

I AM

LESSON SIX

COMMENTARY

COMMENTARY NOTES

JOHN 15:1-5

D. A. Carson, in the *Pillar Commentary*, expounds on Jesus as the true vine:

15:1. This is the last of the 'I am ...' sayings (cf. notes on 6:35), and the only one that runs on into an additional assertion, *and my Father is the gardener*. Although the Son's role is central in these verses, the Father's is not mere background: he trims and prunes the branches.

Vine imagery is so common in the ancient world that scholars have been able to discover parallels they find compelling in a wide range of literature—in Gnosticism, the Mandaeen corpus, Philo, the literature of Palestinian Judaism, and more. The popularity of such imagery in ancient agrarian societies means that superficial similarities cannot themselves demonstrate dependence, at least until all competing claims are weighed. Two factors decisively decide the issue in favour of an Old Testament background: (a) the frequency of John's appeals to the Old Testament, both in allusions and in quotations; (b) the dominance in the Fourth Gospel of the 'replacement' motif (cf. notes on 2:19-22), for that motif strongly operates in this passage (*contra* Borig).

In the Old Testament the vine is a common symbol for Israel, the covenant people of God (Ps. 80:9-16; Is. 5:1-7; 27:2ff.; Je. 2:21; 12:10ff.; Ezk. 15:1-8; 17:1-21; 19:10-14; Ho. 10:1-2). Most remarkable is the fact that whenever historic Israel is referred to under this figure it is the vine's failure to produce good fruit that is emphasized, along with the corresponding threat of God's judgment on the nation. Now, in contrast to such failure, Jesus claims, 'I am the *true* vine', *i.e.* the one to whom Israel pointed, the one that brings forth good fruit. Jesus has already, in principle, superseded the temple, the Jewish feasts, Moses, various holy sites; here he supersedes Israel as the very locus of the people of God. (A similar contrast between Israel and Jesus is developed in various ways in the Synoptics: e.g. in the temptation narrative, Mt. 4:1-11 par.)

Perhaps the most important Old Testament passage is Psalm 80, in that it brings together the themes of vine and son of man:

*Restore us, O God Almighty;
make your face shine upon us,
that we may be saved.
You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it ...
Return to us, O God Almighty!
Look down from heaven and see!
Watch over this vine,
the root your right hand has planted,
the son [the Heb. word may mean 'stock' or 'branch'] you have raised up for yourself.
Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire;
at your rebuke your people perish.
Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,
the son of man you have raised up for yourself.
(Ps. 80:7-8, 14-17)*

The true (*alethinós*; cf. notes on 1:9) vine, then, is not the apostate people, but Jesus himself, and those who are incorporated in him. The theme would prove especially telling to diaspora Jews: if they wish to enjoy the status of being part of God's chosen vine, they must be rightly related to Jesus. Nevertheless the replacement theme does not exhaust the significance of the vine: the imagery itself suggests incorporation, mutual indwelling, fruitfulness. It is making the imagery walk on all fours to argue, with several commentators, that Jesus is the total vine, and not just the trunk over against the branches; *i.e.* the branches are truly in him. The image becomes ludicrous: not only does it then require that it is Jesus himself who is pruned, but it understands the branches not only to be 'in him' but to be him.

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As in Psalm 80, God plants and cultivates the vine: he is the gardener: the Greek word (*georgos*) properly means ‘farmer’, though in English ‘farmer’ is not normally used to describe vinedressing. It is hard not to see in the relation between the vine and this gardener a reflection of the kind of subordination the Son displays toward his Father (cf. notes on 5:19ff.; Fenton, p. 158).

15:2. Chapter 14 has already introduced the mutual indwelling of the believer and Jesus (‘you are in me, and I am in you’, 14:20). Here the same notion is portrayed in the vine imagery. Jesus is the vine; his disciples are the branches (*klema*; the word is particularly used of vine tendrils, though in other literature it is occasionally applied to heavier branches). The branches derive their life from the vine; the vine produces its fruit through the branches.

The role of the Father, the heavenly gardener, is twofold. To take them in reverse order: first, *he prunes or trims every branch that does bear fruit*. No fruit-bearing branch is exempt. Doubtless the Father’s purpose is loving—it is so that each branch *will be even more fruitful*—but the procedure may be painful. The thought is not unlike Hebrews 12:4–11, cast in terms of another model: the Lord disciplines his own the way a father disciplines his children. All this is ‘for our good, that we may share in his holiness’ (Heb. 12:10).

Second, the Father (Jesus says) *cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, i.e.* he gets rid of the dead wood so that the living, fruit-bearing branches may be sharply distinguished from them, and may have more room for growth. The phrase *in me* has prompted considerable speculation as to whether John is thinking of Jews who were once in God’s vine but who have now been cast off, or of apostate Christians. The former does not easily suit *in me*: it is hard to see in what sense Jews who never put their trust in Jesus were once ‘in him’, even if they once belonged to the vine of Israel before it was superseded by Jesus. But the latter view, that these dead branches are apostate Christians, must confront the strong evidence within John that true disciples are preserved to the end (e.g. notes on 6:37–40; 10:28). It is more satisfactory to recognize that asking the *in me* language to settle such disputes is to push the vine imagery too far. The transparent purpose of the verse is to insist that there are no true Christians without some measure of fruit. Fruitfulness is an infallible mark of true Christianity; the alternative is dead wood, and the exigencies of the vine metaphor make it necessary that such wood be connected to the vine. (Dead branches from some other tree, lying around in the vineyard dirt, could scarcely make the point.) These have no life in them; they have never borne fruit, or else they would have been pruned, not cut off. Because Jesus is the *true* vine, in contradistinction to the vine of Israel that bore either no fruit or rotten fruit, it is impossible to think that any branch that bears *no* fruit can long be considered part of him: his own credentials as the true vine would be called in question as fundamentally as the credentials of Israel. Cf. further on v. 6. If we must think of ‘branches’ with real contact with Jesus, we need go no further than Judas Iscariot (cf. notes on 6:70–71; 13:10). Indeed, there is a persistent strand of New Testament witness that depicts men and women with some degree of connection with Jesus, or with the Christian church, who nevertheless by failing to display the grace of perseverance finally testify that the transforming life of Christ has never pulsated within them (e.g. Mt. 13:18–23; 24:12; Jn. 8:31ff.; Heb. 3:14–19; 1 Jn. 2:19; 2 Jn. 9).

The Greek displays a play on words that is hard to render in English. The Father ‘cuts off’ (*airei*) every dead branch; he ‘trims’ (*kathairei*) every fruit-bearing branch; indeed the disciples listening to Jesus are already ‘clean’ (*katharoi*, v. 3) because of the word Jesus has spoken to them. The verb *kathairei* and its cognate adjective *katharoi* are appropriate to both an agricultural (cf. Barrett, p. 473) and a moral or religious context. Cf. Additional Note.

15:3. It is not clear if this verse provides the means of the purification—as if Jesus’ word were pruning shears—or if Jesus’ word is simply what started these branches off clean and fruitful, *already* clean. Probably the latter is in view, since the former rather confuses the work of the Father with that of the Son. The cleansing power of the word Jesus has spoken to his disciples, then, is equivalent to the life of the vine pulsating through the branches. Jesus’ *word* (*logos*) is not assigned magical power. What is meant, rather, is that Jesus’ ‘teaching’ (as *logos* is rendered in 14:23), in its entirety, including what

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he is and what he does (since he himself is the *logos* incarnate, 1:1, 14), has already taken hold in the life of these followers (*cf.* notes on 13:10).

15:4. The first sentence of v. 4 can be taken in one of three ways; all of them make sense. (1) Conditional: 'If you remain in me, I will remain in you' (which is the assumption of the NIV's rendering). Read in this way, the believer's perseverance in remaining in Jesus is the occasional cause, not the ultimate cause, of Jesus' remaining in the believer (*cf.* 8:31–32; 15:9–11). (2) Comparison: 'Remain in me, as I remain in you' (the Greek allows this: the second clause has no verb, but simply 'and I in you'). The thought is coherent enough; the 'and' (as opposed to 'as') is mildly surprising. In the context of the threats on both sides of the verse, it is indefensible to take the 'I in you' as an absolute promise *regardless* of the perseverance or fickleness of the ostensible believer. (3) Mutual imperative: 'Let us both remain in each other', 'Let there be mutual indwelling'. Again, however, the syntax is strange: the strong second person imperative in the first clause cannot easily be reduced to this mutual exhortation, and the normal Greek way of expressing this thought is by a hortatory subjunctive.

If the first reading, the conditional, has a slight edge, the general thought is in any case clear. No branch has life in itself; it is utterly dependent for life and fruitfulness on the vine to which it is attached. The living branch is thus truly 'in' the vine; the life of the vine is truly 'in' the branch. Lest the point be missed, Jesus steps away from the vine imagery a little and directly addresses his hearers (though he preserves the figure of 'fruit'): *Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me*. This is not the inorganic growth of external accretion, like the growth of an alum crystal in an alum solution; it is organic growth, internal growth, driven by the pulsating life of the vine in the branch, and only this kind of growth produces fruit. The imagery of the vine is stretched a little when the 'branches' are given the responsibility to remain in the vine, but the point is clear: continuous dependence on the vine, constant reliance upon him, persistent spiritual imbibing of his life—this is the *sine qua non* of spiritual fruitfulness. The Christian or Christian organization that expands by external accretion, that merely apes Christian conduct and witness, but is not impelled by life within, brings forth dead crystals, not fruit.

Malatesta has convincingly demonstrated that in 1 John 'to remain in' language and 'to be in' language are associated with new covenant theology. If the same is true here, as has been argued,⁴ we are not far from the Old Testament new covenant texts, all of which promise a renewed heart or a right mind or the presence of the Spirit in the new covenant people, such that they will obey what God says. Thus God remains among and in his people by renewing them with his life, with his Spirit, and making his presence known in them and among them (*cf.* 14:16, 23); they remain in him by obeying his commands, as the explanation in 15:9–11 makes clear.

15:5. The central thoughts of vv. 1–4 are here repeated, but without mention of the gardener (v. 1) or of the pruning (v. 2). The ultimate alternatives are set out with simple starkness: one either remains in the vine and is a fruit-bearing branch, or one is thrown away and burned.

There has been considerable dispute over the nature of the 'fruit' that is envisaged: the fruit, we are told, is obedience, or new converts, or love, or Christian character. These interpretations are reductionistic. The branch's purpose is to *bear much fruit* (v. 5), but the next verses show that this fruit is the consequence of prayer in Jesus' name, and is to the Father's glory (vv. 7, 8, 16). This suggests that the 'fruit' in the vine imagery represents everything that is the product of effective prayer in Jesus' name, including obedience to Jesus' commands (v. 10), experience of Jesus' joy (v. 11—as earlier his peace, 14:27), love for one another (v. 12), and witness to the world (vv. 16, 27). This fruit is nothing less than the outcome of persevering dependence on the vine, driven by faith, embracing all of the believer's life and the product of his witness.¹

¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 513–517.

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JOHN 15:1-5

Colin Kruse, in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, shows how Jesus succeeded where Israel had failed to be the true vine:

1. Against the OT background of Israel as the vine that failed to produce good fruit Jesus said, *I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener*. This is the last of the seven different 'I am' sayings with predicates in the Fourth Gospel (6:35, 48, 51; 8:12; 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5). Jesus used the word 'true' (*alethinos*) several times to denote what is true or genuine (4:23: 'true worshippers', 6:32: 'true bread', 15:1: 'true vine', 17:3: 'the true God'). He used it on this occasion to indicate that, as the true vine, he produced what the nation Israel failed to produce: fruit for which the gardener (the Father) was looking. What Jesus meant by 'fruit' is discussed below in the commentary on 15:4. By depicting the Father as the gardener/vinedresser, Jesus indicated that the Father was in control of both his ministry (as the vine) and that of his disciples (as the branches).

2-3. Jesus' use of the metaphor of the vine not only enabled him to depict himself as the true vine and his Father as the gardener, but also to depict his disciples as branches of that vine and his Father's work as the pruning of the branches to increase their 'fruit-bearing'. Jesus began, *He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit*. The Father, as the gardener, Jesus said, cuts off those branches 'in me' that fail to produce fruit. In the context of the Last Supper, just after Judas Iscariot went out to betray his master, the branch that is cut off would have as its primary reference the betrayer. Jesus referred to the removal of Judas later when he said, 'None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled' (17:12). Jesus added, *while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful*. This is an allusion to the spring pruning of the vines during the flowering stage so that fruit-bearing is maximized. The word translated 'to prune' (*kathairo*) can also mean 'to clean' or 'to purify'. It is found only here in the NT, but the cognate word 'clean/pure' (*katharos*) is found twenty-seven times in the NT, and four times in the Fourth Gospel (13:10 [2x], 11; 15:3). In 13:10-11 the word is used to describe the disciples (excluding Judas Iscariot) as 'clean', and here in 15:3 Jesus says of the Eleven, *You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you*. In 15:2-3, then, there is a play on the words *kathairō* and *katharos* ('to clean' and 'clean'). The disciples have already been rendered 'clean' through the word Jesus spoke to them. Now the Father also cleansed/pruned the disciples/branches so that they would bear more fruit. He 'pruned/cleansed' them through 'the word' Jesus spoke to them. It is as we hear and respond to the teaching of Jesus that we become more fruitful.

4. Continuing to speak of his disciples as branches, Jesus said, *Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me*. In 15:3 the disciples bear fruit as they respond to the teaching of Jesus. In 15:4 Jesus emphasizes that, just as a branch cannot bear grapes unless it remains in the vine, so too the disciples cannot bear fruit unless they remain in him. A number of things in this verse call for explanation or comment.

First, what does it mean for disciples to 'remain' in Jesus? Because of the vine/branches metaphor this has often been interpreted as an organic union between Jesus and his disciples. It is unlikely that the disciples who listened to Jesus that night thought of their connection with him in that way. They probably thought of it in terms of loyalty and fellowship that would continue as they obeyed his word. There are two other places in the Fourth Gospel where Jesus speaks of his disciples 'remaining' in him or in his love, and each case involves keeping his word (7, 10). If 'remaining' in Jesus were a matter of organic union (whatever that means), it would be a given, not something dependent upon obedience. However, if 'remaining' in Jesus is a metaphor for continuing in fellowship with and loyalty to him, then obedience to his commands is clearly important.

Second, what does it mean for Jesus to 'remain' in the disciples? Again, we should think in terms of continuing fellowship; this time of Jesus with his disciples. The means by which Jesus remains in fellowship with his disciples cannot be the same as the means by which the disciples remain in

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fellowship with him. Jesus does not keep his disciples' commands! While physically present with his disciples, Jesus remained in fellowship with them by committing himself to be with them and for them. When he returned to the Father, he did not leave them alone (see 14:15-18). He came to them again in the person of the Spirit, and then his remaining in them took on a deeper meaning. Today it is the combination of the disciples' remaining in fellowship with Jesus by obeying his word and Jesus' remaining in his disciples through the coming of the Spirit which produces 'fruit' that pleases the Father.

Third, what is the nature of the fruit produced when the disciples 'remain' in Jesus? There are two common interpretations: (1) righteous living (as required of Israel in Isa. 5:1-8), or (2) the results of preaching the gospel, i.e. new converts. However, to choose one, or even both of these, is to narrow the meaning too much. The context, which stresses that 'fruit' is produced as the disciples maintain their fellowship with Jesus by keeping his word and when Jesus continues to fellowship with them by the Spirit, suggests that 'fruit' refers to the entire life and ministry of those who follow Jesus' teaching and experience his presence in their lives through the Spirit.

5. Until this point Jesus had only implied that his disciples are branches in the true vine; now he stated this quite explicitly—*I am the vine; you are the branches—and then reiterated the teaching of 15:4: If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.* If the disciples remained in fellowship with Jesus by observing his teaching, and he remained in fellowship with them through the coming of the Spirit, the disciples would produce much 'fruit' in their lives, fruit that would please the Father. However, if they did not remain in fellowship with Jesus, there would be no fruit, as Jesus said, apart from me you can do nothing.²

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*
David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*
Richard D. Phillips, *John*, Reformed Expository Commentary
Colin G. Kruse, *John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary
Gerald Borchert, *John*, New Application Commentary
Jey J. Kanagaraj, *John*, New Covenant Commentary Series
Rodney Whitacre, *John*, IVP New Testament Commentary
Bruce Milne, *The Message of John*, The Bible Speaks Today
Grant Osborne, *John*, Cornerstone Bible Commentary
Barclay Newman and Eugene Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John*, UBSH

²Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 4, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 311-314.