

**How Does A Christian Grow?**  
**A Dispensational Theology of the Spiritual Life**  
**(Part 1 of 3: Abiding in Christ)**

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**Introduction**

Thomas Sowell begins his book, *The Conflict of Visions*, with the following observation and explanation for why the same people consistently group together on seemingly unrelated political opinions.

One of the curious things about political opinions is how often the same people line up on opposite sides of different issues. The issues themselves may have no intrinsic connection with each other. They may range from military spending to drug laws to monetary policy to education. Yet the same familiar faces can be found glaring at each other from opposite sides of the political fence, again and again. It happens too often to be coincidence and it is too uncontrolled to be a plot. A closer look at the arguments on both sides often shows that they are reasoning from fundamentally different premises. These different premises—often implicit—are what provide the consistency behind the repeated opposition of individuals and groups on numerous, unrelated issues. They have different visions of how the world works.<sup>1</sup>

The field of theology is no different. Frequently, the same theologians line up on opposite sides of different, seemingly unrelated theological issues. Whether one is discussing eschatology or soteriology, Romans 9 or Revelation 20, there is a certain consistent grouping. Now and then we discover certain anomalies, but among trained, knowledgeable Bible students we discover that birds of a theological feather, generally, also flock together. And when we do have major anomalies, perhaps it is because some subgroups either fail to fully grasp the hidden, subterranean presuppositions affecting these groupings or they are at some level, willingly inconsistent. In theology, like politics, Bible students often have different visions of how God works in history, salvation, and eschatology. This is certainly true in the field of sanctification and spiritual growth.

No fewer than nine distinct models or frameworks for understanding what the Bible teaches about spirituality exist among those who attempt to forge at least the semblance of a biblical view of the spiritual life.<sup>2</sup> Among those who step away from a biblical view, the permutations are as numerous as the human imagination can conceive.

What can make the teaching on the spiritual life even more confusing is that pastors often do not always understand the distinct characteristics of each of these models. As a result, they create a mulligan stew of eclectic principles and guidelines that inevitably produce inconsistencies, contradictions, spiritual failure, and incompatibilities with the biblical text. These distortions from the pulpit lead to spiritual breakdown and disillusion in the pew.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Sowell, *Conflict of Vision* (New York: Quill, William Morrow: 1987), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Some of these include: the contemplative-mystical, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Wesleyan, Holiness, Pentecostal, Keswick, and Dispensational-Augustinian.

These three papers analyze four key passages in Scripture that emphasize the believer's walk and fructification.<sup>3</sup> By comparing and contrasting these passages, this writer believes we can arrive at a consistent and correct model for the spiritual life. Further, because this model is based on a consistent literal, historical-grammatical hermeneutic, the conclusions will also be consistent with the dispensational distinctive—a distinction between Israel and the church. Since one of distinguishing characteristics between Israel and the church is the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, especially in the spiritual life, we will discover that, despite protestations to the contrary, there truly is a view of the spiritual life that is dispensational. But, as Dr. Walvoord once told me, this is true because it is biblical, not because it is dispensational. But because the conclusions are biblical, they are also dispensational.

### The Theological Positions

Jesus' discourse on the vine (John 15:1–6) is a perennial theological battlefield. Calvinists and Arminians traditionally debate whether or not the removal of the unfruitful branches indicates the loss or absence of eternal salvation.<sup>4</sup> Within the Reformed tradition itself other skirmishes have been fought over the hermeneutical framework: Does the discourse address justification 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 temporal fellowship with Christ in order to produce fruit in the spiritual life?<sup>5</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 both the threefold *sine qua non* of dispensationalism, and the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, which is part of the distinction between Israel and the church. Thus, we must conclude that the interpretation presented here is the one most consistent with a dispensational theology.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> John 15:1-11; Gal. 5:16-26; Eph. 5:1-18; 1 John 1:1-10.

<sup>4</sup> Commentators on this passage frequently identify three positions: the view that the unfruitful and burned branches are those Christians who lose their salvation (Arminian), those who say these branches represent "false professors" who never truly believed or truly had salvation (Lordship Calvinism), and those who believe the unfruitful branches are believers who fail to abide and grow, but are nevertheless justified and possess eternal life (the fellowship view). However, in this writer's view there are only two views: those who believe all genuine Christians abide and those who believe only some abide. The first equates abiding with belief in Christ, the second equates abiding with fellowship with Christ. For the Reformed Lordship view, this nonfruitful branch is someone who does not have genuine faith, whereas for the Arminian, there is a loss of saving faith as well as salvation.

<sup>5</sup> J. Carl Laney, "Abiding Is Believing," *BSac* 146 (January–March 1989): 56–66; Joseph Dillow, "Abiding Is Remaining in Fellowship: Another Look at John 15:1–6," *BSac* 147 (January–March 1990): 44–53; Gary W. Derickson, "Viticulture and John 15:1–6," *BSac* 153 (January–March 1990): 34–52; Charles R. Smith, "The Unfruitful Branches in John 15," *Grace Journal* 9 (Spring, 1968): 3–23; and James E. Rosscup, *Abiding in Christ: Studies in John 15* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 38–40.

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?” To whom was Jesus speaking: those in need of justification or those who needed to be encouraged to bear much fruit? 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 John 15:6 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 conditioned only on the vinedresser or on both the vinedresser and the branch? Is the fructification of the branch inevitable 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 this writer observed that among those who hold to eternal security of the believer, two incompatible interpretations of the vine analogy exist: those who view the passage as distinguishing between believers and unbelievers and those who understand the passage to describe only different types of believers.<sup>7</sup> This writer further observed that most of those who interpret the purpose of John 15 and the first epistle of John to distinguish between genuine believers and “professing” believers also hold to a ‘lordship Salvation’ view. And most of those who interpret these same passages to distinguish between types of believers, carnal Christians and spiritual Christians, also uniformly hold to a free grace gospel. Continued investigation revealed that most of the advocates of the second approach were also dispensational in orientation, while lordship advocates echo an interpretation common to Reformed theologians who hold to some form of replacement theology or covenant theology.<sup>8</sup> This appears to be more than coincidence. Since almost all free grace gospel advocates are dispensational, but not all dispensationalists hold to a free grace gospel, could this be a factor? Since theological systems endeavor to be internally consistent, the question arises, are there unstated theological presuppositions that affect the interpreter of this passage so that he is predisposed to interpret these passages in certain ways?

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<sup>7</sup> The same distinction holds true for 1 John.

<sup>8</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 (John MacArthur, Carl Laney, and Charles Smith are among the exceptions), 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 differently from their replacement theology counterparts.

## Discovering Slippery Presuppositions

Attempts to isolate and identify unstated 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 theology interpretation is a subgroup of the larger system of replacement theology.<sup>9</sup> Replacement theology, which includes Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Wesleyanism, and various other theological systems except dispensationalism, understands the New Testament church to be a replacement for the failed Israel of the Old Testament. In replacement theology Israel is the church in the Old Testament and the church is the “New” Israel in the New Testament and heir to all the divine promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in a “spiritual” form. In this view of the Old Testament the vine is an image of national or corporate Israel, comprised of both believer and unbeliever. The thesis in this paper 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 (referred to as “professing” believers) which is applied hermeneutically to argue that the pruned branches are those who were never genuine believers.

One Reformed writer clearly articulates the parallel between corporate Israel and the vine in John 15:

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>10</sup>

Tasker in an analogy compares Israel as a corporate body in the Old Testament to the church as a corporate body in the New Testament. This is consistent with replacement theology in which 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>11</sup>

This is consistent with Reformed presuppositions that there is continuity in God’s program for Israel and the church. In this view the church is simply the post-Golgotha replacement of unrepentant Israel in the divine program. Since corporate Israel was composed of believers and unbelievers, the new corporate Israel of John 15 also must be composed of believers and unbelievers. Could it be that those who interpret John 15 as referring to believers versus

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<sup>9</sup> “Replacement theology” refers to all theological systems that see the church replacing Israel in God’s plan. On the other hand 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 dispensationalism understand that the church replaces Israel, it is to be expected that the vast majority of commentaries will take a similar approach. For a critique of replacement theology see Mike Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* (Nashville: B&H, 2010), and idem., “An Analysis of Neo-Replacement Theology” paper delivered at the *Pre-Trib Rapture Study Group Conference*, December, 2010, Dallas, Texas (<http://www.pre-trib.org/articles/view/an-analysis-of-neo-replacement-theology>).

<sup>10</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 173.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

unbelievers, even among dispensationalists, are unaware that these hidden assumptions of replacement theology undergird their interpretation and therefore 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>12</sup>

Before making this statement, Smith quotes several Reformed, nondispensational commentators to establish the believer-unbeliever interpretation. He then concluded that the vine of John 15 must be like the vine of Israel, also composed of 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>13</sup>

That the vine and vinedresser were familiar images in the Old Testament is not lost on many commentators.<sup>14</sup> A brief perusal 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>15</sup>

This writer does not dispute Laney’s observation of the ubiquity of the vine symbolism, but questions the application of this symbolism to 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 suggest that the unbeliever-believer issue is valid even for the Reformed model?

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

<sup>13</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>14</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, Smith and others do. See John G. Mitchell, *An Everlasting Love: A Devotional Study of the Gospel of John* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1982), 285-296.

<sup>15</sup> Laney, “Abiding Is Believing,” 56.

## 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 as a corporate entity, as the vine first removed from Egypt and then planted in the land of promise, but then because of the vine's rebellion it [Israel] was attacked and its produce eaten by those who passed by. The fruit in this analogy clearly represents the production of the land. When the nation rejected God and gave their devotion to idols and false gods, foreign invaders pillaged the land, stole its grain and wine, and emptied its storehouses.<sup>16</sup> Nothing in the context relates to individual soteriology, but rather to the post-redemption (the exodus from Egypt) spiritual failure of the nation.

A second use of the vine imagery 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., their entrance into the land), they were characterized as corporately faithful. This cannot mean "believers" since that would imply universal regeneration, which can neither be assumed nor demonstrated. But 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 Baalim and Canaanite fertility religions they were 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>17</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;  
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 as a corporate whole, 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 the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom, both of which were destroyed

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<sup>16</sup> Psalm 80 was written by Asaph during the time of David, so this would have referred to the cycles of discipline and deliverance during the period of the Judges.

<sup>17</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 with and assimilation of the paganism of the surrounding culture. See Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*; New American Commentary, (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999).

in divine judgment. Of those who were killed and those deported we can assume some were saved, some were not. Though some commentators seek to make the branches, individual false prophets and unbelievers, this proposition fails. The judgment did not come only to unbelievers. In the context it is more accurate to view the branches as the two kingdoms, since the vine (the people of Israel) itself was never destroyed. 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, as well as believers as seen in 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 on 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 individuals is not in view.

Ezekiel also used this vine analogy (Ezek. 15:1–8; 17:1–24) in a similar way. In Ezekiel 15 he compared 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, producing fruit; after it has been charred, it can no longer produce fruit. The point of the analogy has nothing to do with either individual justification or the spiritual life, but emphasizes the soon to be judgment of God on the nation Israel composed of both believers and unbelievers who would be removed from the land God promised. The result would be that the land would then be as nonproductive as the nation. Here the focus of the vine analogy is on the lack of fruitfulness in the nation.

In Ezekiel 17 the vine represents Israel and Judah and the emphasis again is on fruitfulness, not individual salvation.

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 again the issue is not soteriological. Though the vineyard was planted to produce good grapes it produced worthless ones. In this metaphor Israel is the vineyard (not a vine) that produced men of bloodshed and violence instead of justice and righteousness.

Examination of these passages reveals that the only similarity with the themes of John 15 is fruitfulness. The contention of Reformed theologians is that the vine imagery derives from the Old Testament vine imagery in which Israel was composed of both believers and unbelievers<sup>1</sup>, but this too lacks support since the passages cited are focused not on the salvation status of the nation but on the lack of fruitfulness. As a result of this misunderstanding of the purpose of the analogy, Reformed commentators understand these passages to describe judgment on only the unbelievers in Israel.

If interpreters accept this presupposition then it automatically follows that interpreters with a Reformed theology framework are also inclined to interpret the vine in John 15 as composed of believers and unbelievers. But this presupposition is untenable since these Old Testament passages relate to *corporate* Israel as the adopted, redeemed priest nation (“salvation”; Exod. 6:6; 15:13) that failed to fulfill her covenant purpose (sanctification). The issue in those passages is not the salvation (i.e., the “redemption” of the nation that occurred at the Exodus, but the postsalvation life of the nation). The failure of the nation to produce the fruit God required for blessing brought about divine judgment as described in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28.

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 because of her lack of fruit, who was removed from the vineyard and replaced by the church. A consistent dispensationalist would understand that if Old Testament Israel is viewed corporately as redeemed, then the judgment on Israel announced by the prophets as a redeemed nation for lack of fruitfulness would be analogous to divine discipline on a church age believer for postsalvation failure (Heb. 12:6-7). 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 merely a “professing” redeemed nation.

Therefore the Reformed use of the Old Testament corporate vine as the hermeneutical framework for John 15 must be rejected. But next we should determine if there is such a biblical rationale for a professing believer or someone who can believe in Jesus as Messiah, but not be justified?

### **Are There ‘Professing Believers’ in the Gospel of John?**

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

By way of definition Reformed Baptist theologian John Gill wrote:

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 Judea, 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>18</sup>

Here Gill made a common mistake that is in effect verbal legerdemain. 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 Acts 8 state that Simon’s belief was shallow, superficial, insincere, or false. Acts

<sup>18</sup> John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (London: William Hill Collingridge, reprint 1960), I:740.

8 simply states that after salvation he was dominated by his sin nature power lust for which he was rebuked. Quite a semantic difference exists between “x professes or claims to believe” and, “x believed.” In the former the person does not truly believe, but only claims to, and in the latter the person does believe. This same eisegesis commonly occurs in these alleged “professing” passages.

In raising this issue, this writer does not question the existence of those who claim to be Christians based on external identification with a local church, being baptized, 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.’<sup>19</sup> Thus someone may outwardly claim to be a Christian without having personally believed the Gospel.

We should ask if any of the passages offered for support provide evidence that the belief 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 seems that a false profession belongs to someone who claims to be a Christian but has not believed in Christ. Or someone who lies and claims to have believed in Christ, but has not. This latter could not be said to have believed in Christ, but only to have professed or claimed to have believed. Another example might be someone who did not personally believe that Christ died for his own 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 non-salvific proposition (i.e., James 2:19).<sup>20</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 added something to belief in Christ; faith plus baptism, faith plus good works, faith plus the sacraments, faith plus belonging to a church or any of the myriad systems which add extraneous objects to faith.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Merriam-Webster, Inc. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. Eleventh ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> For a person to say he believes the Bible says Christ died for his sins differs from saying “I believe Christ died for *my* sins.” A person can believe Darwin said that people evolved from lower primates but not believe that he evolved from lower primates.

<sup>21</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.*” Gordon H. Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1983), 105–106., [italics added].

None of the passages usually cited to support the view of a “professing” believer refers to the person making such a profession. Instead the Holy Spirit, through inspiration, stated that the person had believed.

In conclusion a “false professor” is someone who claims to be a Christian but who has never placed his faith alone in Christ alone. A false profession cannot apply to someone who believes Christ died on the cross as a substitute for his sins. Nowhere does the Bible say someone “claimed to believe.” If a person believes the proposition that Christ died in his place for his sins, then he is saved; if he has not believed in Christ, then he remains condemned (John 3:18).<sup>22</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. 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>23</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 [πιστεύω εἰς, *pisteuo eis*] which is non-salvific? The answer is a resounding no! Everywhere John used this phrase he described the sole condition for justification. The only debated passage is the one used to support the allegation of professed faith.

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<sup>22</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 the believer’s faith. A person is saved “through faith” not “because of faith” (Eph. 2:8–9). To say a person is saved “because of faith,” as is common in Reformed discussions puts the locus of salvation on the kind of faith the believer has, not on the work of Christ. Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith*.

<sup>23</sup> Laney, “Abiding Is Believing,” 63.

The primary passage offered to substantiate the concept of nonsaving faith in Jesus is John 2:24. After Jesus' first sign miracle in Cana of Galilee and the wedding in Cana, Jesus and His disciples made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to observe the 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, one must recognize that the Greek phrase *pisteuo eis* is used thirty-four times by John. Always, without exception, it 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, or that they "claimed" to believe on His name, nor did 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.

To attempt to overcome this problem, advocates of the superficial-faith position resort to challenging it on its cause, namely, the observance of miracles. They assume that a faith based on miracles cannot be worthy of salvation and thus is not genuine "saving" faith. But this flies in the face of the clear statements of the Gospel of John. When John articulated his purpose for writing the Gospel he stated, "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 word "these" refer? This near demonstrative finds its antecedent in the plural noun of verse 30, "signs" ("Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written."). John clearly stated that He had written of Jesus' miracles for the express purpose of bringing people to a salvific knowledge of Jesus, so that they can believe that (*pisteuo eis*) Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Furthermore Jesus Himself affirmed 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 [*pisteuo 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 at that first Passover because their faith was based on witnessing a miracle has no basis in the Scriptures whatsoever. Advocates of "superficial" faith present another argument in support of their position. They claim Jesus did not "trust" the masses because He discerned their superficial faith (John 2:24). This again begs the question and it reflects a superficial and naïve view of salvation. Just because someone is a believer in Christ, especially a recent believer, does not automatically make him a better person, does not invest him with a higher integrity, or give him genuine virtue. This argument is based on the shallow 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. Jesus did not want to place himself at the disposal of the masses operating on a false understanding of His Messianic role.

Laney then cites John 7:31; 8:31; and 12:11 as additional evidence. In John 7:31 the negative *me* suggests a negative answer. The crowd had 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, so they believed in Him.

At first glance John 8:31–32 seems to indicate that those same 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>24</sup>

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

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

### Understanding Key Words and Phrases

Three terms used in John 15 are hermeneutically significant: “in Me,” “abide,” and “lifted up.”

#### *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 Pauline phrase, “in Christ,” which describes the believer’s eternal position in Christ. The second is to understand the term as a uniquely Johannine expression for the believer’s temporal fellowship with Christ.

In the former option, “in Me” refers to the moment when a person believes and 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). In this case “in Me” describes a legal position or metaphysical union with Christ rather than a communal fellowship with Christ. If the Pauline meaning is the idea, then Jesus was stating the reality of this branch being united with Him in an eternal relationship. This presents a major difficulty for the lordship view, for Jesus did not say, every branch that “appears” to be in Me or every branch that is “grafted” in Me, but every branch that *is* in Me.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Dillow, *Reign of the Servant Kings* (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle, 1992), 155–56.

Smith recognizes that if “in Me” means united “in Christ,” then the first branch must indeed be a genuine Christian. Not able to accept this, he attempted 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 being “in the kingdom.” Jesus’ parables about the kingdom being composed of wheat and tares, good and bad, fruitful and unfruitful, are very familiar.<sup>25</sup>

Though Smith adequately refutes the “in Christ” lordship interpretation, his suggestion that it is synonymous with being in the kingdom is completely devoid of evidence. Laney correctly challenges him 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>26</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, 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).

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. These

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<sup>25</sup> Smith, “Unfruitful Branches,” 10. Here Smith fully articulates the Reformed assumption that the vine is analogous to corporate Israel including both believers and unbelievers. This is one of the most egregious examples of a dispensationalist utilizing a nondispensational presupposition to interpret a passage.

<sup>26</sup> Laney, “Abiding Is Believing,” 63.

uses clearly do not describe a merely legal or positional union, but rather emphasize the ongoing intimate fellowship between the Father and the 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.<sup>27</sup> John 16:33 is not describing a soteriological relationship, but relates to the peace the already saved disciples might have if their intimate fellowship with the Son continues. And John 14:30 indicates the devil certainly has no communion with the Son.

Another problem with the lordship view as expressed by Laney is his attempt to make “in Me” an adverbial phrase modifying the verb “bearing” rather than as an adjectival phrase that modifies the noun, “branch.” But Jesus said that the branch that is “in Me;” He did not refer to “bearing in Me.”<sup>28</sup>

“In Me” consistently describes fellowship or intimate communion. ‘In me’ is used sixteen times in the New Testament. When the figure involves persons in the Godhead, it always speaks of a true and genuine fellowship (John 10:38; 14:10), not a legal position. So, when the subject involves a human, it also pictures genuine fellowship with Christ and not merely a “professing” belief or judicial union such suggested by the Pauline “in Christ”. Jesus clearly used the phrase “in Me” that way to describe His fellowship with the disciples in John 14:20. In no passage outside of John 15 does the phrase indicate a positional relationship or a professing relationship in the Gospel of John. 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 fellowship with Him.”<sup>29</sup> Since “in Me” always means a an intimate fellowship elsewhere, this would be the expected sense in John 15:2.

Nor does this phrase suggest “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 emphasis in these passages is on the unity of purpose shared by both the Father and the Son, as well as the metaphysical perichoresis of the Godhead.

The one difficult passage to assess is the meaning of “in Me” in John 6:56. Based on other uses one must be concluded that what Jesus was 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” indicates the fellowship intimacy that exists between the Vine and this first, nonfruitbearing branch. This is expressed by the verb μένω (*ménō*) in John 15.

### **Μένω: Does “Abide” describe Positional Union or Fellowship?**

The meaning of *meno* in this passage has been the focus of much debate. Reformed commentators understand *meno* to be a semantic equivalent of “believe.” Advocates of lordship

<sup>27</sup> Dillow, “Abiding Is Remaining in Fellowship,” 47.

<sup>28</sup> Gary Derickson and Earl Radmacher, *The Disciplemaker* (Salem, OR: Charis Press, 2001), 396.

<sup>29</sup> Dillow, “Abiding is Remaining in Fellowship,” 45.

salvation consistently follow this interpretation. Some dispensationalists like MacArthur who adhere to the Reformed interpretation of John 15 and 1 John concur:<sup>30</sup>

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>31</sup>

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 for an eternal relationship or describes the temporal fellowship of the believer with Christ, but it cannot be both.

In contrast, free grace gospel adherents uniformly understand *meno* in John 15 and 1 John to indicate communion or fellowship with Christ. Both evidence from the lexicons and usage suggest that this fellowship interpretation is correct and consistently interprets all 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.

In John 15 the phrase “in Me” is used six times in the first seven verses. With the exception of the first occurrence (15:2) “in Me” is always accompanied by the verb *meno*. 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, if one is to be consistent. Further, it seems more than plausible that *meno* has been elided for stylistic reasons from John 15:2, which should then be read, “every branch [abiding] in me which does not bear fruit.” This reinforces the fellowship 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 16:10, “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 say *meno* is equivalent to

<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately the editors of the NET Bible include this note to explain “abide” in 1 John 2:4. “‘Abide’ has become in some circles almost a “technical term” for some sort of special intimate fellowship or close relationship between the Christian and God, so that one may speak of Christians who are “abiding” and Christians who are not. It is accurate to say the word indicates a close, intimate (and permanent) relationship between the believer and God. However, it is very important to note that for the author of the Gospel of John and the Johannine Epistles *every* genuine Christian has this type of relationship with God, and the person who does not have this type of relationship (cf. 2 John 9) is not a believer at all (in spite of what he or she may claim).” They are guilty of eisegesis 2 John 9 as well.

<sup>31</sup> Homer A. Kent, Jr., “The Gospel of John” (unpublished class syllabus, Grace Theological Seminary, n.d.), 81, quoted in Smith, “Unfruitful Branches,” 15.

believe not only produces a nonsensical translation of these verses, but would also mean that moral obedience to God is the precondition to belief for salvation and that is pure legalism!

Associating 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 used 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 it appears that Jesus was 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 shows that *meno* cannot be equivalent to “believe.”

### **Αἴρω (*airō*): Does it Mean “Lifted up” or “Carried away”**

*Airo* 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>32</sup> The most common option is to take *airo* to mean to take away *in judgment*, thus interpreting John 15:2 by 15:6, a highly 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 and cultural context. *Airo* is used ten 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, εἰμί (*eimí*); and γίνομαι (*ginomai*); (John 1:1–4); ἀγαπάω (*agapáō*); and φιλέω (*philéō*); (John 21:15–17); οἶδα (*oída*) and γινώσκω (*ginōskō*); (John 21:15–17). He also uses a number of double entendres and paronomasias to illuminate subtle points.<sup>33</sup> This passage is no exception. Three times in two verses John used a cognate. In verse John

<sup>32</sup> Joachim Jeremias, “Αἴρω,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–74), I:185–86.

<sup>33</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

15:2a he used the verb *airo* in relation to the first nonfructifying branch to lift it up to receive more light and air so that it would begin to produce fruit. In verse 2b, he used the cognate *καθαίρω* (*kathairō*), a verb also attested in viticulture, but also used by Jesus and John in referring to the cleansing of a believer and which literally means “to cleanse, to purify.” This word is used figuratively for spiritual cleansing, and was also used in farming to describe pruning. By using *kathairo*, Jesus was drawing a connection between the need of the believer to experience regular spiritual cleansing, in order to mature and produce fruit. Jesus also used the adjective cognate *καθαρός* (*katharós*) this way in verse 3 to describe the disciples as positionally saved as he had in John 13:10 (second use). These two verses should then be translated:

Every branch [abiding] in Me when it does not bear fruit, he raises; and every [branch] when it bears fruit, He cleanses [not prunes] so that it may produce more fruit. You all are already clean because of the message which I already have spoken to you (John 15:2–3).<sup>34</sup>

Such a use by John should seize our attention. If John were contrasting these branches, unbeliever versus believer, he would have indicated this by using distinct words. By using cognates, he draws the reader’s attention to what the branches have in common. All the branches represent 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 maturing believer who is in fellowship with Christ and bearing fruit, but who needs to be further cleansed to produce more fruit. It is only the third branch, which represents the continuously rebellious believer, who does not abide and is removed.

In contrast to this, many commentators interpret this analogy to mean that Jesus is describing the removal of nonfruiting branches, which are said to represent unsaved “branches.” In the second case, the fruiting branches are further pruned that they might produce more fruit. However, this explanation does not fit the description of viticultural practices we have from first century sources.

The standard procedure in vineyard production during the first century was to prop up a branch that was weak, or falling to the ground so that it could be productive in the next season.<sup>35</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 crossbar 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>36</sup>

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agricultural term but *kathairo* was the standard word for pruning. Thus our attention is drawn to ask why John used these cognates?

<sup>34</sup> Author’s translation.

<sup>35</sup> Derickson, “Viticulture,” 45.

<sup>36</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, 17.35 quoted by Derickson, “Viticulture,” 46.

Thus the first century attestation is that there were two prunings a year. The first was to keep young nonfruiting branches on the vine, so they could be nourished and strengthened to produce fruit the following year. By raising up the vine onto the trellis, aeration and exposure to sunlight increased. The second pruning in the fall was to remove all unwanted material from the vine including branches that either never had fruit, or never would produce fruit.<sup>37</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. Then the nonabiding, nonfruiting branch of verse 6 represents the believer removed through temporal judgment.

A similar procedure is used by the vinegrowers in Israel today. Unlike in the United States, the grapevine stalks in Israel are allowed to lay on the ground during the nonproductive season, when they are not bearing fruit. When the time comes for the fruit, the vinedressers begin to slowly lift them off the ground. First a small rock, eight to ten inches high, is placed under the top end of the stalk to prop it off the ground. Several days later the vinedressers return and move the rock a little closer to the stalk to lift the branch higher. They continue to move the rock closer to the root, until the stalk is in the best position for fruitbearing.

### **Are All the Branches 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 have been teaching His disciples something new related to the new spiritual life of the coming church age, which would arrive with the advent of the Holy Spirit (John 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 through the cleansing of the maturing believer produces more fruit. The result is three levels of maturity: fruit, more fruit, and much fruit.

But the believer who fails to "abide" in fellowship will be disciplined (Heb. 12:6-7). This is the third branch of 15:6, 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 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 saw the real possibility of failure in the Christian life. The result is misery, self-destruction, and divine discipline, what Paul called death in Romans 6:16 and 23. The nonabiding branches are removed, a possible reference to the burning mentioned in 1 Cor. 3:15 at the judgment seat of Christ. It is not necessary to take every mention of burning as a reference to the lake of fire or the Judgment Seat of Christ. It seems more likely that the real description of the

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<sup>37</sup> Derickson, "Viticulture," 47-48.

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 by death because of his failure to live according to God's sanctification plan and to glorify God.

### Summary

Now that the key terms are clarified, we can easily understand the passage. Jesus begins by asserting that He is the true Vine and the Father is the Vinedresser. Though some allusion to a contrast between Jesus as the true Vine and Israel as the failed vine of the Old Testament may be present, this is not necessary. At best, Jesus may be implying that Israel failed to produce the fruit God intended, but He as the Messiah will fulfill as that Israel was meant to be. The point that is clear though, is that Jesus identified Himself as the Vine and the Father as the Vinedresser, which shows that Jesus is the source of fruit production, but not apart from the individual believer choosing to abide.

John 15:2 describes two types of growing, maturing believers. The first is the young believer who does not yet produce fruit, but is lifted up by the Father, so that in coming years fruit will be produced. The second describes the growing maturing believer who is continually cleansed by the Father so that more fruit will be produced. Here we also see three levels of production: growth, but no fruit; fruit; and more fruit.

John 15:3 continues the word play between *airo* and *kathairo*, but uses the cognate adjective, *kathairo*, to remind the disciples again that they are already clean. Two types of cleansing must be recognized: The positional cleansing that occurs for every believer at salvation, and the ongoing cleansing that takes place throughout the growing believer's life. Positional cleansing is here said to be because of the Word which has already been spoken (*λαλέω, laléō*); to the disciples. The use of the perfect tense emphasizes that Jesus had previously spoken this word to them. The disciples had become positionally clean at their salvation.

Then Jesus commanded these already justified and positionally clean disciples to "abide in Me." The aorist imperative emphasizes the priority of the command. Abiding in Jesus has the highest priority. Further, it is mutual; as we abide in Him, he abides in us. As the believer maintains fellowship with the Lord, He works in Him to produce fruit. The believer cannot produce fruit apart from this mutually abiding fellowship. Further, the command indicates that the believer may also choose not to abide. From this verse we learn that every believer at any moment is either abiding in Christ or not abiding in Christ. And second that only the abiding believer will bear fruit.

In verse 5 Jesus summarized and reiterated what He had already said, by applying it directly to the disciples. He repeated that He is the Vine and they are they branches. And then He stated that the one who has the mutual abiding bears much fruit. And in conclusion, apart from abiding in Him, the believer can do nothing. The believer who does not abide has no fruit production, but the believer who abides produces fruit.

Then John 15:6 makes it very clear that there are non-abiding branches. What happens to them is that they are removed. Perhaps this is an allusion to the sin unto death (1 John 5:16-17).

## Conclusion

This paper has shown that the predominant way of interpreting John 15 is to understand abiding as believing. This is especially common to Reformed theology and 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 that 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.

In relation to sanctification we have discovered that there are two classes of believers: those abide in Christ and those who do not abide in Christ. We have discovered that the sole and necessary condition for producing fruit is to abide in Him. Those who do not abide in Christ, do not bear fruit. But to be fructuous the believer must be continuously cleansed. This raises several questions: first, what is the relationship of abiding in Christ to other actions stated in the New Testament which are necessary for fruit production and second, how is the believer cleansed and on what basis? This is the subject of the next two papers.