

Faithful and effective: A working doctrine of grace

by [Robin Lovin](#) in the [June 13, 2006](#) issue

It's been a good season for scandal. Bribery sent a California congressman to prison. Fraud charges provided courtroom drama in Houston. Everybody everywhere talked about baseball stars on steroids. Along the way, there was the usual quota of exploitation, infidelity and larceny among the clergy.

People with a good knowledge of history or a decent doctrine of original sin will not be surprised by these developments, but they might ask why these stories are so prominent today. Some of it, of course, is simple greed. Politicians and preachers find themselves exposed to power, wealth or privilege beyond their experience and are seduced by it, then seduce others to get their own share of it.

But there is more: we are obsessed with results. Shareholders, fans, constituents, clients and congregations want more—more profits, more hits, more charisma, more votes, more favors. Whatever the previous achievement may have been, the expectation is that the next one will top it. Because trees do not grow to the sky, the demand for continuous advances can end only in failure or deception. Is it any wonder that people who are used to being carried along by their own success often choose deception?

The problem here is not just spin, or the press release that puts a bright face on bad quarterly results. The problem is a flight from human finitude that begins by offering others the illusion that you are unlimited and ends in the delusion that you can escape the laws of the state, if not the law of gravity. We Christians, who have a tradition of understanding the connections between finitude, anxiety and sin, might be able to provide an effective warning against this temptation if we were not so caught up in it ourselves. Megachurches plant colonies in the next ring of outer suburbs when the possibilities closer to their original sanctuary are exhausted. Mainline leaders suddenly become experts on “church growth” and assure overworked pastors in missional circumstances that “any church can grow if it really

wants to grow.”

Perhaps it is time for Christians to remind the world and ourselves that results are not the only things that matter. The obsession with results is the soil in which fraud and exploitation grow. Political slogans about ending corruption and moralistic demands for honesty are not likely to change things if they fail to acknowledge this underlying problem: Every human success has its limits, and we are finally dependent on one another and on God. Faith provides some resistance to our common human temptation to forget that. Faith demands an initial honesty before God that gets in the way of the deceit and self-deception from which scandals grow. As Stanley Hauerwas puts it, we are called to be faithful, not effective.

That does not mean that we are called to be ineffective, or that failure is itself a measure of faith. The point is rather that effectiveness is never entirely the result of our own efforts. Success is not something we can deliver on our own. Alongside a doctrine of original sin, we need a working doctrine of grace to guide our risking, winning and losing.

We should first of all be suspicious of any plan that simply asks for more. That is especially true of quantitative goals imposed by external authorities, whether these are stock analysts shaping Wall Street expectations or church bodies setting targets for contributions or membership growth. We should also be suspicious of ourselves when we find that the only plan we have to offer is one that promises more.

Being faithful means that instead of asking for more, we begin by asking what faithful people would do. Chances are the answer will put us where the needs are greater and the risks of failure are higher than we would choose if more were all that mattered. Being faithful involves a certain prayerful expectation of results, but—here’s where the working doctrine of grace comes in—our commitment is not to produce results. Our commitment is to discern what faithful people would do, and then do it.

That is not the same thing as not caring about the results. There is a way of thinking about Christian witness that leaves it outside the world in which choices and results matter, because nothing that is really important can be accomplished in this world anyway. That way of thinking requires us to choose between faithfulness and effectiveness, because it assumes that effectiveness is always unfaithful. But the fact is that choices and results do matter, at least in an interim way.

Paul, who was not known for giving human achievements more credit than they deserve in the overall scheme of things, talked about the differences between those who build with gold, silver or precious stones and those who build with wood, hay or straw. Especially in the short term and in local situations, we can measure the quality of our work against meaningful standards, and we can often predict what the outcomes of faithful action might be. We should not hesitate to say what we hope for and what we expect. If we fail to do that in the life of the church, the vacuum will be filled by management techniques and growth gimmicks.

But our commitment is to do what we have promised, not to meet expectations, whether our own or those of others. If we can learn to measure effectiveness in terms of discerning what is really worth doing and keeping a covenant to do it, we might be both faithful and effective. We might even suggest to a society obsessed with results that there is a different way to think about what it expects from its entrepreneurs, political leaders, sports heroes—and preachers.