

**ABIDING IN CHRIST:  
A DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY  
OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE  
(Part 1 of 3)**

by  
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Jesus' discourse on the vine (John 15:1–6) has been a perennial theological battlefield. Calvinists and Arminians traditionally debate whether or not the removal of the unfruitful branches indicates the loss of eternal salvation.<sup>1</sup> Within the Reformed tradition itself other skirmishes have been fought over the hermeneutical framework: Does the discourse address salvation and thus the consequent and necessary bearing of fruit by the genuine believer, or does the discourse address the believer's necessity of maintaining fellowship with Christ in order to produce fruit in the spiritual life?<sup>2</sup> The majority of Reformed commentators have adopted the view that this passage addresses the inevitability of fruit bearing in the genuinely saved believer, thus making 'abiding' a semantic equivalent of 'believe' and fruit production a necessary evidence of genuine saving faith. This is also the position of Lordship salvation advocates who follow the Reformed position. These issues are paramount because they become a watershed for key soteriological and sanctification models.

The purpose of this paper is to present the 'abiding is fellowship' view as the most consistent with a literal interpretation of the passage, a distinction between Israel and the Church, and

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<sup>1</sup> It is not within the scope of this paper to interact with the Arminian position.

<sup>2</sup> J. Carl Laney, "Abiding is Believing," *BibSac* 146 (January–March 1989): 56–66; Joseph Dillow, "Abiding Is Remaining in Fellowship: Another Look at John 15:1–6," *BibSac* 147 (January–March 1990): 44–53; Gary W. Derickson, "Viticulture and John 15:1–6," *BibSac* 153 (January–March 1990): 34–52; Charles R. Smith, "The Unfruitful Branches in John 15," *Grace Journal*, 9 (Spring, 1968): 3–23; James E. Rosscup, *Abiding in Christ: Studies in John 15* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973).

the glory of God as the overall purpose of Scripture and the believer's life. Since these three distinctives comprise the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism, it follows that this interpretation is most consistent with a dispensational theology.<sup>3</sup>

Before any application from John 15:1–6 can be made several key questions must first be addressed to insure a proper interpretation. Is the vine imagery for the nation Israel in the Old Testament the background for interpreting the vine analogy? What do these key terms mean: “In Him,” “abide,” “taken away?” Are the branches all believers? Are the fruit bearing branches the only believers? Are there two types of branches or three? Is the fire of verse 6 a statement of judgment, and if so, does this refer to a judgment in time, the judgment seat of Christ, or the Great White Throne judgment? What is fruit, overt quantifiable activity or internal character transformation? How is fruit produced, is this a direct goal of the branch or the indirect and unavoidable consequence of abiding (meaning either salvation or fellowship)? Finally, what are the theological implications? If the analogy refers to believer versus unbeliever, the thrust of the passage is soteriological and related to assurance and fruit as the necessary evidence of justification. If the analogy describes three types of believers, then the subject is the sole and necessary condition for growth in the spiritual life and spiritual production.

### **Is the vine imagery for the nation Israel in the Old Testament the background for interpreting the vine analogy?**

After perusing several commentaries and journal articles I observed that among those who held to eternal security of the believer, there were two distinct interpretations of the vine analogy. Those who interpreted the purpose of John 15 and the first epistle of John to distinguish between genuine believers and “professing” believers also held to a ‘Lordship Salvation’. Those who interpreted these same passages as distinguishing between

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<sup>3</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 38–40.

types of believers, carnal Christians and spiritual Christians, also uniformly held to a free grace gospel. Upon further investigation, it appeared that Free Grace advocates were also dispensational in orientation, while Lordship advocates echoed an interpretation common to reformed theologians who hold to some form of replacement theology or Covenant Theology.<sup>4</sup> This seems like more than coincidence. Since all Free Grace advocates were dispensational, but not all dispensationalists were Free Grace, could this be a factor? Since theological systems endeavor to be internally consistent, the question arose, what unstated theological presuppositions affect the interpreter of this passage such that he is predisposed to interpret these passages in certain ways?

Attempts to isolate and identify such assumptions are extremely difficult. Unstated presuppositions are notoriously slippery. Yet birds of a feather do not flock together for no reason at all. The Covenant interpretation is a subgroup of the larger system of Replacement Theology.<sup>5</sup> These systems, including Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Wesleyanism, and various other theological systems except dispensationalism, understand the New Testament Church to be a replacement for the failed Israel of the Old Testament. For them, Israel is the Church in the Old Testament and the Church is the Israel in the New Testament and heir to all the divine promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in a

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to suggest that all Covenant Theologians take the same view (Arthur Pink was one exception) or that all dispensationalists agree with the “Free Grace” position, but to determine if these interpretive positions are the most internally consistent with their theological system’s presuppositions. Some of the proponents of Lordship salvation cited in this paper are indeed dispensationalists. But they clearly expound an interpretation of John 15 no different from their Replacement Theology counterparts.

<sup>5</sup> By ‘Replacement Theology’ I mean all theological systems which see the Church replacing Israel in God’s plan. Dispensationalists see Israel as God’s permanent people, set aside temporarily in the Church Age, but restored to a position of blessing and fruitfulness in the Millennial Kingdom. Since all theological systems except for dispensationalists understand the Church to be replacing Israel, it is to be expected that the vast majority of commentaries will take a similar approach.

‘spiritual’ form. In the Old Testament the vine was an image of national or corporate Israel, comprised of both believer and unbeliever. The thesis here is that a replacement theology presupposition underlies the interpretation of the vine of John 15 as a corporate image which, like Israel, includes believers and unbelievers (expressed as ‘professing’ believers) and that the pruned branches are those who never were genuine believers.

One Reformed writer makes the parallel between corporate Israel and the vine in John 15 clear:

As they [the disciples] are not a collection of individuals, but a corporate society, the new Israel of God—it is natural that Jesus should frame His allegory in language that had been used to describe the people of God under the old dispensation.<sup>6</sup>

Here Tasker makes the analogy of Israel as a corporate body in the Old Testament to the Church as a corporate body in the New Testament. This is consistent with the replacement theology motif, that the Church replaces Israel in God’s plan and is now the “new Israel of God.” Tasker then goes on to explain this in light of Jesus as the new vine.

Jesus’ description of Himself as *the true*, or ‘genuine’ vine, implies that Israel had been an imperfect foreshadowing of what was found to perfection in Himself. He is what God had called Israel to be, but what Israel in fact had never become. With Him therefore a new Israel emerges, the members of which draw their spiritual sustenance from Him alone.<sup>7</sup>

This is consistent with reformed presuppositions that there is no discontinuity in God’s program for Israel and the Church. The Church is simply the post-Golgotha replacement of unrepentant Israel in the divine program. Since corporate Israel was

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<sup>6</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 173.

<sup>7</sup> Tasker, *John*, 174.

composed of believers and unbelievers, the new corporate Israel of John 15 must also be composed of believers and unbelievers. Could it be that those who interpret John 15 as referring to believer versus unbeliever, even among dispensationalists, are unaware that these slippery assumptions of replacement theology undergird this interpretation and they unwittingly follow conclusions based on theological presuppositions inconsistent with dispensational theology? This is clearly seen from the following comment from a dispensationalist:

Just as there were those in Israel (the old unproductive vine) who were not really “of Israel, that is, who were not true believers, there were also some who, outwardly at least, appeared to be “of Christ,” but who were not inwardly united with Christ. These were in the “Jesus movement” just as the Sadducees were in the “Jewish movement.”<sup>8</sup>

Prior to making this statement, Smith quotes a series of Reformed, non-dispensational commentators to establish the believer-unbeliever interpretation. He then concludes that the vine must be like the vine of Israel and likewise composed of both believers and unbelievers. At the very least a *prima facie* case exists that the assumptions of replacement theology shape the Reformed and Lordship Salvation interpretation of John 15.<sup>9</sup>

That the vine and vinedresser were familiar images in the Old Testament is not lost on many commentators.<sup>10</sup> A brief pe-

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<sup>8</sup> Smith, “Unfruitful Branches,” 12.

<sup>9</sup> Though many who interpret John 15 as relating to believers and ‘professed’ believers might not have considered the connection with Israel to be their own presupposition, and many commentaries do not make this connection explicit, these quotes here demonstrate that an identification of Israel and the Church is indeed the presupposition of the Reformed and Lordship interpretation of John 15.

<sup>10</sup> Even those Free Grace dispensationalists who reject the “salvation” model for a “fellowship” model mention the Old Testament analogy, they just do not draw the same implications from it that Tasker and Smith do. See John G. Mitchell, *An Everlasting Love: A Devotional Study of the Gospel of John* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1982), 285ff.

rusal of the literature indicates that most commentators at least reference this ancient imagery as a possible backdrop for interpreting John 15. Laney observes:

Many commentators have suggested that Jesus appropriated the figure of the vine from vineyards located along the way from the Upper Room to the Garden of Gethsemane. It is more likely that Old Testament imagery rather than external stimulus determined Jesus' use of the figure. The vine is a familiar symbol of Israel in the Psalms and the prophets (Ps 80:8–16; Isa 5:1–7; Jer 2:21; 5:10 ; 12:10 ; Ezek 15:1–8; 17:1–24 ; Hos 10:1). This biblical symbol was so well recognized that during the Maccabean period the image of a vine was stamped on the coins minted by the Jewish nation. The Old Testament vine imagery included among other ideas fruitlessness, degeneracy, removal of branches, burning, and destruction. These are the very themes Jesus appropriated in John 15:1–6.<sup>11</sup>

This writer does not dispute Laney's observation of the ubiquity of the vine symbolism, but questions its bearing on the interpretation of John 15. Specifically we must determine if the themes in these Old Testament passages bear more than a passing resemblance to John 15. Do these passages cited by Tasker and Smith truly suggest that the unbeliever-believer issue is valid even for the Reformed model?

### **The Vine in the Old Testament**

In the Old Testament analogies God is the vinedresser and Israel the vine. Psalm 80 presents the nation Israel, composed of believers and unbelievers, as the vine first removed from Egypt and then planted in Canaan. But because of the vine's rebellion it [Israel] was attacked and its produce eaten by those who passed by. Here the fruit clearly represents the production of the land. When the nation rejected God and gave their devotion to idols

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<sup>11</sup> Laney, "Abiding is Believing," 56.

and false gods, foreign invaders pillaged the land, stole its grain and wine, and emptied its storehouses.

A second use of the vine is in Jeremiah 2:21 where Yahweh confronts the southern kingdom of Judah:

*“Yet I planted you a choice vine,  
A completely faithful seed.  
How then have you turned yourself before Me  
Into the degenerate shoots of a foreign vine?”*

Here again the vine represents the nation Israel as God’s covenant people. At the time of their “planting,” i.e., entrance into the land, they were characterized as corporately faithful. This cannot mean “believers” since that would imply a universal regeneration in Israel which cannot be assumed or demonstrated. However, a contrast is drawn between the nation’s former faithfulness as a whole to the Mosaic Covenant and their current unfaithfulness by immersing themselves into the Baal and Canaanite fertility religions they had been mandated to annihilate. They began to worship foreign gods and adopted pagan value systems. They no longer lived according to the divine purpose to which the nation was called.<sup>12</sup>

In Jeremiah’s second use of the vine analogy a similar meaning is discovered, but in this context judgment is introduced.

*“Go up through her vine rows and destroy,  
But do not execute a complete destruction;*

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<sup>12</sup> The assimilation and syncretism of the Canaanite fertility cults does not necessarily imply there were no believers. During the darkest days of the theocracy, the period of the Judges, even deliverers like Gideon, Jephthah, and Samuel, later included in Heb. 11 for their remarkable faith, showed evidence of profound religious compromise and assimilation of the paganism of the surrounding culture. See Daniel I Block, *Judges, Ruth*; *The New American Commentary*, vol. 6, ed. Kenneth A. Mathews, gen. ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999).

*Strip away her branches, For they are not the LORD'S.  
 "For the house of Israel and the house of Judah  
 Have dealt very treacherously with Me," declares the LORD.  
 (Jer 5:10–11)*

The vine again represents the nation Israel composed of believers and unbelievers. But the soteriological condition of the branches is not in view. The vine is to be destroyed, but not annihilated (God's plan for Israel was postponed not ended). The stripped away branches represent individual Jews taken away in the deportation, many of whom were killed, but not all. Of those who were killed we can assume some were saved, some were not. Of those who survived, the impoverished, unskilled class was left in the land and the skilled classes were removed to Babylon by the Chaldeans. These survivors were composed of unbelievers, and believers represented by Daniel and his three friends.

*"Many shepherds have ruined My vineyard,  
 They have trampled down My field;  
 They have made My pleasant field A desolate wilderness.  
 "It has been made a desolation,  
 Desolate, it mourns before Me;  
 The whole land has been made desolate,  
 Because no man lays it to heart. (Jer. 12:10–11)*

The third use of the analogy by Jeremiah reflects upon how false leaders, "shepherds," led the nation away from God and into idolatry thus ruining the vineyard. Again, the nation is viewed as a whole, and the saved condition of the individuals is not in view.

Ezekiel also uses this vine analogy (Ezek. 15:1–8; 17:1–24) in a similar way. In Ezekiel 15 he compares the impending judgment on Judah to the burning of the stems of the vine. Before burning, the vine is useless for anything except grape production; after it has been charred, it is even more useless. The point of the analogy has nothing to do with salvation or the spiritual life, but emphasizes the soon to be judgment of God on the nation Israel composed of both believers and unbelievers.

In Ezekiel 17 the relationship of the vine imagery has even less to do with the themes of John 15, for in this passage the vine does not even represent Israel or Judah, but the kings Jehoiakim and Zedekiah and their judgment in God's plan.

The most extensive development of the vine analogy is found in the fifth chapter of Isaiah. The analogy of the vineyard is described in the first six verses. The interpretation is then revealed in verses seven and eight. Here we again understand that the issue is not soteriological. Just as the vineyard is planted to produce good grapes it none the less produced worthless ones. In this metaphor Israel is the vineyard (not a vine) that produced bloodshed and distress instead of justice and righteousness.

Examination of these passages reveals only a casual similarity with the broad themes of John 15. Contention that the vine represents Israel as composed of both believer and unbeliever lacks even more support as a soteriological distinction is clearly lacking from these Old Testament passages. However, Reformed commentators understand these passages to describe judgment on the unbelievers in Israel, not believers.

If this is the presupposition of the interpreter, then it automatically follows that an interpreter with a replacement theology framework would also understand the vine in John 15 to be composed of believers and unbelievers. But this presupposition should be untenable since these Old Testament passages themselves relate to corporate Israel as the adopted, redeemed priest nation failing to fulfilling her covenant purpose. The issue is not salvation, i.e., the "redemption" of the nation which occurred typologically at the Exodus, but the post-salvation life of the nation.

Dispensationalists should note that the notion of a "professing" believer being removed from the vine is more consistent with the Reformed understanding of Israel as a typological "professing" believer, due to her lack of fruit, who is removed from

the vineyard and replaced by the Church. It seems a consistent dispensationalist would understand that if the nation is viewed corporately as redeemed, then the judgment announced by the prophets on Israel would be analogous to divine discipline on the Church Age believer for post-salvation failure. This then is consistent with the dispensational understanding that Israel is not permanently removed from God's plan but merely temporarily set aside. The Free Grace interpretation of the first and third branches as believers undergoing divine discipline is much more consistent with a dispensational understanding of the distinction between Israel and the Church, and a future for Israel since Israel is a redeemed nation. As a covenant nation Israel should never be viewed as being merely a "professing" redeemed nation.

### **Are there Professing but not Saved Believers in the Gospel of John?**

To validate the believer vs. unbeliever interpretation, commentators have introduced the idea of professing believer versus genuine believer to explain the first branch which does not bear fruit (John 15:2). To evaluate this conclusion the terms "professing believer" and "genuine faith" must be first examined in light of Johannine usage.

By way of definition Reformed Baptist theologian John Gill writes:

There are two sorts of branches in Christ the vine; the one sort are such who have only an historical faith in him. . . they are such who only profess to believe in him, as Simon Magus did; are in him by profession only; they submit to outward ordinances, become church members, and so are reckoned to be in Christ, being in a church-state, as the churches of Jude, and Thessalonica, and others, are said, in general, to be in Christ;

though it is not to be thought that every person in these churches was truly and savingly in him.<sup>13</sup>

Here Gill makes a common mistake which in effect is a verbal slight of hand. He states, “they are such who only profess to believe in him” and cites the episode of Acts 8 with Simon the magician. Yet nowhere does the text state that his belief was shallow, superficial, or insincere, only that after salvation he was dominated by sin nature power lust for which he was rebuked. There is quite a semantic difference between “x professes or claims to believe” and, “x believed.” In the former the person does not truly believe, but only claims to, in the latter the person does believe. This same eisegesis commonly occurs in these alleged “professing” passages.

In raising this issue, I am not questioning the existence of those who claim to be Christians based on external identification with a local church, engaging in rituals such as baptism, living in a “Christian” nation, living a moral life, or some other unbiblical basis. What is questioned is the validity of this “professing believer” as a category in the Gospel of John.

What does it mean to have professed faith? Webster’s dictionary suggests the following definitions for ‘profession’: an act of openly declaring or publicly claiming a belief, faith, or opinion; an avowed religious faith. These definitions fit most closely with the theological context of the professed but not genuine believer, i.e., ‘to declare in words or appearances only, to pretend, or to claim.’ Thus someone may outwardly claim to be a Christian without having truly believed in the Gospel.

We should ask if any of the passages offered for support of the “professed believer” view provide evidence that the belief

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<sup>13</sup> John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (London: William Hill Collingridge, 1960), I:740.

mentioned was merely superficial, or is this something simply read into the passage to make the passage fit a preconceived idea.

Since Scripture states clearly the sole condition of salvation is faith alone in Christ alone, it would seem that a false profession belongs to someone who either believes too little or too much. If too little, that could mean he has not believed Christ died for *his* sins, perhaps he has only believed in the existence of God, or only believed the Bible says Christ died for his sins (Gill’s “historical faith”), or believed some other proposition.<sup>14</sup> But these fall short of the necessary object of faith as stated in the Scriptures: believing that Christ alone died on *my* behalf, for *my* sins (1 Cor. 15:3–4). Or perhaps he has believed too much; faith plus baptism, faith plus good works, faith plus the sacraments, faith plus the Church or any of the myriad systems which add extraneous objects to faith.<sup>15</sup>

In conclusion a false professor is someone who claims to be a Christian but has never placed his faith alone in Christ alone. A false profession cannot apply to someone who believed Christ

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<sup>14</sup> To believe that the Bible says Christ died for my sins is quite different from saying I believe Christ died for my sins. I can believe Darwin said that I evolved from lower primates without believing that I evolved from lower primates.

<sup>15</sup> Following his lengthy historical, philosophical, and exegetical analysis of ‘faith’ Clark writes, “There are, he [Berkhof] says, other instances of the verb *believe* where ‘the deeper meaning of the word, that of firm trustful reliance, comes to its full rights.’ But Berkhof, like others, fails to show how this ‘deeper meaning’ differs from the straightforward literal meaning. Among the many instances of the verb *believe*, there is, to repeat, a difference of objects. One may believe that two and two are four and this is arithmetic; one may also believe that asparagus belongs to the lily family, and this is botany. Botany is not mathematics, of course; but the psychology or linguistics of *believe* is identical in all cases. Therefore, one should not confuse an analysis of belief with an analysis of numbers or plants. Christ’s promises of salvation are vastly different from the propositions of botany; but **believing is always thinking that a proposition is true.**” [emphasis added] For a more detailed analysis of the meaning of faith see Gordon H. Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1983), 105–106.

died on the cross as a substitute for his sins. If he has truly believed that proposition, he is saved; if he has not believed, then he remains condemned (John 3:18).<sup>16</sup> In contrast to this we find many statements similar to the following by Laney.

The Gospel of John speaks of people who had a “belief” that was not genuine belief. In the progress of belief there is a stage that falls short of genuine or consummated belief resulting in salvation.

This alleged belief that was not genuine is first seen in John 2:23. Many Jews who attended the Passover Feast “believed” as a result of Christ’s signs; yet He did not “believe” (trust) them (2:23–25). That is, He discerned that their faith was superficial, based only on the miracles they had seen. Later during the Feast of Tabernacles many of the multitude “believed in Him,” but apparently not as the Messiah (7:31). Jesus spoke to the Jews “who had believed Him” and accused them of seeking to kill Him (8:31, 40). He later accused the same Jews of unbelief (8:45–46). Evidence of this supposed “belief” also appears in John 12 where John reported that many Jews were “believing in Jesus” (12:11), yet he observed a few verses later, “But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him” (12:37).

Tenney refers to this belief that falls short of genuine faith as “superficial.” Morris calls it “transitory belief” which is not saving faith. It is based merely on outward profession. The problem with this belief is its object. It seems to have been based primarily on miracles and was not rooted in a clear understanding of the Person of Christ as the Messiah and the Son of God.

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<sup>16</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the logical inconsistencies in the notion that there can be a faith in Christ that is nonsaving. Saving faith is so not because it is a certain *kind* of faith, but because it has as its object the finished substitutionary atonement of Christ on the cross for the person believing. His work saves, not our faith. We are saved “through faith” not “because of faith” (Eph. 2:8–9). To do otherwise as is common in Reformed discussions puts the locus of salvation on the kind of faith the believer has, not the work of Christ. See Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith*.

Many were inclined to believe *something* about Jesus but were unwilling to yield their allegiance to Him, trusting Him as their personal Sin-bearer.<sup>17</sup>

These arguments for the existence of a “professing” or “alleged” faith must be examined. Does the Gospel of John clearly affirm the existence of a faith in Christ [*pisteuō eis*] which is non-salvific? The answer is a resounding no! But let’s examine the evidence.

The primary passage offered to substantiate the concept of non-saving faith in Jesus is John 2:24. These events occurred at the first Passover feast not long after the performance of Jesus’ first sign miracle in Cana of Galilee. Shortly after the wedding, Jesus and his disciples made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to observe Passover. There Jesus began to reveal himself and to authenticate His claims through the performance of miracles. Many, we are told, responded and “believed in His name.”

*Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in [pisteuo eis] His name, observing His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men (John 2:23–24)*

First, we must recognize that the Greek phrase *pisteuō eis* is used thirty-four times by John, and it always, without exception, refers to the sole and necessary condition of eternal life. So to be consistent with Johannine usage, we must interpret this as a clear statement of the sole condition of salvation. John does not say they “professed” to believe on His name, that they “claimed” to believe on His name, nor does he use any other qualifier to suggest that somehow their faith was lacking some crucial element such as an inadequate understanding of who Jesus claimed to be or what He intended to do.

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<sup>17</sup> Laney, “Abiding is Believing,” 63.

To get around the above problem, advocates of the superficial faith position resort to challenging it on its cause, the observance of miracles. They assume that a faith based on miracles cannot be worthy of salvation and thus is neither adequate nor genuine “saving” faith. But this flies in the face of the clear statement of the author. When John articulated his purpose for writing the Gospel he states: “but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31). To what does the “these” refer? This near demonstrative finds its antecedent in the plural noun of verse 30, “signs.” John clearly states that He has written of Jesus miracles for the express purpose of bringing people to a salvific knowledge of Jesus, so that they can believe that (*pisteuō eis*) Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Furthermore Jesus himself affirms that miracles and signs are a valid basis for saving faith.

*But if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father.”* (John 10:38)

*Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me (*pisteuō eis*), the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father.* (John 14:11–12)

To impugn the faith of those believers that first Passover because it was based on witnessing a miracle has no basis in the Scripture whatsoever. However, another argument is presented to document this alleged “superficial” faith.

It is further assumed that since Jesus did not “trust” the masses He discerned their superficial faith. This again begs the question. It also reflects a superficial and naïve view of salvation. Just because someone is a believer, especially a brand new believer, does not automatically make them a better, more trust-

worthy person, does not invest them with a higher integrity, or give them genuine virtue. This argument is based on the unrealistic assumption that believers are inherently trustworthy simply because they have been given a new nature. Jesus did not trust them, not because they were not genuinely saved, but because they were still operating on the false expectation that the Messiah had a political agenda and Jesus did not want to place himself at the disposal of the masses who were operating on a false understanding of His Messianic role.

Laney then cites as alternative evidence, John 7:31; 8:31, and 12:11. In John 7:31 the negative *me* suggests a negative answer. The crowd has believed because they do not think the Messiah would do more signs than Jesus. “He will not perform more signs than those which this man has, will He?” No, he will not do more. Clearly this is not a superficial faith. They expected the Messiah to do approximately the same amount of miracles as Jesus performed.

John 8:31ff, appears at first glance to indicate that those Jews who had believed Him, then verbally assaulted him. But a careful reading of the text suggests that “the Jews” who believed were a subgroup of the larger, hostile Pharisaical crowd.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, the events in John 12:11 occurred the day before the events in 12:37. The statement in verse 11 does not even refer to the same people as in verse 37 though Laney attempts unsuccessfully to make it seem so.

None of the passages cited can demonstrate that someone “believed in” Jesus and was not saved. Just because someone believes in Christ, does not mean they are no longer confused about His Messiahship, His purpose, His mission. To assume so betrays a naivete about the sin nature and human nature.

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<sup>18</sup> Joseph Dillow, *Reign of the Servant Kings* (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle, 1992), 155–156.

## **Understanding Key Words and Phrases**

### *In Me*

*“Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit. (John 15:2)*

That the branches of John 15 represent genuine believers is further substantiated by the qualifier “in Me.” There are two options when interpreting this phrase. The first is to take “in Me” as a Johannine synonym for the forensic, positional Pauline term “in Christ.” The second is to understand the term as a uniquely Johannine expression for intimate fellowship or communion.

If the first, then it refers to the instant of salvation when the believer is identified with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:3–4), and entered into His body through the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). If this is true, then Jesus is stating the reality of this branch being identified with Him. He does not say, every branch that “appears” to be in Me, every branch that is “grafted” in Me, but every branch that is in Me.

Smith recognizes that if “in Me” means “in Christ,” then the first branch must be a genuine Christian. Not able to accept this, he attempts a refutation.

Those who hold that the unfruitful branches represent Christians base their interpretation largely upon this phrase and allow it to determine their view of the rest of the passage. Most commentators, however, have felt that the rest of the passage is so clear that this one phrase should be carefully weighed in the light of the whole context.... The familiar technical usage of the phrase “in Christ,” as it is found in Paul’s prison epistles, was not until many years later. At the time when Jesus spoke these words no one was “in Christ” in this technical sense because the baptism of the Holy Spirit did not begin until Pentecost. When these words were spoken, to be “in Christ” was not different from be-

ing “in the kingdom.” Jesus’ parables about the kingdom being composed of wheat and tares, good and bad, fruitful and unfruitful, are very familiar.<sup>19</sup>

Though Smith correctly rejects the “in Christ” interpretation, he does so for inadequate reasons. His suggestion that it is synonymous with being in the kingdom is completely devoid of evidence. Laney correctly takes him to task on this: “However, John used the words ‘in Me’ elsewhere to refer to genuine salvation (6:56; 10:38; 14:10–12, 30; 17:21).”<sup>20</sup> A brief examination of these passages is illuminating and reveals that Laney’s solution is similarly lacking in evidence.

*He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. (John 6:56)*

*But if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father.” (John 10:38)*

*Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me (πιστευῶ εἰς), the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father. (John 14:10–12)*

*“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)*

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<sup>19</sup> Smith, “Unfruitful Branches,” 10. Here Smith fully articulates the Reformed assumption that the vine is analogous to corporate Israel including both believer and unbeliever. This is one of the most egregious examples example of a dispensationalist utilizing a nondispensational presupposition to interpret the passage.

<sup>20</sup> Laney, “Abiding is Believing,” 63.

*I will not speak much more with you, for the ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in Me; (John 14:30)*

*That they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. (John 17:21)*

A cursory glance calls into question Laney's assertion that "in Me" is salvation oriented. Three of the five passages he cites (John 10:38; 14:10–12; 17:21) speak of the Father being in the Son. Clearly not a soteriological relationship, but an emphasis on the ongoing intimate communion between the Father and Son. In John 17:21 Jesus would not be praying for the disciples to be "in Us" if this meant salvation or forensic identification since the disciples were already saved, "you are clean" (John 13:10 with John 15:3).<sup>21</sup> John 16:33 is not soteriological, but relates to the peace the already saved disciples can have if their intimate communion with the Son continues. And John 14:30 indicates the devil certainly has no communion with the Son.

In light of this consistent use, "in Me" describes fellowship or intimate communion. *En emoi* is used sixteen times in the New Testament; when the figure involves persons in the god-head, it always speaks of a true and genuine relationship (John 10:38; 14:10). So, when the subject involves a human, then it also must picture a genuine relationship with Christ and not merely a 'professing' relationship or judicial union such as "in Christ" suggests. In no passage outside of John 15 does the phrase indicate a general relationship or a professing relationship. As Dillow points out, the "the preposition *en* is used 'to designate a close personal relation.' It refers to a sphere within which some action occurs. So to abide 'in' Christ means to remain in close relationship to Him."<sup>22</sup> Since it always means a specific relationship elsewhere, this would be the expected sense in this passage.

<sup>21</sup> Dillow, "Abiding is Remaining in Fellowship," 47.

<sup>22</sup> Dillow, "Abiding is Remaining in Fellowship," 45.

Neither can this phrase suggest merely sphere as the Pauline phrase “in Christ” does. This would then imply that Jesus was inside the Father positionally and judicially and that God the Father was inside the Son positionally and judicially. This is nonsense.

The one difficult passage to assess is the meaning of “in Me” in John 6:56. Based on other uses it must be concluded that what Jesus is emphasizing here is not union at salvation, but ongoing communion. More will be said about this in the next section.

Therefore the use of “in Me” must be taken to indicate the fellowship intimacy that exists between the Vine and this first, non-fruitbearing branch. This is expressed by the verb this phrase is connected with in John 15, *menō*.

### *Menō: Does “Abide” mean salvation or Fellowship*

The meaning of *menō* in this passage has been the focus of much debate. Standard Reformed commentators understand *menō* to be a semantic equivalent of “believe.” Advocates of Lordship Salvation consistently follow this interpretation. Inconsistent dispensationalists who adhere to the reformed interpretation of John 15 and 1 John concur:

But what is meant by “abiding” in Him? According to 1 John 4:15, the one who confesses that Jesus is the Son of God “abides” in God. Also according to 1 John 3:24, “he that keepeth his commandments (the chief of which is named in the preceding verse as believing on him) ‘abides’ in him.”

Thus to “abide in Christ” is equivalent to “believe in Christ.” The relationship of abiding is initiated by saving faith and is continued by walking in faith.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Smith, “Unfruitful Branches,” 15, cites Homer A. Kent, Jr., “The Gospel of John,” (unpublished class syllabus, Grace Theological Seminary, n.d.), 81.

In this last statement the author displays some confusion; abide cannot be both believing in Christ at salvation and at the same time be the faith that is the basis for spiritual growth. The objects of these two different faiths are different. Abide is either entry into the body of Christ or communion, it can't be both.

In contrast, Free Grace gospel advocates uniformly understand *menō* to indicate communion or fellowship with Christ. Both evidence from the lexicons and usage suggest the latter is correct and more consistently interprets the data. Since this type of analysis is readily available in the articles by Dillow and Derickson it will not be repeated here. Contextual arguments will be emphasized instead.

Within John 15, the phrase “*en emoi*” is used six times in the first seven verses. With the exception of the first occurrence (v. 2) it is always accompanied by the verb *menō*. Thus the phrase “abide in me” occurs five times. Since “in me” is a term of communion and fellowship, abide must also have the same connotation to maintain consistency. Further, it seems more than plausible that *menō* has been ellipsized for stylistic reasons from v. 2, which should then be read, “every branch [abiding] in me which does not bear fruit.” This would reinforce the communion interpretation, but is not crucial to establish it.

If abide is the semantic equivalent of believe, then simple word substitution should reinforce this as well as amplify the meaning of the text. Unfortunately, such a substitution yields confusion and absurdity. In verse 4 Jesus would be commanding the already saved disciples to once again “believe in Me and I believe in You.” No reason exists for Jesus to believe in them. This would also reduce verse 6 to the absurdity that Jesus belief in the Christian is a prerequisite for fruit production. The next absurdity would occur in verse 7, “If you believe in Me and my words believe in you.” It should go without saying that words cannot believe. The greatest absurdity though would appear in verse 10: If you keep My commandments, you will believe in My

love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments, and believe in His love." To understand *menō* to be equivalent to believe not only produces a nonsensical translation of these verses, but would also mean that moral obedience to God is the precondition to belief—pure legalism!

Confusing the sense of abide with belief creates confusion in other passages as well. The Bread of Life discourse in John 6 is also a notoriously difficult passage to interpret because of the use of symbols and metaphor. Jesus uses the word “abide” in John 6:56, “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.”

At first blush it appears that Jesus is explaining salvation in terms of an eating or drinking metaphor. Just as eating and drinking are non-meritorious activities available to any human being, so too is faith. These are the options: either eating and drinking refer to the initial belief in Christ at salvation, or eating and drinking describe the postsalvation nourishment of the believer on the doctrines of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. If the first option is taken, then “eats my flesh and drinks My blood” is metaphorical language for “accepting Me as Messiah/Savior.” In this case, abide taken as a synonym for belief would be redundant. The sense of the passage would then be, “He who accepts me or believes in Me, believes in Me and I believe in Him.”

The second option is to understand eating and drinking in this verse as describing the process of spiritual nourishment. This makes sense if abiding is taken as communion or fellowship. Thus the sense is, “He who continues to be spiritually nourished by Me has fellowship with Me and I with Him,” a clear description of the vital connection between learning and assimilating doctrine in the soul as the basis of spiritual nourishment and growth and fellowship with the Lord. This point is not lost on Peter who later wrote: “but grow in [by means of] the

grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 3:18). Either option renders *menō* as belief insupportable.

*Airō*: “Lifted up” or “Carried away”

*Airō* is a second word around which controversy has swirled. Kittel lists three meanings: “to lift from the ground, to lift in order to carry” and “to carry off.”<sup>24</sup> The most common option is to take *airō* to mean to take away in judgment, thus interpreting verse 2 by verse 6, a questionable procedure. If this is true, in light of the meanings already established for “abide” and “in Me,” such a meaning would indicate loss of salvation. No wonder commentaries attempt to insert some qualifier that negates the reality of “in Me!”

The second option fits the context of John better and also fits the historical context. *Airō* is used 10 times in John’s gospel where it means to lift up. Not only is this a common meaning for John, but John’s style reveals a very particular use of vocabulary. His contrasts are clear and undebatable: light and darkness, *eimi* and *ginomai* (John 1:1–4); *agapaō* and *phileō* (John 21:15–17); *oida* and *ginōskō* (John 21:15–17). He also uses a number of double entendres and paranomasias to bring out subtle points.<sup>25</sup> This passage is no exception. Three times in two verses John uses a cognate. In verse 2*a* he uses the verb *airō* in relation to the first nonfruiting branch, in verse 2*b*, he uses *kathairō*, to describe the pruning of the branch that bears fruit, then in verse 3

<sup>24</sup> Joachim Jeremias, “*Airō*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–74), I:185–186.

<sup>25</sup> Brown suggests both of these words are a bit out of place and “were chosen not because of their suitability for describing vineyard practices, but for their applicability to Jesus and His followers.” Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 660. Derickson confirms that *airo* was not attested as an agricultural term but *kathairō* was the standard word for pruning. Thus our attention is drawn to ask why John uses these cognates?

he uses the adjective cognate *katharos* to describe the disciples as saved.

Such a use by John should grab our attention. If John were contrasting these branches, unbeliever versus believer, he would have made this clear by using distinct words. By using cognates he draws the readers attention to the commonality of the statements. They are all believers. The first nonfruiting branch is a young believer, abiding in Christ, who has not yet matured enough to produce fruit. The second branch is the mature believer who is in fellowship with Christ and bearing fruit. It is only the third branch, who is not in fellowship and removed.

Viticultural practices of the first century confirm this. The standard procedure in vineyard production propped up a branch that was weak, or falling to the ground.<sup>26</sup> Pliny states:

Thus there are two kinds of main branches; the shoot which comes out of the hard timber and promises wood for the next year is called a leafy shoot or else when it is above the scar [caused by tying the branch to the trellis] a fruit-bearing shoot, whereas the other kind of shoot that springs from a year-old branch is always a fruit-bearer. There is also left underneath the cross-bar a shoot called the keeper—this is a young branch, not longer than three buds, which will provide wood next year if the vine's luxurious growth has used itself up—and another shoot next to it, the size of a wart, called the pilferer is also left, in case the keeper-shoot should fail<sup>27</sup>

Thus the first century attestation is that there were two prunings a year. The first kept young nonfruiting branches on the vine, so they could be nourished and nurtured to produce fruit the following year, and a second pruning in the fall which removed all unwanted material from the vine including branches that ei-

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<sup>26</sup> Derickson, "Viticulture," 45.

<sup>27</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, 17.35 Quoted by Derickson, "Viticulture," 46.

ther never had, or never would produce fruit.<sup>28</sup> Thus literary and historical contexts combine to confirm the interpretation of the first branch being lifted up to prepare it for fruit production in the future.

### **Are the branches all believers?**

This question has already been partially answered. Yes, there are three distinct branches mentioned in the analogy. Since the context mitigates against a believer/unbeliever contrast, Jesus must be teaching his disciples something new related to the new spiritual life which will come with the advent of the Holy Spirit (14:14, 16, 26). Together the three branches begin to describe for us God's work in the believer's sanctification.

The first branch represents the young believer. Remember, the analogy is from a plant. Young seedlings and plants do not produce fruit, only maturing plants produce fruit. As stem growth and leaf development precedes fruit production in a plant, so spiritual growth and advance in "the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" must precede fruit production. So God the Father, the vinedresser, encourages and nourishes the young, weak, "seedling" believer. As the believer enters his "second season" the Father begins to "prune" the believer through tests of adversity to provide opportunity to apply doctrine he has learned. The result is three levels of maturity: fruit, more fruit, and much fruit.

But the believer who fails to stay in fellowship by not abiding will be disciplined. Eventually he will suffer temporal judgment. This is the third branch of verse 6, of whom the apostle Paul speaks, describing one who:

*. . . goes on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness . . . Do you not know that when*

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<sup>28</sup> Derickson, "Viticulture," 47–48.

*you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?* (Rom. 6:13, 16)

As with Paul, John sees the real possibility of failure in the Christian life. The result is misery, self-destruction, and divine discipline, what Paul calls death in Romans 6:16 and 23. The nonabiding branches are removed, a possible reference to the burning of 1 Cor. 3 at the judgment seat of Christ. However, it is not necessary to take every mention of burning to be of the Lake of Fire or the Judgment Seat of Christ. It seems more likely that the real description of the burning of the useless branches from the vine merely illustrates the believer who fails to advance and to maintain fellowship in Christ. He faces divine discipline in time and removal because of his failure to live according to God's sanctification plan and glorify God.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has emphasized that the predominant way of interpreting John 15 is to understand abiding as believing. This is especially common to Reformed theology and its offspring, Lordship Salvation. These two approaches share a hidden and often unrealized presupposition that the vine of John 15 is like the vine in the Old Testament, comprised of both believers and unbelievers. Unbelievers are removed and believers are indicated by fruit production. In the Reformed view of regeneration the believer is so transformed that fruit becomes inevitable.

This presupposition which uses an identification of Israel and the Church as a means of interpreting John 15 violates one of the three distinctives of dispensationalism, the consistent distinction between Israel and the Church. In light of this, an interpretation of John 15 which rejects fellowship as the subject is inconsistent with dispensational theology. From this starting

point we can then see that there is a basis for a theology of the spiritual life that is more consistent with dispensationalism.

Free Grace advocates reject the vine imagery of Israel as the hermeneutical backdrop to John 15. This approach is more consistent with the dispensational distinction between Israel and the Church. As such, a consistent dispensationalist must then reject the idea that fruit is the necessary and inevitable result of salvation. Instead fruit production belongs to the realm of experiential sanctification. Fruit should not be identified as simply spiritual growth or morality. Fruit is produced not because of salvation, but because the already saved person abides in Christ. This emphasis on abiding in Christ as the basis for spiritual growth becomes a distinct element in a dispensational theology of the spiritual life. From this starting point we must then determine how abiding in Christ relates to the Pauline concept of walking by the Spirit. This will be the subject of the next installment.

**—To be continued—**

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