

fruit bearing

Bernard Palmer considers the purpose of being Christian

Many socially-minded aid organisations started with a Christian agenda. But then the social aims took over and the concerns of the Bible about eternal salvation slipped into the background or were lost. Cadbury, Oxfam, Christian Aid, Barnardo's and YMCA are just a few. The Christian Aid website has a section on what they believe and it says 'Christian Aid has a vision - an end to poverty'.¹ It seems as if meeting social needs can become the main focus for Christian organisations and even churches. The same can happen in the practice of medicine. High standards of care become the only focus, with the Lord Jesus himself relegated.

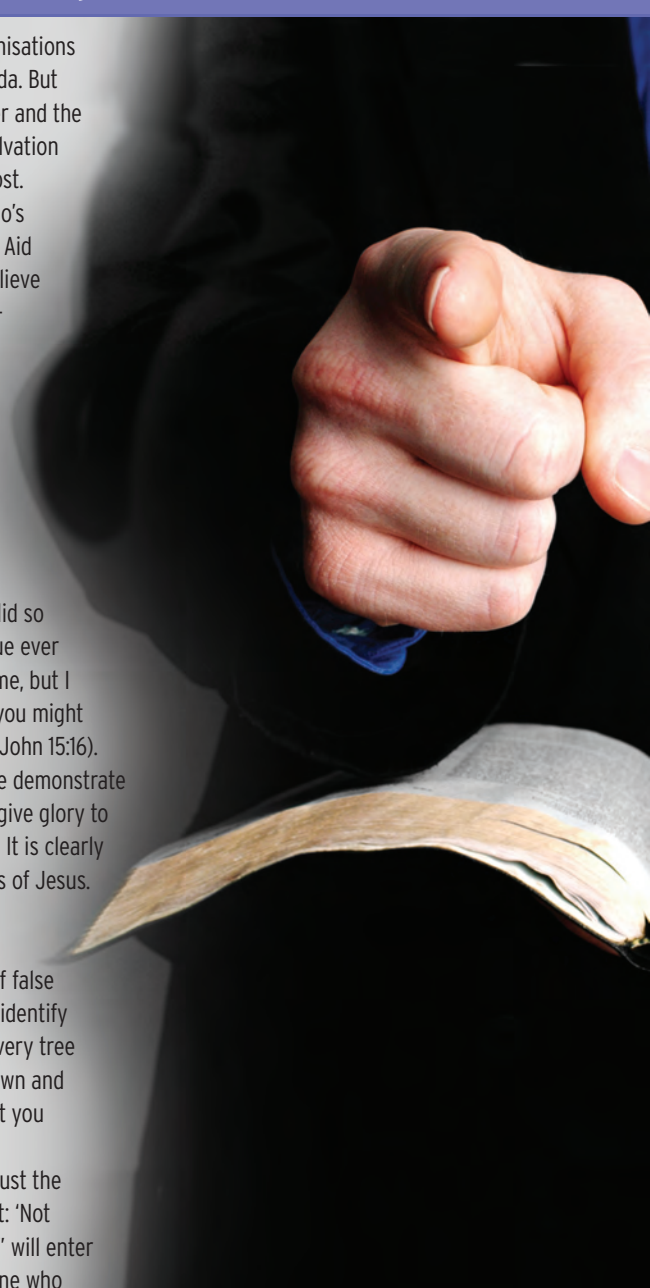
When Jesus chose his disciples he did so with a purpose. The same has been true ever since. Jesus said 'You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit - fruit that will last' (John 15:16).

It is by producing much fruit that we demonstrate that we are followers of Jesus and so give glory to God (John 15:8). But what is this fruit? It is clearly something that shows we are followers of Jesus.

Jesus

Jesus also warned about the danger of false teachers and said that 'their fruit' will identify them. 'Watch out for false prophets...Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognise them' (Matthew 7:15-20).

Jesus continues by saying it is not just the words people use that constitutes fruit: 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who





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does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord," ... Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evil doers!" (Matthew 7:21-23). The fruit is surely the life that stems from a personal relationship with Jesus.

Paul

When Paul wrote to the young Colossian church he told them that his regular prayer for them was, '... ask(ing) God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God' (Colossians 1:9-10).

For Paul, a Christian's life begins with an understanding and acceptance of God's truth about Christ, which then results in a Christ-centred life. This life is the fruit God expects of all true Christians. The fruit must begin in our thoughts and so affect our actions and words. When writing to the church at Galatia, Paul emphasises that the fruit of the

Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) should not be thought of in terms of gifts but in terms of relationships with others. It is through warm relationships that the gospel spreads.

All Jesus' followers are given the undeserved status of being righteous before God. When Paul wrote to the church at Philippi he described his prayer for them: '...that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of

righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God’ (Philippians 1:9-11).

As in his letter to the Colossian church, knowledge about God and his revelation is a fundamental need. This knowledge of God’s gift of salvation, given to all who are committed to Christ, is to produce a new holy life.

The fruit of being in Christ, the fruit of the Spirit, is the actions, character and speech that stem from this new relationship with God. Real fruit gives the glory and honour to Jesus Christ. Today many consider that kind and beneficial actions performed by Christians are automatically fruit. They may be, but only if they are undertaken as representatives of Jesus, to bring glory to him. The danger is that others may see our good works and give glory to us (Matthew 5:16). They are outwardly similar actions but have different motives. One glorifies Christ, the other man. Part of this fruit is sharing the gospel with others.

evangelism in the New Testament

When Paul was in Troas, on his second missionary journey, he had a vision of a man in Macedonia who begged him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us’ (Acts 16:9). Today many would respond to such a request by having a collection and gift day in response to whatever social or economic need is found. Paul did not think in this way. ‘After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them’ (Acts 16:10).

This was the understanding of Jesus and his apostles. Spiritual needs trumped social needs, though both are important. The whole book of Acts is about the urgent spiritual need people have, and the priority the church has to proclaim the gospel of Jesus to the world and expect a response.

At the beginning of his ministry Jesus substantiated his Messianic claims by healing many people. The effect was dramatic, with large numbers interested (Mark 1:37). Such popularity may be the ambition of some modern healing evangelists and their protégés but it was not what Jesus wanted his ministry to centre on. He wanted nothing less than the salvation of as many people as possible. Submission to God’s Messiah, his chosen king, is much more important. It gives permanent benefits, not temporary healings. Mark 1:38 records him leaving the crowd clamouring for healing to preach in nearby villages, saying ‘that is why I have come’.

James wrote his letter to encourage Christians who were facing ‘trials of many kinds’. At the end he reminds his readers about the priority of taking the message of salvation to individuals. ‘My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins. (James 5:19-20).’ This passage is particularly interesting as it reminds us that sin is, at root, wandering from the truth God has given us in Christ. We know this both through the message of the Bible, but also through the spiritual instincts that God has put in us all.

evangelism in the Old Testament

When Abraham was chosen by God to be the Father of his special people, the Lord said to him, ‘I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you ...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you’ (Genesis 12:2-3). A little later the Lord changed his name from Abram, which means ‘exalted father’ to Abraham which means ‘father of many’, in accordance with God’s promise (Genesis 17:5).

This promise was repeated a third time, presumably to make sure Abraham and his descendants understood, but on this occasion the means of this promise being fulfilled is clarified. One day he was visited by the Lord himself. The Lord said to Abraham and the other two, 'Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him' (Genesis 18:18-19).

God's chosen people must 'keep the way of the Lord' and he will then glorify his name through them. Abraham clearly understood something of this. When the Lord told him that he was about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of their serious sin, Abraham pleads that if there are some righteous people in the city, 50, then 45, even 40, or 30, or 20 or finally only ten, won't God stay his hand for the sake of the righteous? (Genesis 18: 23-33). His nephew Lot was living in that city of pagan people but there were not even ten righteous! Lot was clearly not very effective at bringing people back to God.

In the New Testament Paul explained that this promise to Abraham referred to all people who would be saved by faith (Romans 4:16-17). It was Abraham's belief, his relationship with God that resulted in his salvation. How can people have such a saving faith if they are not told about the Lord who saves those who trust him and who later sent Jesus to be the means of that salvation?

The book of Proverbs explained that 'The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and the one who is wise saves lives' (Proverbs 11:30) well before Jesus and his apostles appeared.

Psalm 145 is a glorious psalm of praise to the living God. Today many Christians think of praise as singing. David, who wrote this psalm, sees praise as a much wider lifestyle which includes sharing the gospel with others.

'Your faithful people extol you. They tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might, so that all people may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendour of your kingdom' (Psalm 145:10-12).

On the day I was thinking about this question of the fruit of righteousness, I was walking along the seafront in Ramsgate and came across a group of nuns belonging to the Sisters of Charity, the order founded by Mother Theresa. We got into conversation and I asked if they could explain the gospel to me briefly. One nun immediately replied that she could do this in five words, 'You did it to me' she said, quoting from Matthew 25.

She seemed to think that her good works were the gospel. I questioned whether this was the gospel as it sounded more like the works Christians are called to do once they have been saved. A fellow nun then interrupted and explained that the gospel was Jesus himself who died on the cross to save us from our sins. How important it is that we are clear about this when talking with others.

Our good works and social actions are part of the outworking of our faith and will help with physical, psychological and social problems but unless combined with the message about the salvation to be found in Jesus Christ these actions cannot be called 'the fruit of righteousness'. Jesus came to bring eternal salvation which is only found through faith in him. ■

REFERENCES

1. www.christianaid.org.uk