Will We Ever See Digital Spiritual Fruit?

Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained. — Philippians 3:12-16

Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. — Galatians 5:24-25

At some point in recent years, the Internet passed from being the predominant domain of businesses and organizations, transforming into something very *personal*. In the earliest days of the world wide web we were fascinated with what was presented to us in much the same way as an audience watching a movie, but more and more they found ways to personally include us in their websites, forums and blogs. Those of us in the web development community at one time called this "Web 2.0", a way of stating that the static eye candy of the earliest days of the Internet needed to give way to making the web as interactive and personal as possible. Currently we have gone far beyond the meager aims of "Web 2.0" to achieve a daily integration of individuals with technology not imagined even then. We have passed from merely getting information from the Internet to regularly leaving more of ourselves in Cyberspace with each passing day.

I am not speaking about the technologically addicted who take such things to excess. As a routine part of daily life these days, it is not unusual for a "normal" person to send and receive emails, send and receive text messages, post updates to Facebook, check on same from friends and colleagues, and leave comments to stories or products on blogs and websites. We are no longer limited to doing so while only sitting in front of a computer, but perform them throughout the day and night on our smartphones and iPads at home, in the car, while eating or at the store. We regularly take photos and

videos with these devices which are automatically uploaded and shared with others, which we likewise routinely view as they are offered by others back to us. At times we may even supply book or product reviews, share in much more detail on a blog, or participate in a discussion on an online forum. This leads to the greater question of whether we are *truly* grasping the degree to which our *whole* behavior and life is open to scrutiny. Even more pointedly, what kind of witness does this openness into our personal lives testify to when it comes to our Christianity?

> *"For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit, nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit. For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush. The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart. — Luke 6:43-45*

Biblically speaking, everyone's internal condition is visibly and publicly revealed by their fruit. Whereas in the past someone had to have some kind of familial, social or work relationship with us so as to have enough contact to become aware of what kind of fruit producing tree we were individually, we can now be likewise examined by those who have little or no personal relationship with us. Through our messages, comments, updates, pictures, etc. we leave, on a daily basis, proof of who we *really* are to anyone who comes across them.

One of the reasons I am writing about this is because, quite frankly, I often see a consistency in the online lives of non-Christian friends and acquaintances which is questionable or outright lacking in some who are supposed to be maintaining a higher Christian standard. It seems that there are Christians who, by their words and behavior, prove they believe they can operate according to different rules depending on either the subject or venue. In other words, they suspend their own standards for certain topics such as politics, a social issue, or even addressing the situation of an immediate family member. What comes across to others is that while they profess to be a Christian in general, there are specific examples of words and/or behavior which seem to directly contradict that assertion.

> *Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned*

you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. — Galatians 5:19-21

It doesn't take a Holy Spirit-filled believer to discern the presence of these behaviors in others. It's interesting to me that American Christians feel a sense of entitlement under their constitutional freedoms so that they feel they have a particular license in the areas of "*enmities, strife…outbursts of anger, dissensions, factions*". Many times this not only comes through in the course of more mundane conversations concerning personal things going on in their lives, but even more so in public forums on politics and social issues. For some reason there are many Christians living under the false notion that their American right of free speech entitles them to override the greater biblical standards by which they're supposed to live:

> *The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will. — 2 Timothy 2:24-26*

We're not supposed to be winning political arguments or prioritizing social agendas, but engendering "*repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth*". Give them the Gospel and everything *else* will take care of itself; keep acting like you do and they'll *never* embrace it.

But the worst online examples, in my opinion, are those websites, blogs and forums dedicated to issues which are supposed to be restricted solely within the walls of the Church. The worst, in my estimation, are so-called "discernment ministries" who claim to be exposing false teachers and movements, but whose behavior is so unseemly it is often no different from that which they claim to be exposing. And a close second to this are many online exchanges hyper-focused on the area of biblical prophecy. The war between certain adherents of Pre-Tribulationism and Pre-Wrath eschatologies look no different to others than the religious warring of Islamic Shia's vs. Sunni's, Irish Catholics vs. Protestants, Orthodox Jews vs. Kabbalah, or any other purely religious rivalry. The online world exposes not just our *individual* behavior in such things, but *collectively* as well.

> *If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another. — Galatians 5:25-26*

It should be of the utmost importance to Christians how often in Scripture our behavior is directly associated not just with our speech, but by how we treat each other. I once heard a pastor preach what I believe is still true today, "Why is it that non-Christians so often know *better* than Christians how Christians should behave?" Yes, non-Christians know that Christians shouldn't smoke or get drunk, shouldn't swear and cheat on their spouses, and don't have a license to act like a horse's patootie when it suits them. Non-Christians can see just by the way that Christians treat each other on discernment and prophecy websites that they are not acting like Christians at all.

Thankfully I see Christians who, across their emails, text messages, twitter feed, Facebook account and every other fingerprint of their online presence, consistently reveal an uncompromising faith. Their behavior never seems to stray just because the topic might be political or social in the secular realm, or a matter of discernment or prophetic in the spiritual.

> *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. — Galatians 5:22-24*

I am not trying to make the case that we should be something that we are not, or that we should put up a false online presence to cover up who we genuinely are—I am saying that we are *already* being genuinely exposed for who we truly are and therefore should recognize the need to genuinely *change* in accordance with God's Word and ways. Since the new "normal" is to live an open, online life which exposes our interior more than ever before, we have an immediate measurement of our spiritual fruit. I personally think that in the list Paul provided, the most under-realized spiritual fruit in the Christian grove are "*patience, kindness…gentleness, self-control*"; these seem to be casualties of our online presence much of the time.

Finally, I think we have to take into consideration this phenomena of an open, online life when it comes to our treatment of *others*.

I have a friend in a prominent, public ministry who, to put it as kindly as possible, is a bit of a technophobe. As a personal weakness this can be easily forgiven, but his lack of understanding the new "normal" I've been describing is causing some problems for him which I've also observed in others. He still thinks that the Internet is used and operates

the way it did when it came into existence back in the mid-90's. In other words, he thinks when something is said on the Internet, it is being presented by someone who is claiming to be an expert or authoritative, and therefore is instantly read by everyone in the world. He has not caught on yet that blogs numbers in the hundreds of millions, the number of web pages in the trillions, nor that scientists will have to invent a new name for a number big enough to describe the number of text messages, tweets and Facebook updates piling up each day, much less in a given year. In other words, just because something appears in Cyberspace, it no longer can be assumed it has been authored by an expert or source of authority, but is far more likely to merely be a part of a normal person's daily life.

I wholeheartedly agree that we have to treat outright false teachers differently than others. We are obligated to not just publicly identify them, but specifically warn against what they are doing. But just because someone says something publicly in any of the myriad channels draining into the Internet does not automatically place them in the same category and therefore pre-qualify them as a false teacher. We have to recognize the difference between someone who is sharing a part of their self in a conversational, albeit digital, manner, and those who are specifically engaging in a concerted effort to deceive and connive.

I believe we often see online Christians engaged in un-Christian behavior because they treat an individual as a "corporate solidarity"—a seminary term that describes when an individual figure in Scripture represents a greater group as a whole, like when Barabbas the sinner was set free and the sinless Messiah crucified in his place. Barabbas is a "corporate solidarity" in that we can see in this one man *individually* how he represents the spiritual condition of all of us as a group *corporately*.

Likewise, in this digital age when everyone's life now extends into everyone else's field of view, we still have to recognize that we are most often dealing with individuals. We shouldn't automatically treat each person as a representative of something we want to address globally at the expense of that individual. It goes against the very nature of the Great Commission, when Jesus commanded not that we make *converts*, but *disciples*. We so often lose sight of this in our zeal to convert many to our opinion through the opportunity of responding publicly to someone, when the real opportunity lost is the Gospel leading to discipleship.

Jesus provided an entirely new standard by which not just the whole of Christianity is be measured, but each individual within it. The challenge for us in a digital age when we are personally and purposely exposing ourselves on a daily basis to the rest of the world is whether we will also follow through and live up to it:

> *"You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you. This I command you, that you love one another. — John 15:16-17*

In Him,

Servant@WalkWithTheWord.org