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Fruit of the Spirit

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SELECTED TOPICS IN NEW TESTAMENT ETHICS

◊ Fruit of the Spirit ◊

Gary M. Simpson

“The fruit of the Spirit” is Paul’s metaphor (Gal. 5:22) that he places in contrast to his metaphor “the works of the flesh” (Gal. 5:19). Flesh and Spirit are contrasting powers or “desires” that produce opposing ways of human life together (Gal. 5:17). Paul designates love as the Spirit’s first fruit.

Having highlighted this initial contrast of powers, Paul illuminates subsequent contrasts that have ethical import. Second, therefore, “works” in the plural contrasts with “fruit” in the singular. Flesh produces an unhindered plethora of obvious works that divide people from one another and thus hinder people from inheriting God’s kingdom. Paul stresses the chaotic plurality of these works, which is comparable to the swamp of evils unleashed on the world when Pandora proverbially opened the box. Spirit, however, produces a singular “fruit” that issues in a flourishing life together led by the Spirit.

Paul’s third contrast comes in Gal. 5:18, where life together “led by the Spirit” is distinguished from life together “subject to the law.” On the one hand, for Paul, the law has its source in God and thereby is itself always good.

Yet, law always intrinsically embodies a distinctive coercive element in order to gain even a semblance of flourishing human life together. On the other hand, Paul's organic metaphor of fruit stresses the effective yet noncoercive force field of life together in the Spirit. The notion of fruit recalls Jesus' words "every good tree bears good fruit" (Matt. 7:17). Because the Holy Spirit is free and freeing (2 Cor. 3:17; Gal. 5:1), Augustine and those influenced by him stress the spontaneity of the Christian life in the Spirit in contrast to the coercive character of a life together subject to God's law.

With these three contrasts framing Paul's metaphor of fruit of the Spirit, questions often arise about how to think through Paul's lists that follow the powers of flesh and Spirit. It is unlikely that Paul is using any ancient commonplace list of vices or virtues, or that he is giving some kind of specifically Christian comprehensive listing of vices or virtues. Some interpreters have thought that Paul is referencing three groups of three virtues, but others have rightly found that idea not persuasive or fruitful for ethical reflection. That Paul says "and things like these" and "such things" (Gal. 5:21, 23) indicates the illustrative and thereby nonexhaustive nature of these listings.

One significant suggestion made first by Augustine and taken up again by Martin Luther, among others, is that Paul places love as the first fruit of the Spirit because love is really the only virtue of Christian life together. In this view, love issues from faith in Christ, which is created by the Spirit (Rom. 5:5; 1 Cor. 13; Gal. 5:6). Christ becomes the one form of Christian faith and freedom—"Love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12) (see Bonhoeffer). Indeed, this "as I have loved you" "expands into all" (Luther 93) aspects of the Christian life together producing, forming, and norming whatever other subsequent virtues are needed in order to serve neighbors and their neighborhoods and communities. Whether the neighbor is within or without the Christian church appears unimportant (Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 5:13–14). Love seeking justice operates like a pluripotent stem cell becoming through Christian discernment whatever set of virtues neighbors, neighborhoods, and communities need for their welfare, thus setting out the breadth of Christian vocation in God's world.

The Augustinian-Lutheran trajectory opens a more discernment-oriented model of Christian ethical reflection that focuses on the necessities and needs of neighbors and their neighborhoods and communities. This contrasts with the "third use of the law" model of Christian ethical reflection, initiated by Philip Melancthon and John Calvin, which focuses Christian ethical reflection more on identifying, following, and applying the particulars of biblical injunctions and commands. On the one hand, the "fruit of the Spirit" approach to ethical reflection based on discerning love seeking justice for the neighbor resonates

with the centrality of prudence within classical and medieval natural law approaches to ethics, still championed by many contemporary Roman Catholic moral theologians. On the other hand, the “third use of the law” approach, which looks to biblical laws and NT injunctions as superior rules that guide Christian life, has largely rejected Christian natural-law reasoning.

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✧ Golden Rule ✧

Michael Westmoreland-White

The Golden Rule is the designation for Jesus’ command to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount: “[Therefore] in everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12; cf. Luke 6:31).

Mark 12:31 and Rom. 13:9 similarly indicate that the law is summed up by the command “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” a quotation from Lev. 19:18. This suggests that Jesus’ formulation likewise refers to Lev. 19:18.

The appearance of “therefore” in Matt. 7:12 indicates that the Golden Rule is based on God’s trustworthiness and mercy in Matt. 7:11. Similarly, Mark 12:31; Luke 6:31–36; and Lev. 19:18 link the Golden Rule with God’s gracious mercy as the Lord. God does not merely reciprocate; God initiates.

Versions of this principle are found in many world religions. For example, in Hinduism there is the saying “This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain for you” (*Mahababharata* 5.1517); in Confucianism, “Do not do to others what you would not have them do for you” (*Analects of*