, are urged to “bear fruit in every good work” (1:10), and in Jeremiah, “I the LORD test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings” (17:10). And in poetic texts, “works” and “fruit” can be set in synonymous parallelism,

The works of the righteous bring life, while the fruits of the ungodly yield
sins. (Prov 10:16 LXX, author’s translation)

Thus, it hardly appears likely that Paul chose to contrast works with fruit because the terms typically or inherently suggested negative or positive connotations respectively.⁶

⁵ So BDAG, s.v. *karpos*; Hauck, s.v. *karpos*, *TDNT* 3.614-616.

⁶ Barclay comes to similar conclusions in John M. G. Barclay, *Obedying the Truth: A Study of Paul's Ethics in Galatians*, ed. J. K. Riches, *Studies of the New Testament and Its World*. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 119-122.

Spontaneous “fruit” versus human produced “works”

Our third exegetical question concerned a possible contrast between “fruit” as something spontaneously, yes even passively, produced by an outside agency (“of the Spirit”), versus actively produced human “works.” This viewpoint turns out to be amazingly popular in the exegetical literature. “The ‘fruit’ is not the product of the Christian’s labouring, but the effect of another’s [the Spirit’s] activity.”⁷

It must be admitted there is an almost intuitive appeal to such assertions. The ground does not strain and give effort to produce grass; rather, it grows spontaneously. One can easily see why a plant could be called passive in the production of its fruit.

⁷ T. J. Deidun, *New Covenant Morality in Paul* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981), 81. Similarly Schlier, for whom “works,” in contrast to fruit, is tied to human *Leistung* (achievement, work): Heinrich Schlier, *Der Brief an die Galater*, 15th ed., Kritisch-Exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament, V. 7 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), 256. See further, Ernest de Witt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, Icc (New York, NY: Scribner, 1920; reprint, 1921 and 1988, T&T Clark), 313.; and Timothy George, *Galatians*, The New American Commentary, vol. 30 (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1994), 390.

The problem with this common-sense deduction is two-fold: (1) we have no evidence that this connotation of passivity or spontaneity was present when ancient peoples used fruit imagery, and (2) biblical tradition, Paul included, does not support a simple passive-active contrast between Spirit-induced behavior and human deeds.

Now it’s true, Jesus speaks of lilies growing without toil or effort (Luke 12:27 par.), i.e., passively; however, he does not connect this process with the language of fruit bearing. Instead, in biblical tradition bearing fruit is more often thought of as the result of human thought and will. Children are the “fruit of the womb,” hardly something that occurs spontaneously and without human performance. Or when John the Baptist preaches “**Bear fruit worthy of repentance**” (Matt 3:8), he hardly expects this to happen automatically or without a considered change of mind.

On the flip side, human works did not primarily evoke in the ancient world a sense of effort, of performance or achievement. Instead, works were perceived as the visible manifestation of one’s inward reality, one’s heart.⁸ That is, when Greek-

⁸ “In Paul’s thought works only superficially signal achievements in the sense of fulfilling divine demands; rather they should be seen as signs of the inner reality of the person which become manifest in the judgment,” Roman Heiligenthal, *Werke als Zeichen: Untersuchungen zur*

speakers referred to someone’s *erga*, the focus was usually on what these behaviors revealed about the inner virtue of the person, rather than on the effort or merit involved. A good person is known as such by the good works they produce.

As to the larger issue of divine versus human agency . . . passivity or spontaneity do not seem to be the normal categories used by biblical traditions. Paul and other biblical authors seem to have no difficulty in using language related to human effort to refer to the loving deeds performed by believers, even when it is assumed these are induced by the indwelling Spirit.

So let us not grow weary in doing what is right [*to kalon poiountes*], for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good [*ergazōmetha to agathon*] of all, and especially for those of the family of faith. (Gal 6:9-10)

As Walter Hansen puts matters,

We must be careful . . . not to think that the contrast between *acts* and *fruit* is a contrast between active and passive, our effort and supernaturally

produced growth. [. . .] Life in the Spirit is both active (walking) and passive (being led). And though love and goodness are fruit of the Spirit, Paul urges the believers to work at loving and doing good (5:6, 13-14; 6:4-5, 9-10).⁹

Of course, biblical traditions do at times portray the divine agency so potently that the human subjects appear totally passive, like a lump of clay or something dead being brought to life.¹⁰ Nevertheless, such a one-sided portrayal appears to have special rhetorical motivations—to highlight the glory of God—and is not meant to be an adequate representation of the larger understanding of divine and human agency in Scripture, which represents the interplay of the divine and the human in a much more nuanced way.¹¹

⁹ G. Walter Hansen, *Galatians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series; 9 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994), 174, original emphasis.

¹⁰ See Jer 18 (Israel is like clay in the potter’s hand), and Ezek 18 (divine breath brings dead Israel to life).

¹¹ See, for example, John M. G. Barclay and Simon J. Gathercole, eds., *Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural Environment*, Early Christianity in Context (London/New York: T & T Clark, 2006).

Significance for Paul

To this point I’ve done little else but show what I *don’t think* Paul was trying to say by coining this phrase, “the fruit of the Spirit,” and thus raise some questions about a whole host of theological conclusions often drawn from this text. Let me conclude by making some positive suggestions regarding his intent in context.

First, you probably noticed my reference to Paul’s “coining” of this phrase. While impossible to prove that no one had ever spoken this particular combination before Paul, as far as extant pre-Pauline literature is concerned, both Hebrew and Greek, we have no evidence that Paul borrowed it from anyone. It seems he invented the phrase “fruit of the Spirit.”

But to what end and from where did he derive such conceptions? Without arguing my case in detail, I think John Barclay, Greg Beale and a growing number of Galatians commentators are correct to see in Paul’s phrase an echo of OT prophetic expectation. As Barclay states,

In the Old Testament, Israel is frequently described as a fruit-bearing tree and in several prophetic passages . . . she is criticized for failing to bear the fruit (i.e., moral behaviour) expected of her. In eschatological prophecies

there are many promises concerning Israel’s future fruitfulness, . . . and in at least two passages, Isa 32.15-16 and Joel 2.18-32, this is explicitly connected with the Spirit.¹²

This all comes together beautifully in Isa 32:15-18 which reads:

until a spirit from on high is poured out on us, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.

Although Paul’s precise phrase is not used, here we have the Spirit of God poured out upon God’s eschatological people who then become fruitful, which means explicitly walking in righteousness, peace and trust. That Paul has such eschatological and renewed Israel ideas in mind is suggested by his ensuing

¹² Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, 121, with OT references. Todd Wilson builds on Barclay’s insight in Todd A. Wilson, *The Curse of the Law and the Crisis in Galatia: Reassessing the Purpose of Galatians*, WUNT 2.225 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 131-137. Beale adds Isa 57:15-19 to these passages: Gregory K. Beale, “The Old Testament Background of Paul’s Reference to ‘the Fruit of the Spirit’ in Galatians 5:22,” *BBR* 15, no. 1 (2005): 1-38.

reference to “new creation” and the “Israel of God” (Gal 6:15-16), not to mention his stress throughout chaps 3-4 on Gentile converts as part of the seed of Abraham, the now-fruitful Israel of the last days.

As I noted at the start, Paul designed the Galatian letter to answer a question: How will Paul’s pagan converts—without becoming Jewish and gaining the guidance of God’s Torah—live as a people pleasing to the God of Israel? Paul’s answer, to which he has been pressing throughout and which he finally reaches in chap. five, is that through adherence to the Jewish Messiah, Jesus, these pagans are made part of the fulfillment of the promises to Israel. They will be made fruitful morally by the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit, they will bear the fruit of the Spirit, all the marks of the renewed covenant with Israel.

To conclude . . . Paul coins this phrase not to make some point about passivity versus action, or to reveal something about the nature of human works, but to announce the good news that Gentiles, without becoming Jews, can become living members of righteous Israel through faith in Jesus the Messiah.

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