

**What Does Abiding Have to Do with Being a Christian?**  
*The Theological Significance of John 15*

Evangelical Theological Society Regional Meeting

April 2005

Biblical Theological Seminary  
Hatfield, PA

By  
Keith J. Miller  
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Much has been written in an attempt to answer some of the hermeneutical issues that John 15 poses to one's understanding of what it means to be a Christian. There are two main views of John 15: there are those who feel strongly that to make fruit bearing (good works) as evidence of saving faith is to add something to faith for salvation, and then there are those who understand fruit bearing as a necessary part of saving faith and the lack of fruit bearing (good works) is a sign of not having saving faith. This paper attempts to answer who it is that Jesus has in mind in his illustration of the vine and its branches, and what the relationship abiding has to the Christian life.

## The True Vine (v. 1)

Jesus begins his parable emphatically,  $\nu\epsilon\gamma\omega$ ,  $\epsilon\iota\upsilon\mu\iota$ <sup>1</sup>  $h' a;mpeloj h' avlhqinh.$ ; Jesus' use of  $\nu\epsilon\gamma\omega$ ,  $\epsilon\iota\upsilon\mu\iota$  is one of His eight great "I am" statements all of which communicate the exclusive role that is His as the Son of God.<sup>2</sup> What is intriguing in this passage is the fact that Jesus classifies Himself as being the "true" vine, for the image of the vine is often used as a symbol of Israel;<sup>3</sup> the fact that the vine was a symbol of Old Testament and even first century Israel is supported with the evidence of its impression on Israel's coins and ceramics.<sup>4</sup> The point Jesus makes to His disciples in v. 1 is that He alone is true Israel, and it is on this point that Beale in his provocative book, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* writes, comments, "The word 'true' likely includes more than mere moral and cognitive truth, but also the idea of 'authentic' in the redemptive-historical sense of Jesus being *true* Israel by fulfilling the Isaiah 43:10-19 prophesy about God and Israel's witness to the new creation."<sup>5</sup>

But Jesus does not only classify himself as the true vine, for He further clarifies that  $o' path,r mou o' gewrgo,j evstin$ . The image that may have come to the minds of the disciples is the judgment imagery that Israel's association as the vine brought, which seems to be the point for Jesus' word choice for 15:1, of which Borchert is writes,

In the Old Testament the vine is frequently used as a symbol for Israel. Yet it is usually employed as a symbol of a disobedient Israel (Ezek. 17:6-10) that has become wild (Jer. 2:21) and dried up. It will therefore be burned with fire (Ezek. 15:1-8; 19:10-14) because it is ripe for judgment (Isa. 5:1-7). In the Old Testament texts, therefore, if Israel is the vine or the vineyard, then the Lord God is viewed as the vinedresser or gardener (cf. Isa. 27:2-6), but what is totally different in the Johannine *mashal* is the role of Jesus and the disciples.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The use of  $\epsilon\upsilon\gamma\omega$ , (personal pronoun) with  $\epsilon\iota\upsilon\mu\iota$  (verb) is an emphatic statement.

<sup>2</sup> See John 6:35; 8:12, 58; 10:11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1; 18:4.

<sup>3</sup> Comp. Ps. 80:8-18; Isa. 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Jer. 2:21; Ezek. 15:1-5; 17:1-21; 19:10-15; Hos. 10:1.

<sup>4</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *WBC: John*; (Nashville, Tenn: Thomas Nelson, 1999) 272.

<sup>5</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2004), 296.

<sup>6</sup> Gerald L. Borchert, *The American Commentary: John 12-21* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002) 138.

The difference of Jesus as being the vine and His disciples' role as the branches in relation to the Old Testament imagery of Israel as the vine is that Jesus fulfills everything that Israel was to embody as a nation but failed to do. Jesus, as the Vine, is the True Temple where the sphere of worshipers is extended beyond the borders of one nation, or as Robertson so clearly points out,

God now 'tabernacles' with his people in a way that far surpasses his dwelling with Israel in the days of their wilderness wandering (John 1:14), that the angels of God now ascend and descend on the Son of Man rather than on Jacob's visionary ladder (John 1:51), that the lifting up of the Son of God supersedes the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness (John 3:14), and that the manna from heaven given by Moses has been transformed into 'living bread' given by Christ (John 6:49-51)."<sup>7</sup>

Jesus is the Vine because He true Israel, and all who are identified in Him are citizens of in Christ. Jesus, the Vine, now stands between the Vinedresser, "as a kind of 'mediator' of life and sustenance."<sup>8</sup> The role of the Vinedresser is to tend the branches of the Vine.

### **Cutting and the Christian Life (vv. 2-3)**

In deciphering the meaning of *fe,rw*, it is helpful to look at the grammatical construction and context of John 15:2.<sup>9</sup> As stated in verse 1, Jesus is emphatic about who He is in relation to Israel, that He is the Vine and His Father is the Vinedresser.<sup>10</sup> Notice that, "*pa/n klh/ma evn*

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<sup>7</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God*, (Phillipsburg, Penn.: P&R Publishing, 2000), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Gerald L. Borchert, *The American Commentary: John 12-21* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002) 138.

<sup>9</sup> Some have proposed that the key to the a proper hermeneutic of John 15 rests in viticulture of the first century; Gary Derickson provides a plausible argument for the above hermeneutic in his paper, "Viticulture and John 15:1-6." His aim was to show that John 15:2 (*pa/n klh/ma evn evmoi. mh. fe,ron karpou ai;rei auvto.*) could not mean the removal of the unproductive branch from the Vine, but instead meant a raising up of the branch for fruit bearing. Derickson supports his thesis on the practice of cultivating grapes in the first century. The problem with Derickson's argument is threefold: 1) the context of 15:1 is not so much concerned with contemporary agricultural practices as it is with the vine imagery of OT Israel verse Jesus; 2) viticulture in the first century did involve the removing of dead branches from the vine; 3) John specifically links abiding (e.g. eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Christ) with eternal life (see John 6:54-56). If abiding is linked to eternal life in John 6, why would it be any different in John 15?

<sup>10</sup> Note John 14 in comparison to Ch. 15, and notice how verse one functions as the linchpin between the two chapters (The Father is not mentioned in vv. 2-7).

evmoi. mh. fe,ron karpō.n” is referring to those who consistently bear no fruit (mh. fe,ron is descriptive present).<sup>11</sup> In other words, the branch Jesus is referring to here is not just going through a season of no fruit bearing, it is consistently bearing no fruit. What seems to be the problem is that there is no sap from the vine running through the branch to promote fruit bearing.

What gives so many a hermeneutical headache is the word ai;rei, for it can mean: to “raise up” or to “take away.” If it means to “raise up” then there is no problem in understanding the defunct branch as a Christian who is either caught in some habitual sin or spiritually immature. If ai;rei means “take away” then one is forced to conclude that the defunct branch refers to a Christian who loses his/her salvation or is a person who claims to be a Christian, but never really belonged to Christ.

One of the hermeneutical problems that both of the above camps face is what to do with possessive evn evmoi. (equivalent to “in me”). Joseph Dillow, in his thoughtful article writes, “A review of the 16 occurrences of ‘in Me’ in the Gospel of John seems to suggest that when Jesus used this phrase, He referred to a life of fellowship, a unity of purpose, rather than organic connection.”<sup>12</sup> But, the implications of Dillow’s proposal are that it is possible to be a true Christian without manifesting any fruit (e.g. good works) as a result of being regenerated; the implications of the above proposal would even allow a person to be a true Christian without any indication that he or she even has a love for God (the most basic form of fruit bearing).

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<sup>11</sup> Bill Arp, *John 15:1-8: Is the Branch That Does Not Bear Fruit a Description of Judas’ Fate and Fate?* (Paper: ETS, 2004) footnote 46.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph C. Dillow, “Abiding is Remaining in Fellowship: Another Look at John 15:1-6,” *BibSac* 147 (January 1990): 45-6.

Those who understand *ai;rei* as “take away” do not see any real problem with “*evn evmoi*” for to make much of it is to read into the parable,<sup>13</sup> it is on this point that Laney comments are helpful, “Jesus did not specifically identify the “branches” with any particular group of followers, but He did refer to two kinds: fruit-bearing branches and fruitless branches.... I would be safe to say that Jesus was talking about disciples. Some disciples bear fruit, but others – such as the ‘disciples’ (broadly defined as interested listeners) who turned away from Jesus after His hard teaching in John 6 – bear no fruit (John 6:60, 66).”<sup>14</sup>

Another important point that should be considered in deciphering the meaning of *ai;rei* in John’s Gospel is that the word *ai;rw* is used 23 times in John’s Gospel alone and can be translated as “take” or “lift up” in eight places (5:8-12; 8:59; 10:18, 24), and in thirteen places it is translated “take away” or “remove” (see 11:39, 41, 48; 16:22; 17:15; 19:15, 31, 38; 20:1-2, 13, 15). In order for one to understand 15:2, the historical context should be considered.

The context of John 15 is chapters 13:1-14:31. Jesus is about to be betrayed and handed over to the authorities for execution, and one learns in 13:21-30 that Judas, one of the twelve, left the upper room to betray Jesus. It is important to realize that John 15 is part of the discourse that followed Judas’ betrayal (John 13-17); therefore the context of John 15 includes Judas’ betrayal. The implications for such a context is that Jesus may have had Judas on His mind in 15:2 – the same Judas that Jesus would later include in His high priestly prayer, “While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction...” (John 17:12).

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<sup>13</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1991): 515

<sup>14</sup> J. Carl Laney, “Abiding is Believing: The Analogy of the Vine in John 15:1-6,” *BibSac* 146 (January 1989): 56-7.

When one examines the flow of John's Gospel, it seems very plausible to understand the defunct branch in verse 2 not as one that is raised up for the purpose of fruit bearing, but instead taken away (e.g. removed) from the Vine altogether.<sup>15</sup> D. A. Carson agrees that the defunct branch is not raised up, but is instead removed:

The transparent purpose of the verse is to insist that there are no true Christians without some measure of fruit. Fruitfulness is an infallible mark of true Christianity; the alternative is dead wood, 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."<sup>16</sup>

The branch that does bear fruit is the branch that is further pruned for the purpose of producing more fruit (kai. pa/n to. karpou.n fe,ron kaqai,rei auvto. i[na karpou.n plei,ona fe,rh]). In contrast to the branch that consistently bears no fruit, which is a sure sign of death, the fruit bearing branch is the one that habitually bears fruit: a sure sign of life.

Just as fruit bearing is the essential purpose of a vineyard, so it is with the Christian; verse 3 makes sense in light of what has been said thus far, for it is in v. 3 that Jesus reassures the

<sup>15</sup> Compare the following passages:

John 10:14-16	John 15:1-2	John 17:12
I am the good shepherd. <u>I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father;</u> and I lay down my life for the sheep. And <u>I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.</u> So there will be one flock, one shepherd.	"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. <u>Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes,</u> that it may bear more fruit.	While I was with them, <u>I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction,</u> that the Scripture might be fulfilled.

<sup>16</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991): 515.

disciples, “h;dh u`mei/j kaqaroi,<sup>17</sup> evste dia. to.n lo,gon o]n lela,lhka u`mi/n,” and it is here

Carson sheds some light on what is meant in this text,

The cleansing power of the word Jesus has spoken to his disciples, then, is equivalent to the life of the vine pulsating through the branches. Jesus’ *word (logos)* is not assigned magical power. What is meant, rather, is that Jesus’ ‘teaching’ (as *logos* is rendered in 14:23), in its entirety, including what he is and what he does himself is the *logos* incarnate, 1:1, 14), has already taken hold in the life of these followers.<sup>18</sup>

### **Abiding and the Christian Life (vv. 4-6)**

One of the basic themes that emerge in John’s Gospel is that of “abiding.” Jesus commands his disciples “mei,nate evn evmoi,,” for mei,nate is in the aorist imperative; this idea of remaining is something Jesus emphasized in the previous chapter in John 14:10, 17, for to abide is not an option for the disciples, it is what they must do. The point of the illustration of the Vine and the branches is that fruit bearing is only possible if the same sap that the Vine (e.g. Jesus Christ) produces runs through its branches (e.g. the disciples). But Jesus does not stop short with the command to abide in Him, for he finishes the thought with a curious statement: “kavgw. evn u`mi/n.” Carson notes that there are three legitimate ways to take the first sentence of 15:4, (1) Conditional: ‘If you remain in me, I will remain in you; (2) Comparison: ‘Remain in me, as I remain in you; (3) Mutual imperative: ‘Let us both remain in each other’, ‘Let there be mutual indwelling.’<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Murray provides a very helpful exegetical note in his commentary on John regarding John’s choice of ai;rei, kaqai,rei(v. 2), and kaqaroi, (v. 3); he notes, “There is a play on words in ai;rei and kaqai,rei, which is maintained in kaqaroi, of v. 3. ai;rei means “take away, remove,” in this context “clear away”; kaqai,rei primarily means “cleanse,” frequently in a religious sense, but it is used also in the sense of “clear” (i.e., the earth of weeds). ai;rei denotes the removal of dead branches, kaqai,rei the removal of unwanted shoots from living branches. We may render therefore, he clears away” the useless branches and “clears clean” the living ones, or... he “cuts off” the dead branches and “cuts clean” (of unwanted growth) the living ones” (George R. Beasley-Murray, *Word: John* [Nashville, TN.: Thomas Nelson, 1999]: 272).

<sup>18</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1991): 515-6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 516.

The point that Jesus is making to His disciples in v. 3 is one of encouragement: “Abide in me, and understand that I am abiding in you.” The reason for the above conclusion is because the emphasis is not on the disciples but on Jesus, which Murray helpfully clarifies, “‘And I in you’ may be viewed as the apodosis of a conditional sentence: ‘If you remain in me, I shall remain in you’; but the emphasis in the passage is on *Jesus*, the Vine, hence it is more likely that a note of encouragement is intended here, “and be assured, I am remaining in union with you.”<sup>20</sup>

What v. 4 shows the reader is that fruit bearing is only possible when the branch is fueled by the life giving sap of the Vine: no sap, no life: death, or as Kostenberger so keenly put it, “By implication, external, apparent growth that is not fueled by pulsating life within is not indicative of true, spiritual life.”<sup>21</sup> This is why v. 4b leaves little room for misunderstanding: *aqw.j to.*

*klh/ma ouv du,natai karpou.n fe,rein avfV e`autou/ eva.n mh. me,nh| evn th/| avmpe,lw|( ou[twj ouvde. u`mei/j eva.n mh. evn evmoi. me,nhte* Life for the branch is only found in an abiding relationship with the Vine; the problem with Judas and those like him is that they are “dead wood” in which the Vine has no abiding relationship.

Jesus, in 15:5-6, repeats the central point of what has been said in vv. 1-4, for to abide in Jesus (*h` a;mpeloj*) is to produce much fruit resultant of the Vinedressers’ pruning hand (*kai. pa/n to. karpou.n fe,ron kaqai,rei avto. i[na karpou.n plei,ona fe,rh|*), but without an abiding relationship in the vine one can bear no fruit (*ouv du,nasqe poiei/n ouvde,n*). Therefore the only source for fruit bearing is the Vine, which is the purpose of the vine branch. It is very important to note that fruit bearing for the branch is not a secondary option, it is imperative.

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<sup>20</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *Word: John* (Nashville, TN.: Thomas Nelson, 1999) 272.

<sup>21</sup> Andreas J. Kostenberger, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: John* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 2004): 454.

The consequence for a defunct vine branch is “evblh,qh e;xw w`j to. klh/ma kai. evxhra,nqh kai. suna,gousin auvta. kai. eivj to. pu/r ba,llousin kai. kai,etai.” It is important to note that even though evblh,qh and evxhra,nqh are normally understood as gnomic aorist, it is better to understand these words as Murray explains: “expressing a sequence introduced immediately with absolute certainty.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, the consequence for no abiding relationship in the Vine is sure destruction. What is very striking is the parallel of v. 6 with Ezekiel 15:1-8,

And the word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, how does the wood of the vine surpass any wood, the vine branch that is among the trees of the forest? Is wood taken from it to make anything? Do people take a peg from it to hang any vessel on it? Behold, it is given to the fire for fuel. When the fire has consumed both ends of it, and the middle of it is charred, is it useful for anything? Behold, when it was whole, it was used for nothing. How much less, when the fire has consumed it and it is charred, can it ever be used for anything! Therefore thus says the Lord God: Like the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so have I given up the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And I will set my face against them. Though they escape from the fire, the fire shall yet consume them, and you will know that I am the Lord, when I set my face against them. And I will make the land desolate, because they have acted faithlessly, declares the Lord God."

It is important to note that Ezekiel 15:1-8 is not alone in its relationship to John 15, for the New Testament is replete with similar language especially in relation to one's relationship to fruit bearing,<sup>23</sup> note especially Luke 13:6-9,

And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'

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<sup>22</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *Word: John* (Nashville, TN.: Thomas Nelson, 1999) 268.

<sup>23</sup> See Matt. 3:10; 7:16-17; 13:30; Rom. 7:4; Eph. 5:8-11.

It is interesting that the above passages, in contrast to John 15:6, seem to serve the same purpose: productive fruit bearing is a sign of life; no fruit bearing is a sign of death. If other fruit bearing illustrations are used in both the OT and NT for the purpose of contrasting the true people of God verses the artificial why would John 15 be any different?

### **Concluding Thoughts**

What does abiding in Jesus Christ have to do with the Christian life? Everything! To abide in Jesus is to be in union with Him and as John Murray so forcefully wrote, “It [union] is not simply a step in the application of redemption; when viewed, according to the teaching of Scripture, in its broader aspects it underlies every step of the application of redemption. Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation not only in its application but also in its once-for-all accomplishment in the finished work of Christ.”<sup>24</sup>

Abiding in Christ is the experience of salvation, for it is in abiding that one experiences the new life that is only found in Jesus Christ. Abiding is the eating of Christ’s flesh and the drinking of His blood in that He becomes the source of one’s life and breath and joy, for Jesus said Himself, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.”<sup>25</sup> And as already seen in John 15, abiding in Christ is the source of fruit bearing, and to abide in the Vine is to have Christ’s words abide in the Christian (v. 7); to abide in the Vine is to display God’s multifaceted perfections in Jesus Christ, for the life of the branch takes on the life of the Vine

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<sup>24</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1955): 161.

<sup>25</sup> John 6:53-56

which is proof of being a disciple (e.g. a Christian).<sup>26</sup> To abide in the Jesus Christ (the True Vine) is to be a true Christians (unlike Judas), and to be a Christian is to be a disciple of the True Vine. Abiding has everything to do with the Christian life.

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<sup>26</sup> John 15:8; compare also John 14 with Galatians 5:22-26; John 15 with Ephesians 2:1-10.

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