

BEARING FRUIT

MINISTRY WITH REAL RESULTS



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BEARING FRUIT MINISTRY WITH REAL RESULTS

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A BIBLICAL MANDATE FOR FRUITFULNESS

We believe that the Bible begins and ends with an image of fruitfulness and that Scripture throughout leads us to conclude that churches, as the body of Christ on earth, are intended by God to be fruitful.

The image of fruitfulness fit the biblical world, so dominated as it was by agriculture. The richness of all that is embodied in this concept was familiar to those hearing calls that they “bear fruit” (Matthew 3:8; John 15:8). They quickly got the point that good trees bear good fruit and bad trees cannot bear good fruit (Matthew 7:18; Luke 6:43). Comparing the expectation that disciples will bear fruit to the experience of good seed sown in good soil producing a good harvest fit their world (Mark 4:20; Luke 8:15). The images of pruning and destroying unproductive trees would not have been lost on them (Matthew 7:19; Luke 3:9; John 15:2). And they certainly would have understood the difference between the vine and the branches and the reminder that “the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine.” So they could understand the promise that those “who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit” (John 15:4-5).

FRUITFULNESS AS PART OF GOD’S CHARACTER

We begin the conversation about fruitfulness as the goal of church leadership with the question of the *will of God* for the church’s ministry. A basis for discerning God’s will is found in considering the *nature of God*. Fruitfulness is an aspect of *God’s character*.

In Genesis we quickly discover that God is creative and productive.

As the stars and planets are spun into existence out of the void, God populates the earth with beings of every kind. When humans are created, they are invited to reflect the nature of their Creator with the command to “be fruitful and multiply” (1:22). The Bible shows God to be a being of movement and resourcefulness.

The Bible consistently states God’s desires and expectations in terms of fruitfulness. Look up the word *fruit* in a concordance. The word appears more than 150 times. *Fruitful* appears nearly 30 times. One would assume that its use would typically have to do with people eating fruit or having children. When you examine the texts, however, you discover so much more. Let us consider three types of fruitfulness that God hopes we will display.

THE FRUIT OF GOD’S EXPANDING REIGN

Notice how the term *fruitful* is used in the conversation between God and Abram as the Lord changes his name to Abraham and offers to be in a covenant relationship with him:

I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. (Genesis 17:6-7 NIV)

Fruitful in this context points to the offspring that God plans for Abraham and Sarah. It also relates to the blessings brought to their lives by being in covenant with God. This covenant includes the promises of land and the assurance of God’s provision for their needs. The other side of the covenant assumes that Abraham and Sarah will be fruitful for God as well. They will be obedient to the Lord, remain in relationship with God, and raise their offspring in such a way that the covenant will endure from generation to generation. The intention of God for Abraham’s fruitfulness is repeated later in Genesis when the Lord shares plans to destroy Sodom. In Genesis 18:18, the Lord states, “Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him” (NIV).

Here God is stating the expectation that the fruitfulness of Abraham and Sarah’s way of life will be a blessing to others. It is the Lord’s desire

to bless Abraham and Sarah. However, the greater purpose of this covenant is to plant the seeds of God's goodness in the barrenness that comes to those who do not know the Lord. Abraham and Sarah, through the doorway of their covenant, enter what later portions of the Bible will call the reign of God. Their task is to open this door to others and extend the blessings of the covenant to those around them as well.

In Exodus, when the covenant is presented to Moses on Mount Sinai, God restates the intention that Israel is to have a unique role in the world as a nation of priests. The idea is that a people made holy through their covenant with God will enable all the nations of the world to be blessed in like fashion. This type of fruitfulness, first found in the covenant with Abraham and Sarah, is a thread that runs throughout the Bible. The hope of God is clearly that the covenant people will widen the circle by inviting others to know the Lord as they do. This theology of God's expanding realm underpins Jesus' commandment: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20 NIV).

In the Revelation of John, we find a vision of heaven in which all of God's blessings are fully enjoyed by the nations of the earth: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life. . . . On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (22:1-2 NIV).

This is a vision of the reign of God in its fullest. In the Revelation of John, it is not a hoped-for event or a hastily glimpsed image. It is the reality in which the children of God live. In Revelation, the fruit of Abraham's covenant, the fulfilled great commission with the church as the new Israel, is fully shared with everyone who needs to "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8a).

Although Christ never used the term *fruitful* in the Great Commission, it is evident that his desire was for his disciples to share the fruit of God's promises with others.

THE FRUIT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

In Psalms and Proverbs, the fruit of a life surrendered to God is expressed in the transformed character of the person. To know the Lord

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is to become holy, or righteous. The author of Psalm 1 speaks with great joy about persons who reflect the character of God in their lives:

Happy are those
 who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
 or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees
 planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
 and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper. (vv. 1-3)

The fruit yielded by those who follow the Lord is in sharp contrast to the fruitless existence of those who live contrary to God's commands.

Proverbs reinforces this concept by focusing our attention on what happens in our lives when we fall in love with the wisdom of God. The voice of Wisdom beckons the reader,

I love those who love me,
 and those who seek me find me.
With me are riches and honor,
 enduring wealth and prosperity.
My fruit is better than fine gold;
 what I yield surpasses choice silver. (8:17-19 NIV)

Proverbs states that when God's wisdom is integrated into our lives, it bears fruit in our character. The transformed life, guided by the counsel of God and the sound judgment arising from the mind of the believer, is a fruit that bears fruit. The seeds encased in God's righteousness, planted in the fertile soil of the believer's life, give rise to healthy relationships, sound vocational decisions, and a stewardship of goals and possessions that bless generation after generation.

This transformation is not simply about fruit that benefits individual lives. It is to affect the broader society. Proverbs shares the Lord's hatred of pride and arrogance, the basis for self-centered behavior that often harms others. The fruit of righteousness curtails evil behavior and perverse speech. A society void of such things would have less sensational evening news reports but would truly be a better place to live.

A Biblical Mandate for Fruitfulness

The passage continues to show how society as a whole is blessed when rulers display the fruit of God's wisdom by creating just laws and governing in ways that benefit all rather than a few:

By me kings reign
and rulers make laws that are just;
by me princes govern,
and all nobles who rule on earth. (8:15-16 NIV)

Throughout Proverbs, we find the calling to honest business, fair practices with others, consistency in speech, generosity, and care of spouse and children. In the last two verses of Proverbs 8 we find a summation of the value of the fruit of God's wisdom in our lives:

For whoever finds me finds life
and obtains favor from the LORD;
but those who miss me injure themselves;
all who hate me love death. (vv. 35-36)

Leaders often measure the strength of the churches they serve by the scope of the churches' ministries. This overlooks the greater impact that the church is having in its community through the ethical conduct and sound decision making of its members as they live daily in the world. Formed in Christ, these members undertake a variety of vocational pursuits: teachers, doctors, farmers, lawyers, laborers, scientists, managers, and business owners. They touch most sectors of the economy, including business, government, the military, and nonprofits. The righteous life they pursue has a ripple effect across the culture in which they live.

Years ago Tom went to buy a used car from John and Kay, a married couple who were members of a church he served. Often people go to buy a used car with fear and trepidation. Like attorneys, politicians, and, yes, pastors, used car salesmen are often the punch line of jokes that characterize them as shady and unscrupulous. John and Kay, however, enjoyed a reputation in the community as people who were honest and fair.

When I stopped by their dealership and began to discuss a particular car with John, I knew I did not need to fear being sold a bad vehicle or paying too high a price. Long before CarMax made no-haggle car sales popular, John and Kay were selling cars by simply saying, "Tom, we're going to give you our best price for this car."

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I knew I could trust John and Kay, not because of their friendship or because I was their pastor, but because John and Kay were so deeply formed by the teaching of the church. The beauty of the righteous life is that it removes anxiety from every aspect of our lives. When John and Kay offered their price, I knew that it was a price fair to the customer and fair to them as the owners of a business. Buying a car without fear of hidden problems or the anxiety that the price is too high is a blessing.

One of the key reasons that Christian leaders want churches to grow is the benefit that will come to our communities when more people like John and Kay own businesses, work in the government, and provide leadership to their community. Such people enrich our society. They have learned Jesus' secret of being in the world but not of the world. While they live and work in our community, they uphold the standard of God's reign in the way they conduct their lives.

Church leaders must understand what is at stake when their congregations no longer influence their neighbors and communities as they once did. The transformative effect of Christ on people is a blessing to spouse, children, vocation, and the influence each person has on the larger society.

The New Testament invites us to consider that for people to exhibit the righteousness of God, they will need to find personal transformation through a relationship with Jesus Christ. In the Gospels, Jesus uses the images of fruit and fruitfulness several times to inform his followers that such transformation is not possible until we find life in him. The image of the vine and the branches in the Gospel of John is a vivid metaphor related to the need of the follower to be fully connected to Christ if he or she is to find transformation. Losing this connection is to risk losing the life and power of Christ that make the transformed life possible.

Paul uses similar imagery in Romans 11 when he describes the way the Gentiles, as a "wild olive shoot," have been grafted into the vine, among those already there. The purpose of this grafting is so that they can be transformed as they are nourished by the root, Christ. Without such a relationship with Christ, there is no possibility of being transformed. Once this new life in Christ is found, Colossians states that Christ's followers are to be productive for the Lord: "We pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work" (1:10 NIV).

THE FRUIT OF JUSTICE

The Bible calls God's people to live in a state of justice that far exceeds occasional moments of compassion or generosity. The call for justice is the expectation of God that all people will find adequate resources to enjoy life. Throughout the Prophets, metaphors related to the fruitfulness of God's realm are employed to help the people of Israel understand that the character of God demands fairness in the administration of civil law and integrity in matters of economics. The prophets believed that those of greater power and wealth should address the poverty experienced by some of God's people. They attempted to remove anxiety by reminding Israel that in God's realm, there is a sufficient abundance of resources to supply everyone's needs:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?
Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe him,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? (Isaiah
58:6-7 NIV)

It is particularly offensive when these resources are hoarded by the few rather than enjoyed by the many. Having provided such abundance, God is angered upon seeing vast disparity among people. It is particularly upsetting to God when injustice has been committed in order to gain wealth and resources. The prophets spend whole chapters communicating God's disgust for those who exploit the poor, misuse the court system to get what they want, or gain their wealth through the misuse of power. Likewise, the ire of God is raised when a nation of priests fails to remember the Lord's clear expectation to defend the basic rights of poor and vulnerable people. God, whose nature finds joy in justice, does not take lightly such a sin of omission. Jeremiah employs a metaphor of obesity when he speaks this word of judgment. Here the people are guilty of gorging themselves on God's fruitfulness while letting their neighbors starve:

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Like cages full of birds,
 their houses are full of deceit;
they have become rich and powerful
 and have grown fat and sleek.
Their evil deeds have no limit;
 they do not plead the case of the fatherless to win it,
 they do not defend the rights of the poor.
(Jeremiah 5:27-28 NIV)

Ezekiel employs this same metaphor of hoarding rather than sharing God's fruitfulness in explaining the hardship that comes to those who ignore God's justice: "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy" (Ezekiel 16:49 NIV).

Isaiah 3–5 is perhaps one of the clearest examples of the use of fruitfulness as a biblical metaphor for God's expectations of the covenant people. In Isaiah 3:14, the prophet proclaims that the chosen people were to be a vineyard whose fruit would bless all people. Instead, their blatant injustice destroyed the potential of fruitfulness. They used their social and economic advantage to profit from the poor whom God would have them bless. The prophet warns that it was not in the nature of God to turn a blind eye to injustice:

The LORD enters into judgment
 against the elders and leaders of his people:
"It is you who have ruined my vineyard;
 the plunder from the poor is in your houses.
What do you mean by crushing my people
 and grinding the faces of the poor?"
 declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty.
(Isaiah 3:14-15 NIV)

The Lord employs the image of fruitfulness to convey disappointment that the covenant people, having enjoyed so much, share so little. God's judgment is recorded in "The Song of the Vineyard" in Isaiah 5. Here the Lord talks about the joy of lovingly planting a vineyard that would bless others, only to discover that it instead produced bad fruit. The nation of Judah, through its disregard for the poor and vulnerable, is like a vineyard that will be torn down because of its failure to produce good fruit:

A Biblical Mandate for Fruitfulness

“Now I will tell you
 what I am going to do to my vineyard:
I will take away its hedge,
 and it will be destroyed;
I will break down its wall,
 and it will be trampled.
I will make it a wasteland,
 neither pruned nor cultivated,
 and briers and thorns will grow there.
I will command the clouds
 not to rain on it.”
The vineyard of the LORD Almighty
 is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah
 are the garden of his delight.
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
 for righteousness, but heard cries of distress. (Isaiah 5:5-7 NIV)

If God felt so strongly that the people of Judah bear the fruit of justice in their society, certainly the Lord anticipates the same from the church today. Jesus’ call to be “the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14) in the Sermon on the Mount includes the desire of God for the church to be fruitful as it cares for the poor and advocates for the weak in the broader society. Like a vineyard that God has planted to bless all who live in the community, the church is to be a place of provision and a place of joy. When congregational leaders see their church as a vineyard whose fruit was planted to enrich the community, they will act in ways that will bless others as a way of life instead of an occasional special event. When we embrace the community sufficiently to see that there are many forms of despair in which people live, we will no longer argue about whether the church is called to a fruitful ministry. We will be compelled to dream, plan, and strategize for ways the church can be productive for God and a blessing for those who do not know the goodness of God’s promises.

AND DON’T FORGET PRUNING

Bishop Robert Schnase tells of teaching on fruitfulness in a congregation. He recounted many of the Scripture verses about fruitfulness with their images of vines, branches, seedtime, harvest, soils, vineyards,

trees, and fruits. As he was listing these agricultural metaphors, someone from the audience shouted out, “Don’t forget pruning!”¹ Pruning is as much a part of a fruitful harvest as is planting.

Management pioneer Peter Drucker often used the phrase “creative abandonment” to describe the process by which people and organizations determine what they should stop doing. In most organizations new programs are added on to everything else currently being done. Hardly ever do people stop to ask, “What will we discontinue to make room for the new effort?” They seem to assume new undertakings can be accomplished without undermining current programs or diluting the focus of the organization.

For a time, this process can be sustained. Over the long term, however, the proliferation of new endeavors, without “pruning,” creates unhealthy results, for any organization has a limited amount of time, energy, and resources. Therefore, it is crucial to make judgments constantly regarding how we use our resources to fulfill our mission so that we are a genuinely mission-shaped congregation.

Creative abandonment provides the opportunity to ask periodically, “What can we stop doing without compromising our mission?” When people brainstorm about such possibilities, many good ideas emerge. After reviewing the implications and impact, they discover that pruning some branches will turn out to be quite workable. Many of the things may seem to be small, but every activity takes time, energy, and resources that cannot be devoted to other efforts.

Do you have ministries that are like the tree Jesus mentioned that did not bear fruit and needed to be cut down?

THE BIBLICAL CALL FOR FRUITFULNESS

Throughout Scripture, we have seen, God calls the covenant people to live lives of fruitfulness. We are to labor for the advance of God’s reign, for righteousness to be normative to the human character, and for justice to bless everyone. Just as in the past, God intends for the covenant people of today to be fruitful and make disciples in response to the grace we know in Christ Jesus. The promise remains: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20 NIV).

Ministry that bears no fruit, that brings about no demonstrable change in people's lives, is no ministry at all.

Jesus uses *fruitfulness* to draw our attention toward the results, outcomes, impact, and effect of our ministry. In *Bearing Fruit*, Lovett Weems and Tom Berlin focus the church on changing lives rather than on merely maintaining or surviving. With unapologetic candor, honest passion, and helpful examples, *Bearing Fruit* weaves practical experience with biblical mandate to help us fulfill God's mission for the church. A helpful, hopeful tool for rethinking ministry.

--Robert Schnase, author of *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*

Bearing Fruit is an excellent book on leadership and the local church! It reminded me of things I know but had forgotten, it renewed my passion for leadership, and it inspired new ideas and insights for the church I serve. This is the one book we've asked our leaders to read together before our strategic planning process this year.

--Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor, The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection Churches are created to be fruitful. The faith, knowledge and actions of Christian leaders can be shaped toward fruitfulness. As guides of our spirits and mentors of our practice, Berlin and Weems lead us beyond frenzy, lethargy, excuses and denial. Our work matters, and we dare not engage it without an eye to the quantifiable contribution that we make.

-- Hope Morgan Ward, Resident Bishop, Mississippi Conference, The United Methodist Church

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