



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
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Vital Union
John 15:1-17

A crisis point

There are times in life when we come to the point that something has to change. I was at that point.

I had been a Christian for about twenty-four years and a pastor for over twelve years. I'd been to college and seminary, and was in graduate school. But something was missing in my walk with Christ and in my ministry.

I'd been brought up in a church that had taught me the gospel. I knew good, solid theology, and had thought deeply about the faith. But I had sub-consciously fallen prey to something that robs us of our joy and our spiritual power in our Christian lives and our ministry.

Early in my ministry, I had felt like a failure because nothing was happening. The people were wonderful, but a combination of circumstances conspired against any success apart from a miraculous movement of God.

A formative shift in my theological perspective helped me with that as I moved to my next pastorate. I was more intentionally dependent on God and the power of the Holy Spirit. We saw some very good things take place, as a church that had experienced an awful division came together in a unity that was nothing short of awesome. I remember one particular Communion service one Sunday evening, when the sense of fellowship was so powerful that I felt as if I were being bowled over by it.

Our next assignment was even more difficult in some ways. That church had also experienced an awful split. And though the members of the congregation were wonderful and kind in so many ways, it seemed as though everything we tried was one step forward, three back.

I attended Southeastern Seminary while we were serving that church. I'm sure the professors didn't mean it this way, but much of what I learned in my practical studies seemed to suggest that if we just did the right things, results were sure to follow. I'd heard that most of my life. The only problem was that it wasn't working.

At our next church, I'd taken the same approach, trying to use *my* spiritual gifts to *do* certain things, particularly in planning for the next few years of ministry. I assumed that the *situation* at my previous church was the problem. So we went through our process and developed some priorities. The congregation adopted the plan and priorities without opposition—without *expressed* opposition, that is. It wasn't long before some people started voting with their pocketbooks, and only small portions of the plan ever came to fruition.

I didn't realize it so much then, but looking back, I see now that I was at a *crisis point* in my ministry. I did know I needed some help to move the church forward, and decided to attend a *MasterLife* training conference at Ridgecrest, the Baptist conference center near Asheville.

Looking for help

MasterLife was an intensive discipleship training course developed by missionary Avery Willis. To lead it, you had to be certified, either by going through it yourself with a group, or by taking a week-long intensive training. I thought it might be something that could help our church. So I went for the one-week session.

It was a tough week. We were facing some health concerns with my wife Jo Ann, something that could have potentially been very serious. But she insisted that I go. It was difficult being away from her during that time—for both of us. The work was tough, too—a lot of study, a lot of memorization in a short time. But it was a week that changed my life and my ministry.

A great deal of what we did in that training focused on today's text, especially verse 5: **I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me, you can do nothing.**¹

Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus identified Himself using what scholars call the "I am" sayings. Jesus gave these statements in a very emphatic way, repeating the personal pronoun that's already included in the verb ending in Greek. The point of that was that He was identifying Himself with the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, the great **I AM** of the Old Testament.

Jesus used seven different descriptions like this:

- **"I am the bread of life"** (John 6:22-59).
- **"I am the light of the world"** (8:12).
- **"I am the door of the sheep"** (10:7-9).
- **"I am the good shepherd"** (10:10-18).
- **"I am the resurrection and the life"** (11:25-26).
- **"I am the way, the truth, and the life"** (14:1-6).
- **"I am the true vine"** (15:1-17).

Now why did Jesus use this image of the vine and its branches to describe His relationship with His disciples? At this point in His conversation with His disciples on this night before His death, they had started toward the Kidron Valley, heading for the garden of Gethsemane. As they walked along, they probably passed the side of the temple where the Jewish historian Josephus tells us a tall golden cluster of grapes adorned the wall. Maybe that was the catalyst for this part of the conversation.

This was an image the disciples were very familiar with, because over and over, particularly in the Psalms and the prophets, the Old Testament describes Israel as God's vine (*e.g.*, Psalm 80:8-13; Isaiah 5:1-7; Ezekiel 19:10-14). But there was a problem. God had indeed planted Israel as a choice vine, expecting to harvest good fruit from her; but she *always* ended up bearing bad fruit.

But Jesus does something very different with the image here. He claims it *for Himself and His followers* to show that *He* is the faithful Israel, **the true vine**. And He uses it to describe His disciples' relationship with Him—a relationship that involves a *vital union* between Him and His followers, a union in which those who belong to Him derive and draw their very life from Him. And as they draw their life from Him, they bear fruit, not by their own power, but by His power and sustenance flowing into and through their lives.

Jesus paints the picture like a great master artist. He is the true Vine; the Father is the vinedresser who removes fruitless branches and prunes fruitful ones so they may bear more fruit. George Beasley-Murray captures a play on words here by translating it in his commentary that

the Father **cuts out** the fruitless branches and **cuts clean** the fruitful ones. Jesus tells His disciples that they've already been **cut clean** by His word. They must abide in Him as He abides in them, since like branches in the vine, they can't bear fruit unless they're abiding in Him.

Jesus then develops the image using the ancient tool of repetition with variation. He is the vine, His disciples are the branches. Those who abide in Him and He in them bear fruit, because without Him they can do nothing. Those who don't abide in Him are like branches that are thrown away and wither; they are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

But what does all this mean for His disciples? Jesus says that those who abide in Him and have His word abiding in them can be sure that whatever they ask will be done. His Father is glorified when believers bear much fruit, proving to be His disciples. They have not chosen Him; He has chosen them and appointed them to go and bear fruit, so the Father will give them whatever they ask in His name, and commanded them to love one another.²

So what?

So what does all this mean for us who would be Jesus' disciples today? Isn't He saying to us that *to bear fruit as Christians, we must be in vital union with Jesus?* To bear the fruit of love, we must depend *on Him!* We must be abiding consciously *in Him*, depending on Him, communing with Him, drawing life and strength *from Him*. When we do, He abides *in us*, so that His life and being flow *through us*, producing fruit.

Did you notice that the fruit Jesus specifically talks about has to do with both our relationship with God through Christ *and* our relationship with other disciples?

If we're abiding in Jesus, we'll be *praying as God directs*, and as Jesus would Himself. So we'll ask as He would ask, and whatever we ask will be done. That's what it means to pray in His name.

If we're abiding in Jesus, *His joy will be in us*, and our joy will be made full.

If we're abiding in Jesus, *we are His friends* in a friendship that *He* has graciously initiated, making us His friends as Abraham was the friend of God.

And if we're abiding in Jesus, *we'll love one another*. Jesus made it crystal clear on more than one occasion that loving God and loving one another go hand-in-hand. They're a matched set that can't be separated! And they're only possible as we abide in Jesus.

That was it! It finally hit me! I was trying to do it *on my own*—to live for Christ in *my own* strength, minister out of *my* power and resources. *And it wasn't working.*

This realization revolutionized my life and my ministry. It changed everything.

Paul describes it in another way in Galatians 2:19-20 (KJV) when he says:

I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

My faith and faithfulness just aren't enough. They will fail. But *Christ's* faithfulness—it will *never* fail! So as we yield ourselves to Christ, being crucified—put to death—with Him, He lives His life out through us, He exercises His faith and faithfulness in us, we live in Him and He lives through us in a vital union that produces the fruit of the Holy Spirit—fruit that Paul describes in Galatians 5:22-23 (NASB) as **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.**

Reminders

But to this day I still need to be reminded of this necessity of a vital union with Christ—and often!

I served as pastor of the First Baptist Church of Fairmont, NC from 1996 to 2003. Their sanctuary has a cathedral style stained glass window in the baptistery.

I loved that window, because it reminded me every Sunday as it stood tall behind me of the truth of this text.

The background was a deep blue. In the center was a huge, deep red cross.

Above the arms of the cross on either side were the Alpha (Α) and Omega (Ω), the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet—remember how in Revelation 1 the eternal God **who is and who was and who is to come** says, **I am the Alpha and the Omega**, and in Revelation 22, the risen Lord Jesus claims that title for Himself.

Immediately below the crossbeam on either side of the upright beam were the symbols for Christian marriage and the Nativity of Christ. Below these were the symbols for Christian Baptism and Holy Communion.

And at the foot of the cross was a huge Easter lily, to remind us of Jesus' resurrection. It sat above the Chi Rho (XP), the symbol for Christ formed from the first two letters of the Greek word for Christ.

And growing from the foot of the cross intertwined behind it and the symbols, was the image of this passage in John 15—the grapevine with its fruitful branches.

Years later, a dear couple from that church where this truth revolutionized my life and ministry still remind me of it. While I was their pastor, I had begun leading them through *MasterLife*. We never made it through because we were called to another church. But they understood the importance of John 15:5 to me and my ministry. Their parting gift to us sits in our house on the ledge over our bookcase—a three piece pottery set, each piece decorated with a painted grapevine branch and an inscription.

The largest pot says, “He is the life in everything.”

The middle one says, “In Him is life.”

And the smallest says, “Abide in Him.”

And to all three I say, Amen!

†MEG

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture taken from the New King James Version.

² These commentaries have been helpful in my exposition of the text: George R. Beasley-Murray, “John” (2nd ed.), *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 36* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999); Gerald L. Borchert, “John 12-21,” *The New American Commentary, Vol. 25B* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002); Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).