

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	59		Gary L.W. Johnson
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THE TRUE VINE

“John 15 follows John 14 thematically in that it continues the theme of God and the believers living and abiding in each other. Chapter 15 advances the image from an inorganic dwelling to an organic one: *house* and *rooms* become *vine* and *branches*. In chapter 15 the imagery of vine and branches speaks of a living union between Christ and his believers, as well as a spiritual union among all those attached to him. Each believer’s union with Christ is the basis of his or her union with all other believers. This illustration of vine and branches corresponds to the Pauline image of the head and many members comprising the one body of Christ; both show the relationship between Christ and the church as a living, organic entity. Finally, this chapter provides further explanation about how the disciples, with the help of the Comforter, would continue Jesus’ work of glorifying the Father in the midst of a hostile world. The reader should be cautioned that no illustration or parable is complete in and of itself with respect to purporting theology. Theology should be based on plain statements, not parables. Hence, we should be careful not to formulate a theology based on Jesus’ illustration of the vine and the branches. Most of Jesus’ illustrations, taken as a whole, portray his observations about certain spiritual realities. For example, the parable of the sower in the synoptic Gospels is an illustration of how different people respond to the message of the gospel. We go beyond the intent of the parable if we ask questions such as, *Were the people represented by the rocky soil and those choked by weeds ever regenerated? Were they true Christians who then lost their salvation?* Likewise, we go beyond the intent of Jesus’ illustration about the vine and the branches when we ask, *Were the branches that didn’t bear fruit true Christians who lost their salvation?* To ask these questions is to read our theology into the text. Rather, we should take the text for what it portrays of the relationship of Christ and believers.”¹

In the course of developing the theme of abiding in Himself, and in that in eternal life, our Lord lays to rest some unsatisfactory emphases in the Christian life. Thomas a Kempis wrote a famous book many years ago entitled *The Imitation of Christ*. Now let it be said immediately that it is a biblical injunction that we be imitators of Christ in our Christian living (cf. 1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Pet. 2:21). However, it is the express teaching of our Lord in this passage, as well as the teaching of the Apostle Paul in many passages, that the Christian life is not only an *imitation* of Christ. It is a *participation* in Him (cf. Phil. 1:21). “For me to live is Christ” is Paul’s description of his life, and the relation that he sets out between the Lord and himself is a far deeper one than simple imitation. It was Jowett who said, “Some people visit Christ; others abide in Him.” The latter is the thrust of this paragraph. The theme of the section, it seems to me, is fruit-bearing. Abiding is a term that relates to that concept, not to the concept of vine-planting (cf. 14:16; 15:6). The word *fruit* occurs about eight times

in verses one through sixteen, and only two times elsewhere in John. That gives us a clue to the theme of the passage. It is not easy to trace our Lord's flow of thought through the section. The Greeks loved connecting conjunctions to indicate the flow of thought in their writing, and ordinarily the New Testament authors followed suit. In the Johannine literature there is some absence of reliance upon such connectives in verses one through seventeen of chapter fifteen. The connection of thought rests, then, largely on the development of concepts in the section. We shall try to trace the thought, but it is not as easy as it is in some other sections of the book and of the New Testament.²

I. **GOD THE SON IS THE TRUE VINE.** "The first point of this parable is the *I am* saying itself, and the obvious emphasis is upon the word *true*. 'I am the *true* vine,' says Jesus. This does not mean that he is true as opposed to that which is false but, rather, that he is the one, perfect, essential and enduring vine before which all other vines are but shadows. The word is used in precisely this sense elsewhere where Jesus is declared to be the *true light* (1:9), the *true bread* (6:32), and the *true tabernacle* (Heb. 8:2)."³ Whitelaw contends that Jesus is speaking here of his exaltation: "It is the glorified Christ who constitutes the tree of which believers are the branches. The term *vine* had been frequently employed by the Hebrew prophets and poets to designate Israel (Ps. lxxx. 8; Is. v. 2; Jer. ii. 21; Hos. x. 1). But Israel had not proved a true vine in the sense of perfectly embodying the divine thought. The spiritual truths of which the vine and its branches were the emblems had their highest expression in the interrelations henceforth to subsist between the glorified Saviour and His people."⁴

II. **GOD THE FATHER IS THE GARDENER.** "Jesus is here presented as the true Israel, the genuine vine, the man of God's right hand. As in the psalm, God is both the planter and cultivator of the vine. The noun translated *vinedresser* is the ordinary Greek word for *farmer* (*geōrgos*), but in English *farmer* is not used in connexion with the vine. The thought of the mutual indwelling, the coinherence, of Christ and his people has found repeated expression in Chapter 14; here it is conveyed in the parable of the wine and the branches. If Jesus is the vine, his disciples are the branches, deriving their life and fruit-producing strength from him. The Father tends the vine with loving care, making it as fruitful as possible: he removes unfruitful branches and prunes those that are fruitful, clearing away superfluous wood so that they may be even more fruitful. There are plays on words in the Greek that cannot easily be reproduced in English; *he removes* is *airei* and *he prunes* is *kathairei*. Moreover, *kathairei* can also mean *he cleanses* and is linked with *clean* in verse 3: 'you are *katharoi*.' Here is an echo of John 13:10, 'you are clean (*katharoi*), but not all.' Judas was the exception then; in terms of the present parable, he is an unfruitful branch that has to be removed. The disciples who keep Jesus' word (cf. John 14:23), in whom his word has found a lodging place (cf. verse 7 below), are *clean* on that account; it may be implied that his word is the means used by the Father to perform his work of pruning."⁵

(to be continued)

ENDNOTES

¹ This section is taken from the very helpful work of P. W. Comfort and W. C. Hawley, *Opening The Gospel of John* (Tyndale, 1994), p. 241.

² I owe this analysis to my theology professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, the late S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.'s lectures on the Gospel of John.

³ J. M. Boice, *The Gospel of John IV* (Baker, 1999), p. 1160.

⁴ Thomas Whitelaw, *Commentary on John* (rpt. Kregel, 1993), p. 332.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel & Epistles of John* (Eerdmans, 1983), p. 308.