

IS FAITHFULNESS/FRUITFULNESS A TRADEOFF?

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Rightfully, Jesus is called "faithful and true" (Rev.19.11, & see the book's other "faithful" reff.), though his efforts were fruitless: when he was arrested, his followers "scattered" (Mt.26.31, M.14.27); when he was executed, they returned to their former life-interests (Jn.21.3). Like most single-leader movements, this one died with the loss of its leader.

The post-Cross, pre-Easter mood of the disciples is easy to feel (L.24.21). The fruit had died on the tree. The promised Kingdom Come had not come. Death was the answer to the promise of Life.

1 In Jesus' case, faithfulness/fruitfulness were not a calculated tradeoff. He saw his **role-assignment** as single: to be faithful to the Voice/Vision. Coevally, he saw his Father's self-role-assignment as single: to bring the Son's faithful witness to fruition--as the Father did in the resurrection of the Son.

2 Jesus' absence of fruit-calculation gave his ministry a pellmell, unmodulated, unguarded quality. As love drove out fear, faith drove out figuring the angles either in self-regard or in longterm personal influence. "Trust and obey, / for there's no other way." Work as though all depends on you, pray knowing that all depends on God. We would agree, would we not, that such fanatic behavior is socially irresponsible? Or would we? Well, who are "we"? The early Christian martyrs took Jesus here as direct model. Recall stories of missionaries who, without much or even any fruit (i.e., converts), bravely-joyfully persisted in their work. Have you known some faithful, apparently fruitless souls?

Jesus continues to challenge a non-fanatic definition of social responsibility.

3 I've written extensively on faithfulness, most recently #2725 ("What, now, is 'faithful witness'?"). What about **fruitfulness**: how does the Bible define it, & relate it to faithfulness?

(1) While the Bible's a heavenly book, it's also an earthy: "fruit" in Heb. & Gk. is often literal, though tropical (metaphorical, symbolic) occurrences of the words are far more frequent. Those derivative meanings continue in Ivrit & Hellenisti, modern Hebrew & modern Greek.

(2) The continuum of meaning in all the words & all the usages is **calculation** of harvest, profit, payoff, reward, positive result, victory, in/visible laurels (both, in 1Cor.9.24-27, the Bible's most extensive use of the footrace as metaphor; cf. Gal.2.2,5.7 & Phil.2.16--these loci showing the footrace to be Paul's favorite image for single-minded goal-orientation, here the winner's wreath being the "fruit," though in these contexts "fruit" does not appear).

(3) The readymade Christian compensation, sometimes alibi, even sometimes boast, for failure is that: "The point is to be faithful, not successful." But in the NT, is that more a choice (either faith-trust-faithfulness-loyalty or success) or more a sequence (be successful by being faithful)? Both, depending on many circumstantial factors. So complex, even somewhat ambiguous, is the NT here that Christian ethics cannot, out of hand, condemn/commend either the calculator (e.g., the king who wants to war but not without sizing up the enemy, L.14.31-2) or the benevolent prodigal (e.g., the widow who, by temple giving, left the temple with nothing to live on, M.12.42-44, L.21.1-4). (Condemned, however, are those who use religion for self-aggrandizement: Mt.6.2-3 [though in the next v., God rewards the uncalculating]).

(4) Most Christians, on this matter, are more comfortable with Paul, than with Jesus, as model. Paul sees a **sequence** between loyal-faithful attention to the gospel & its demands (e.g., 2Cor.10.5: "take every thought captive to obey Christ," a military metaphor, in Stoic style), & fruitfulness in his church-planting-&-tending herculean efforts. For Jesus, it was a **choice**, the success/failure of his witness being left entirely up to God (e.g., Jesus' going up to Jerusalem though anticipating capture, Mt.20.18 & parallels).

4 Of moderns, Dietrich Bonhoeffer illustrates both. He calculated success in his preaching-teaching-writing, but risked all (& lost) when he became convinced he should join a conspiracy against Hitler's life, & damn the torpedoes....When truth as one sees it is at stake, calculation can be betrayal.

5 Social creatures that we are, our faith-/fruit-fulness decisions are made in sense-1 view of others, including organized others, ie. institutions. (Sense-2 is passive, how we are seen by others.) Even anchorites involve their social existence in their explanations of withdrawal from society. But as rational creatures, we know that swapping faithfulness (personal integrity) for relational- & institutional prospective payoffs (hoped-for fruitfulness) is a problematic tradeoff at both ends. (1) How will the compromise affect one's character today & tomorrow? (2) Will the law of unintended consequences kick in & stop, stultify, or even reverse one's social goals? The warm fuzzy (the person who goes fuzzy in in convictions in order to be warm & "in" for, hopefully, everybody's good) may prove out to be worse than a failure: what s/he defends/promotes/envigorates should have weakened & died.

CASE: The Oxford/94 politically correct Bible, titled THE NEW INCLUSIVE TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE. The tradeoffs will prove, I'm convinced, bad swaps. E.g., to PC, "obey" is a four-letter dirty word, so children are requested only to "heed" their parents. Good intention (viz. "justice"), but bad unintended results! Better it would be, wouldn't it, to be faithful to Scripture, treating it with integrity matching its integrity, than betraying its integrity to make it more female-friendly?

CASE: In the interest of maintaining church unity, some thinkers would soft-peddle the issue of truth in order to play to diversity--as though one could have a circle with only a center, no circumference. "A center without a circumference is just a dot, nothing more" (Thos. Oden, 12 Apr 95 CHRISTIAN CENTURY, 396-7: one defines both orthodox center & heresy-excluding circumference, or one has nothing that can be called either orthodoxy or heresy: we cannot expect our affirmations to be "taken seriously" unless we have, as the Barmen Declaration had, "the courage to make negations").

6 Instead of such a tradeoff, we need to **balance** the truth of love with the love of truth, in the spirit of humble openness about both "truth" & "love." But in the mainline churches (in contrast to what Alister McGrath in his latest book calls the "mainstream" [viz. evangelical] churches), truth has been traded off for a hypertrophied love, under pressures to make hasty, guilt-ridden accommodations to a variety of "victims" who play themselves as underloved by the liberal churches & by society in general. What gives feminism its special punch in the liberal churches is that it manipulates their hypertrophied compassion, even to the point of ultrafeminism's trans-mogrifying of the biblical God, whom we are invited to forget (in spite of the major biblical warning against "forgetting the Lord your God").

7 Back to **Jesus**, who gets hauled to & fro in the faithfulness/fruitfulness debate. The liberal tradition, beginning with David Friedrich Strauss (LEBEN JESU, 1835), was big on fruitfulness, & was countered by the eschatologists, beginning with Johannes Weiss (but peaking in Albert Schweitzer's VOM REIMARUS ZU WREDE [1910, THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS]), who were big on faithfulness (Jesus' leaving the fruitfulness question entirely in the hands of his Father). Amos Wilder's 1932 Yale PhD dissertation bridged between the two (ESCHATOLOGY AND ETHICS IN THE TEACHING OF JESUS, 1936), my position even before he became mentor on my PhD more than a half century ago. I believe that it is of the Holy Spirit that the canonical NT materials are open to a wide range of talmudic conversation toward the best decisions we can arrive at in our present-day situations. (Here I'm appropriating a Jewish word to a Christian situation. The Talmud continues to provide wisdom to the Jews because of its nature as a series of conversations on religion & ethics, with high debate-potential because of the relative economy of both the Hebrew language & its orthography, & because those conversations encourage, & model for, continuing conversations.)

8 A good friend frequently says, of the ultrafeminist success in the United Church of Christ, "It's over." He was not noted for attacking it while it was crouching, before it pounced; but he's critical of my attacking it now that it's taken over (& especially of my attacking individual promoters of it). But a woman UCC pastor, in a recent letter which was circulated to the "Confessing Christ" steering committee, is militant, wanting us to go beyond reaction to action. "A banner across Main Street announcing a goddess festival at the junior highschool where my son attendsfueled my fire." In this as in many controversies, faithfulness should take precedence over fruitfulness.