

THE VINE AND THE BRANCHES IN JOHN

Douglas M. Beaumont
Charlotte, NC
October 2003

One of the more difficult passages of John's gospel to deal with for those who hold to eternal security regards the identity of the vine and the branches of chapter fifteen. For the Arminian believer the interpretation might seem very clear: Jesus is the vine, believers are the branches, and those who do not remain in Him are cut off (from salvation) and subsequently burned up (in judgment). Indeed, if Jesus' phrase "in Me" in John means the same thing that Paul means when he writes "in Christ" this might seem to be the only possible interpretation.¹

However, it seems that such an understanding would cause unnecessary tension when one considers other verses such as John 6:37 where Jesus states, "All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out." It seems rather counter-intuitive to think that Jesus on the one hand would affirm that one who merely comes to Him will not be cast out, whereas one already "in Him" might face that possibility. Nevertheless, even interpreters who do not follow the Arminian approach may disagree as to what a better explanation might be. The following presents some of these other, more likely, understandings.

The True Vine

The figure of the vine was not an unknown metaphor at the time Jesus used it. Tenney notes that Jesus "used the allegory of the vine. This device was not unfamiliar to the disciples, for

¹Jn. 15:1 *cf.* Rom. 6:23, 8:1; 1Cor. 15:22; Gal. 5:6; etc.

the culture of the vine was one of the common occupations of that day in Palestine.”² While the metaphor might have also been used by other cultures in that day it appears that Jesus expected His disciples to already be aware of some specific usage of the image and thus recognize His claim in a special sense. More than likely this means that this symbol is referring to something that would have been recognized by an Israelite. Talbert notes that the vine “usually symbolizes Israel in Jewish and early Christian tradition.”³ Bruce agrees: “The vine is one of the OT figures used to illustrate the people of Israel.”⁴ Bruce supports this statement with a reference to Psalm 80:8-19 which depicts Israel as a vine brought out of Egypt and planted in the land. Carson makes a similar claim regarding the religious use of the figure in the Old Testament and beyond Israel’s borders.⁵ Morris cites Hosea 10:1-2 when he points out that “when the vine imagery is used in the Old Testament it is mostly used of Israel, . . . it is used of Israel in its sinfulness rather than its fruitfulness.”⁶

Jesus’ expectation is also seen in His use of the term “true.” Morris believes this term is used to contrast Jesus with other vines.⁷ Similarly Lenski believes that this term “implies a

²Merril C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 226.

³Charles Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 212.

⁴F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Basingstoke, England: Pickering, 1983), 308. See also (Isa. 5; Jer. 2:21 and 12:10; Ezk. 15:18-, 17:1-21, 19:10-14).

⁵D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 511-13.

⁶Leon Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 515.

⁷*Ibid.*

contrast with other vines.”⁸ But what is this contrast that is being made? It might at first seem that this word is being used in contrast with some sort of “false” vine, however that would not fit well with other Johannine uses of this type of phrase. The term “true” (Gk. ἀληθινῇ) is used by Christ several times in John’s gospel. In 1:9 Jesus is said to be the “true light,” in 6:32 He calls Himself the “true bread,” in 6:55 He is the “true food and . . . true drink.” To take one example, the “true bread” in 6:32 is a clear contrast with the manna that the Jews associated with Moses’ ministry. Carson says of this comparison that, “the manna from heaven was comparatively crude: it perished with time, and the people who ate it perished with time.”⁹ While certainly inferior in its life-giving potential it would make little sense to call the manna “false bread.” Rather, Jesus is amplifying the symbol: manna came down from heaven, Jesus is heavenly; manna was given to Israel, Jesus was given to the world (Jn. 3:16); manna was a gift given by God, in Jesus God is the gift.

Assuming that Jesus here is using “true” in a similar fashion, then “‘true’ in verse one means ‘genuine’ or ‘real,’” not “true” as opposed to “false.”¹⁰ Lenski thinks that Jesus is “the actual origin, of which all natural vines, genuine in the domain of nature, are only images.” But if “vine” here is being used in the same sense as its Old Testament usage, it makes better sense to see “the true vine” as a combination of the two applications: Jesus is the true vine in contrast, not to earthly vines, but to Israel.

⁸R. C. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 1026.

⁹Carson, 287.

¹⁰Tenney, 227.

Carson, although he discounts the parallels, notes that “vines and vineyards crop up in several parables in the Synoptic Gospels. . . . These parables have two things in common: (a) they all have narrative plot; (b) in each case the vineyard, or people connected with the vineyard, portray Israel, or a part of Israel, being far less fruitful than ought to have been the case.”¹¹ He concludes: “Two factors decisively decide the issue in favour of an Old Testament background: (a) the frequency of John’s appeals to the Old testament, both in allusions and quotations; (b) the dominance in the Fourth Gospel of the ‘replacement’ motif.”¹² Concerning this replacement idea Carson says that Jesus is “the one to whom Israel pointed.”¹³ “The figure of a vineyard had been used in Isaiah 5:1-7 to reveal God’s purposes for the nation of Israel. . . . The vines in that vineyard did not fulfill their function. In contrast to them, Christ said, ‘I am the true vine.’”¹⁴ This accords well with similar uses throughout Scripture and, more importantly, in John’s writings.¹⁵ So Jesus “is here presented as the true Israel, the genuine vine, the man of God’s right hand.”¹⁶

¹¹Carson, 511-12.

¹²Ibid., 513.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 441.

¹⁵See ἀληθινός, ἡ, ὅν in W. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, F. W. Danker, and W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹⁶Bruce, 308.

The Vinedresser

Having concluded that the vine represents the “true Israel” in this picture, what is to made of the vinedresser? Jesus interprets for His hearers what are probably the most unclear parts of the metaphor (again, assuming that He expected them to understand the vine symbol from their cultural background), and leaves little to the imagination here. He plainly states that the vinedresser is God the Father. The Father’s role in this image is twofold: “First, *he prunes or trims every branch that does bear fruit . . . so that every branch will be even more fruitful . . .* . . . Second, the Father (Jesus says) *cuts off every branch that in me that bears no fruit, i.e.* he gets rid of the dead wood so that the living, fruit-bearing branches may be sharply distinguished from them, and may have more room for growth.”¹⁷ Tenney states succinctly: “God cuts dead wood out from among His saints.”¹⁸ The question arises, “What is meant by ‘cutting off’?” The answer will depend heavily on what is meant by the branch figure in the metaphor which therefore will have to be explored further before an adequate response may be given.

The Branches

Jesus’ words to the disciples in 15:5 seem a plain enough explanation for the identification of this element: “You are the branches.” Therefore it is the disciples themselves who are in view. The rest of the verse seems to add others, however, for Jesus goes on: “he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing.” Note that He shifts from “he who” which appears to be inclusive of anyone abiding to “you” which joins the two subjects under the same admonition “apart from Me you can do nothing.” If this is the

¹⁷Carson, 514-15.

¹⁸Tenney, 227.

case then it would appear that anyone who abides in Christ is a branch. But Jesus adds yet another twist: “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch.” Going back to verse two we see the same thing, namely that there are branches that do not bear fruit (do not abide) that are cut off. Thus is reached the crux of the interpretation: what does it mean to be “in Me” and what does it mean to be “cut off”?

Pentecost states that, “While the cutting off may be understood to refer to a pruning process in which a gardener removes a branch, the Greek word translated “cuts off” normally is rendered “lifts up.” This may be preferable here. . . . Christ was saying that His Father had the responsibility of putting each branch in a place where it could bear fruit.”¹⁹ Pentecost’s interpretation follows the practice of farmers who lift vines from the ground (which grew there to conserve water) to a place higher up where fruit would grow. This, however, does not appear to be the way Jesus means the phrase for He plainly states that these branches are burned up.

Consider the logical progression:

- (1) Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; . . .
- (2) the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine,
- (3) If anyone does not abide in Me, he is a thrown away as a branch, and
 - (a) dries up; and
 - (b) they gather them, and
 - (c) cast them into the fire, and
 - (d) they are burned.

Pentecost seems to realize this when he comments further that, “The pruned branches from the vineyard were dried and then used to heat the ovens in which the daily bread was

¹⁹Pentecost, 441.

baked.”²⁰ He then compares this to the fiery test of works that believers will face. The problem here is *all* believers will face this test of their works—not just the ones who are unfruitful (1 Cor. 3:13). This would seriously compromise the divisive motif of the metaphor which seems to indicate that fruitful branches will never face this fire.

Lenski also identifies the branches with believers but thinks that the division occurs when they lose faith: “We need not puzzle about the unfruitful branches being ‘in Me’; for evidently these are disciples whose hearts have lost the faith and the love that once dwelt in them and joined them to Christ. . . . It is idle to think of branches which are unfruitful from the start because Jesus uses the phrase ‘in Me’ ; for no man becomes a branch unless fruitfulness is in him from the start. But he may lose his faith, and then he is promptly cast away.”²¹ He clearly believes the fire here to be indicative of final judgment: “While the noun ‘the fire’ and the verb ‘are burned’ belong to the figure, like Matt. 3:10; 5:22; 13:30, these terms are, to say the least, highly suggestive of hell fire.”²² Talbert may agree with this ultimate outcome if for a different reason: “This separation from Christ is probably the sin unto death mentioned in 1 John 5:16-17.”²³

Carson offers another point of view. He believes the branches to be Jewish believers (both true and false):

But the latter view, that these dead branches are apostate Christians, must confront the strong evidence within John that true disciples are preserved to the end (e.g. notes on 6:37-40; 10:28). . . . The transparent purpose of the verse is to insist that there are no true

²⁰Ibid., 442.

²¹Lenski, 1029.

²²Ibid., 1039-40.

²³Talbert, 213.

Christians without some measure of fruit. Fruitfulness is an infallible mark of true Christianity; the alternative is deadwood, and the exigencies of the vine metaphor make it necessary that such wood be connected to the vine. (Dead branches from some other tree, lying around in the vineyard dirt, could scarcely make the point.) These have no life in them; they have never borne fruit, or else they would have been pruned, not cut off. Because Jesus is the true vine, in contradistinction to the vine of Israel that bore either no fruit or rotten fruit, it is impossible to think that any branch that bears no fruit can long be considered part of him: his own credentials as the true vine would be called in question as fundamentally as the credentials of Israel. Cf. further on v. 6. If we must think of 'branches' with real contact with Jesus, we need go no further than Judas Iscariot.²⁴

He shows here that “in Me” has more to do with dependance on the vine for spiritual growth. He relates this aspect to new covenant theology: “God remains among and in his people by renewing them with his life” This follows from his replacement ideal mentioned earlier which he reinforces with the vine’s imagery in Ezekiel: “he [Ezekiel] warned that if a vine failed to produce fruit its wood was good for nothing but a fire (Ezk. 15:1-8); Jesus assumes the same thing, and thus by alluding Ezekiel, where the vine stands for Israel, he is warning his contemporaries of their imminent danger, . . . both the threat and the promise still apply to the Jews to whom he [John] is primarily writing.”²⁵

While judgment is certainly in mind in the Ezekiel passage, the message seems to focus more upon the cause (Israel’s uselessness) rather than the judgment (effect). Citing the same passage as above, Bruce may better capture the essence of the image reference when he states that, “The wood of a dead vine branch cannot be used to make a piece of furniture or a utensil of any kind: it will not even serve as a peg to hang something on. A vine branch that does not

²⁴Carson, 515.

²⁵Ibid., 517.

produce grapes is good only for fuel (Ezek. 15:1-8).”²⁶ In other words, it is not that fire here represents judgment or hell fire, rather it shows that if a thing does not fulfill its purpose, it is useless and can only be used for a much lower purpose. If the Ezekiel reference is what Jesus had in mind then this interpretation would better fit the Old Testament reference and therefore should better fit the disciples’ understanding inasmuch as they were expected to grasp the imagery.

Morris seems to agree with this assessment: “We should be clear that Jesus is here referring to conditions of fruitfulness, not to eternal salvation. We should not understand the passage to mean that God will remove from the number of the saved those who are not fruitful. . . . Jesus is talking about the saved and about what will happen in order that they may be the most effective servants they can be.”²⁷ Lenski notes well that “All who are ‘apart from Jesus,’ those who have never been joined to Him as well as those who have lost their connection with him, are able ‘to do nothing’ in the way of acceptable service to God.”²⁸

Fruit Bearing

The last image to consider is that of the fruit. Whatever this fruit is, it is the production of it that will keep one from being cut off. Lest this be taken in a legalistic manner, Jesus is quite clear that it is only through a living connection with Him that fruit may be brought forth (15:4). Tenney believes that fruit bearing has to do with obedience which is “a sure mark of the believer as disobedience is a mark of the unbeliever.”²⁹ He also notes that joy and love (other fruit of the

²⁶Bruce, 308.

²⁷Morris, 516.

²⁸Lenski, 1036.

²⁹Tenney, 228.

Spirit) are included. In this interpretation a believer is connected to Jesus and through Him produces good works. Again, this might be tenable if a believer can become an unbeliever. But if this is the case, then is obedience the key to “abiding”? The branches are not cut off unless they bear no fruit—which would seem to be the result of unbelief. In this case would not the unbelief alone be enough to sever the connection? Can a believer become an unbeliever through disobedience? Probably not, as Tenney sees these two in a cause-effect relation. Yet this seems to compromise the metaphor which has the branches cut off as a *result* of fruitlessness (which in Tenney’s view is disobedience rather than unbelief).

Lenski’s view is that the fruit here is equivalent to the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. This is in contradistinction to those who think that bearing fruit means making more disciples for “no branch ever grafts another branch into the vine.”³⁰ To remain in Jesus is to believe in Him always. Thus, according to Lenski, the fruitless are unbelievers.

Talbert focuses primarily on the aspect of communal love when he writes, “‘Bearing fruit’ here has been understood to mean either winning unbelievers to Jesus (cf. 4:35-38) or manifesting all the fruits of the Christian life, especially love of the other members of the community (13:34-35).”³¹ He goes on to point out that, “Jesus has chosen the disciples and appointed them . . . to bear fruit: not in this instance for missionary activity . . . but for love within community (as in 1 John 3:14-15; 4:16).”³²

³⁰Lenski, 1030.

³¹Talbert, 213.

³²Ibid., 214.

Carson includes the love aspect but adds several other “fruits,” as well as linking fruit bearing to effective prayer: “This fruit is the consequence of prayer in Jesus’ name, and is to the Father’s glory. . . . This suggests that ‘fruit’ in the vine imagery represents everything that is the product of effective prayer in Jesus’ name, including obedience to Jesus’ commands . . . experience of Jesus’ joy . . . love for one another . . . and witness to the world.”³³ This follows the text much more closely (15:5-12, 16, 27) and this is a good indication that it is the correct view. This conclusion is further evidenced by Bruce’s insightful observation that “the ‘fruit’ of which this parable speaks is, in effect, likeness to Jesus.”³⁴

Abiding

While the image Jesus presents may raise several questions, the literal use of the word “abide” is of importance for it seems to be the hinge that holds all the rest together. The Greek term translated here is ἀναπαύομαι: which means “to remain in a place, with the implication of continuing to rest—‘to remain, to abide.’” While numerous interpretations may be put forth here, it seems best to understand this in terms of the disciples’ connection that existed when the words were spoken. The disciples were “already” clean, they were already “in” Jesus—the command was not to *become* “in Him,” but rather to *remain*.

How did the disciples come to be “in” Christ? They had followed Him, obeyed Him, believed in Him, and loved Him. Indeed it is these very things that Jesus stressed in the previous chapter as illustrations of what abiding meant. All of these seem to be different aspects of the one central relation that one is to “remain in.” In fact, Jesus points out that a change has taken place

³³Carson, 517.

³⁴Bruce, 310.

in their relationship: they were now His friends (15:12-17, note that Judas was not among them [13:30] when Jesus spoke these words, so no clarification was necessary as in 6:70-71, 13:10-11). Their belief and obedience had made them disciples, their love had made them friends.

Conclusion

Jesus, as the only true source of eternal life with God, has explained using the image of the vine and the branches that those connected to Him through their love, obedience, and belief (which are really aspects of one relation) will love one another and obey God through the very life that He gives them. Those who try to make their way without Christ's life will fail and thus be rendered useless to the God who chose them to do those very things.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arndt, W., Gingrich, F. W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Bruce, F. F. *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*. Basingstoke, England: Pickering, 1983.
- Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.
- Exell, Joseph. *The Biblical Illustrator: St. John*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962.
- Lenski, R. C. *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961.
- Louw, J. P., and Nida, E. A. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*. Vol. 1. New York: United Bible Societies, 1989.
- Morris, Leon. *Expository Reflections on the Gospel of John*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990.
- Pentecost, J. Dwight. *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981.
- Talbert, Charles. *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles*. New York: Crossroad, 1994.
- Tenney, Merrill C. *John: The Gospel of Belief*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988.