

3. The Organic Union Between Christ and His Church

Becoming a Disciple Series

I grew up in a port town on the East coast of England, Harwich in Essex, England. I come from a long line of fishermen that operated out of Harwich, known to Americans as the home of Christopher Jones, the master (captain) and quarter owner of the Mayflower. He used to live around the corner from me, apart from a couple of hundred years or so, of course. I worked with my father on his fishing trawler, *Why Worry*. I had a lot of time to observe the methods of catching different types of fish. My father was a well-known and experienced fisherman. There is more to the trade than having the right boat and equipment. The net my father towed behind the *Why Worry* was about 100 feet long and designed to be dragged along the bottom of the murky waters of the North Sea. The net is only as good as the boat that tows it through the water, designed to allow the vessel to pull it fast enough not to let the fish swim out of its path. The fish do not even see the fishing boat, which is often several hundred yards in front of the net. The net was joined to the boat by wire cables. To use an analogy of fishing, the Lord Jesus is the fisherman and uses us as His net. Just as the net needs to be connected to the boat to catch fish, we need to be connected to Him to be effective.

In this life, we can only be effective at bearing fruit by being connected or joined to the Lord and having His life flowing through us. In one place, Jesus used the analogy of being "yoked" to Him, and in that connection, we would learn from Him and find rest and ease in plowing the hard soil around us:

²⁹Take my **yoke** upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my **yoke** is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:29-30).

What was He saying by using the analogy of the yoke? A yoke was a piece of wood shaped in such a way as to fit over the shoulders of two oxen or horses, connecting them so that they would equally bear the weight of the plow behind them. This yoke helped them work together. Often a younger animal was trained in how to plow by being yoked together with an older, trained animal that would lead them where the man behind the plow wanted them to go. Jesus was saying to His disciples that if we connected ourselves to Him in a vital union, there would be great fruit that would be an outflow of the life that would flow from this union. It was so important to the Lord that He spoke further about this topic when He sat down with them at His last supper:

The Vine and the Branches

¹"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain 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. ⁵I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷If you remain in

me, and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. ⁸This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. ⁹As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹²My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³Greater love has no one than this; that he lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. ¹⁷This is my command: Love each other (John 15:1-17).

The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight (Isaiah 5:7).

Hosea the prophet compared the nation of Israel to a vine, saying, “Israel was a spreading vine; he brought forth fruit for himself” (Hosea 10:1). Jeremiah also spoke of the nation of Israel in the same terms, saying, “I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock” (Jeremiah 2:21). This picture of the nation of Israel being a vine was such a sharp image to the Jewish people that a great richly ornamented golden vine was hung in the temple area as a reminder for all Israel as to their holy calling—to bring forth fruit to God. It was considered a great honor for many rich Jewish people to give their gold for this nation's symbol as it hung there for all to see.

If the Vineyard is a picture of the people who belong to the Lord, what do you think Christ meant when He said, “I am the true vine”? (v. 1).

An Organic Unity

If you have come to entrust your life to Christ, at that point of repentance and abandonment to Him (believing), something happened at the core of your being. The Spirit of God came into your life and baptized you into the Body of Christ:

¹²Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For **we were all baptized** by one Spirit **so as to form one body**—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

In some unseen mystical way, the Spirit dipped, soaked, and saturated us (for that's what the word *baptism* means) into an organic union with Christ. Notice that this is not some Christians that the Spirit baptized, but the Scripture says that **all** who are Christians were placed into the spiritual body of Christ. This baptism is a spiritual union between you and Christ and the rest of God's family—your brothers and sisters in Christ. The Spirit of God maintains the connection with the Head of the Body, Christ Himself. We are the arms, legs, hands, and feet of the organic union with Jesus Christ. You are one with me, as I am one with you, as long as we are *in* Christ Jesus, a phrase repeated 174 times in the New Testament (and its equivalents *in Jesus, in the Lord, in the Son, etc.*). Just as fishing nets were connected to our trawler, nothing happens without the connection.

In our passage from John 15:4, Jesus said that we would not bear fruit unless we remain in Him and keep that ongoing organic connection vital. The relationship is the key. It's like emailing or texting one another back and forth via the Internet, Facebook, or other programs. An invisible source, the Internet, connects two or more individuals. We are talking about a living connection in the vine picture that is unseen but very powerful. There is a flow of life-giving sap from Christ to you through that connection that will bring forth fruit.

Let's think more about what Jesus is saying. He says that He is the vine and we are the branches. Fruit is not seen on the rootstock. The manifestation of the fruit of the vine is at the level of the branches. First of all, every vineyard comes from a single vine. It starts from a single rootstock, and we are saying that the spiritual sap of Christ flows into every branch connected to Him. In his letter to the Romans, Paul the apostle uses the same analogy when he shares that the Gentiles are grafted into the rootstock of the covenant God made with Israel (Romans 11:16-20).

Jesus describes His relationship with His followers: "I am the Vine. You are the branches." He does not say, "I am the foundation, and you are the upper floors." He describes our relationship with Himself as an organic union. He has so united Himself with us that He does not want to be known apart from us or for us to be known apart from Him! The Spirit connects us organically to the person of Christ. He identifies with us. We are identified with Him. **"For to us to live is Christ..."** (Philippians 1:21a).

When the Lord Jesus confronted Saul on the Damascus road during his persecution of the church, the Lord said to him, **"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"** (Acts 9:4). He didn't ask him why he was persecuting Christ's people, but why was he persecuting Him? Those who belong to Christ have been brought into such unity in the Body of Christ that He is in pain with us when one of us hurts. If I bang my knee against the table, it may be my knee that is throbbing, but the pain is felt in the whole body. Christ hurts when we hurt, but further to that, we should be so close in our relationships in the Body of Christ that each of us feels what our brother or sister is going through and hurts alongside them. Here's what Paul the apostle wrote:

But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, ²⁵so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. ²⁶If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. ²⁷Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it (1 Corinthians 12:24b-27).

Christ feels what we feel because we are one with Him. In another place, Paul the apostle also talks about this organic unity that we have with Christ, saying, **"so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others"** (Romans 12:5).

What do you think Paul means by saying that we belong to one another?

To be a disciple of Christ is to be aware that we no longer live for ourselves but for Christ and learn to live in relationship with others in the Body of Christ. True biblical Christianity is growing in relationship with others in the Body of Christ and sharing your life with them under the direction

and leadership of Christ. By saying that He is the true vine, He is saying He is not just the rootstock but the whole vine. He is the sum of all the parts of what the Father has planted. It is as if He is saying, “you have a part in me. You have a portion in the expression of My life. I have called you to be a fruit-bearing expression of My life.” Faith in Christ is the root. Discipleship is the fruit and outward manifestation of our union and communion with Christ.

What the World Needs Now

This kind of organic unity and the fruit that comes from it will draw others into the kingdom and a relationship with Christ. People today are longing for that which is genuine. I remember a story that John Wimber, the founder, and church planter of the Vineyard Movement, shared about an event during a conference where he spoke. When John worked for Fuller Theological Seminary, he taught extensively on church growth. At one of his lectures, a frustrated pastor who was a delegate at the conference stood up and stated that he knew the things that John was teaching, but when was he going to get some advice on getting his church to grow? John patiently told him that he would have all his questions answered in a short while. He became desperate a little later on as he hoped to learn some new method from the conference that would catapult his church into more significant growth in numbers, so he stood up again, saying, “Yes, I know all that, but when are you going to help me grow my church?” John just looked at him, and at that moment, the Spirit of God gave John a wise, intuitive answer for him. He asked a loaded question, “Okay, how many more like you do you want?” The man exclaimed, “I don’t want any more like me! I want them to be like Jesus!”

The truth John Wimber stated was that often the followers go as the leader goes. If we want our congregation to embody truth, it must be seen in the leaders first! The farmer must be the first partaker of the fruit, and leaders must first take the beam out of our eyes to enable us to take the sliver out of someone else’s eye. If we’re going to grow, we must follow the Maker’s instructions. Life can only come from union with the True Vine. Think of it; all life in nature is born out of intimacy. Why would it be any different in the growth of the Church, which is a living organism?

I think we have taken a wrong turn somewhere along the road to growing the church “for Jesus.” This departure is especially true in the Western church today. We started with an excellent and logical idea; to make the church comfortable enough for non-believers to come and hear the good news of the Gospel in such a way as to remove the roadblocks to their understanding by making the church “a seeker-sensitive” environment. I think this idea is close to God’s heart since He sought to remove the religious obstacles which obscured the image of the heart of the Father from the people of His day. This is why Jesus often challenged the Pharisees and taught people using simple stories they could understand. Unfortunately, in many churches today, we have focused on performance-oriented events and put a greater emphasis on professional presentation and less on the One we are presenting.

In contrast, our presentation is, at best, human effort. We need to connect to the divine source—Jesus. When we connect people to Christ Himself through His Word, He has the power to transform a life. Do you believe this? This vital relationship is something we cannot afford to forget or leave out. The life people need is centered in the True Vine. People want the “real deal.”

The Father's Pruning

Christ wants us to be partners and participators in the fellowship of the Godhead and the process of fulfilling His purpose on earth.

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful” (John 15:1-2).

Charles Swindoll makes several observations about this passage, which I have found helpful. In his book, *Insights into John*; He states:

“Firstly, this passage has meaning for believers only. Any non-believer trying to apply these truths will become hopelessly confused. Jesus was not describing how one becomes a Christian but how one lives as a Christian after placing trust in Him. Second, Jesus draws heavily on the metaphor of a vineyard, a powerful symbol with roots running deep into the soil of Israel's history. No illustration touched the Hebrew soul like the image of a vinedresser and his vineyard. Third, the primary subject of Christ's teaching is abiding (KJV) or *Remaining* in the NIV, not bearing fruit. At no point in the discourse is the believer *commanded* to produce fruit. Instead, we are promised that if we abide, the fruit will be the result. Fourth, the illustration Jesus chose would have been familiar to every disciple and virtually all of John's readers, but it is unfamiliar to most of us today; therefore, we must be careful not to milk every detail for symbolic meaning. Illustrations allow us to see the bigger picture; that must be our focus here. Jesus is summarizing the care a vinedresser gives to a vine. The Lord reassures the disciples that they had already been pruned. The adjective translated "clean" is based on the same verb for "prune" in verse 2. He followed this assurance with a command to "abide." The verb means "to remain" or to "stay in place" often in reference to one's home. Upon meeting Jesus, Andrew and John asked Him "Where are you staying [or abiding]?" "Abiding" regarding this metaphor refers to the branch remaining connected to the vine. Branches that do not receive nourishing sap from the vine cannot produce fruit- or live, for that matter."¹

What is pruning? What is the Father's motive in pruning us? How does He spiritually prune?

This picture of the Father's pruning is not indicative of God cutting unfruitful Christians off of the Vine (Christ). When you gave your life to Christ, God rescued you from the dominion of darkness and brought you into the kingdom of the Son (Colossians 1:13). He won't throw you out because you are not fruitful enough! You are secure in God's love and faithfulness. This passage above is about how the Father goes about bringing **more** fruit from your life. The Father wants us to be fruitful and will exercise His rights to **remove dead wood** from our lives. The dead wood of wrong attitudes that need to be cut off, the kind of mentality of believers that have never become disciples, believers of the sort that only want ten cents worth of God:

I'll have ten cents worth of God, please.

¹ Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's New Testament Insights, Insights into John*. Published by Zondervan, Page 260.

I want enough to get a taste, to actually have Him, but not so much that it costs me much.

I don't want to get distracted from the things that I really want.

I don't want to be consumed by a huge dose of God.

I want enough to feel pretty good about myself, enough to make my life respectable and manageable—enough to get me through the pearly gates.

I'll have ten cents worth of God, please...

The deadwood speaks of dead works of the flesh—our lower nature inherited from Adam. When I came to Christ, I had been working with a bunch of commercial fishermen. With no women or children on the boats, the language was often coarse—rude, crude, or vulgar. This is the kind of works that the Spirit of God wants to cut off from our lives. The Lord will use all sorts of circumstances in our lives to reveal how far short of Christlikeness we are. As we are obedient to His Word and the promptings of His Spirit, dead wood is cut off, and new habits in our lives bring God's purposes to the end result—the fruit of the Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22).

In the Old Testament, we hear Joseph say, “(He) has made me fruitful in the land of affliction” (Genesis 41:52b, NASB).

His Word is a pruning instrument. When the Spirit shows us something that displeases Him, it is usually through a Bible Scripture or a subjective inner thought that this particular behavior you are undertaking is of your old life and needs to be cut off. This thought will be either the inner conscience or a Spirit-inspired corrective reflection. Because we have received His Word of salvation, we have been set apart into this relationship with Him of organic oneness whereby we can bear fruit. Jesus told the disciples that they were already clean because of the word that He had spoken to them:

You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you (John 15:3).

Christ Himself had lived with them for more than three years, correcting, encouraging, and strengthening them for them to be fruitful. But they were never to think that they would be worthy of the task without Him. No, Jesus still does the work; we are just willing vessels for His life and power to flow through.

What Does it Mean to Remain?

Did you notice how many times the words *remain* come up in the John 15 passage?

⁴“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. ⁵I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. ⁸This

is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (John 15:4-8).

What does it mean to remain? (The King James Version uses the word "abide").

I think that the thought here is of the picture of the life-sap of Jesus Christ flowing through your life by allowing the Word of God to be the pruning shears of the Holy Spirit. The disciples had the person of Christ with them for three years, speaking the very words of God to them. That's why He said to them that they were already clean because of the words He spoke to them (John 15:3). He went further as it concerns the life-giving Word of God, saying that if they continued to allow the Spirit to maintain the connection with the Head, and His Word remained in them, they would ask "**whatever you wish, and it will be given you**" (verse 7).

Is it as easy as just reading the Word of God? No, the devil knew the Word of God and quoted it to Jesus in the temptation of the wilderness. The difference is allowing the Word to find a home in you—to take root in the soil of your character:

³⁷And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, ³⁸**nor does his word dwell in you**, for you do not believe the one he sent. ³⁹You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, ⁴⁰yet you refuse to come to me to have life (John 5:37-39).

The religious Jews had meditated on the Holy Scriptures all their lives, but the Word of God had not found a home in them. We must move the furniture around and make room for His Word. Any junk in our hearts has to be taken to the junkyard, and the throne room has to have Christ and His Word wholly at home and taking root. The Lord said something similar a little bit later to the religious Jews:

I know that you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are looking for a way to kill me, **because you have no room for my word** (John 8:37).

The life of God flows smoothly through a man or woman who is living in obedience and faith in God by making room in His heart for the Word of God. We often underestimate the power of the Word of God, but Jesus said this about His Word:

The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life (John 6:63).

True discipleship is being connected to Christ, who is the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27). When we allow God's strength to flow through us, the Lord produces results that defy natural explanation—powerfully effective prayers, God-honoring blessings, unbounded love, and inexplicable joy. All these things come when God's Word finds a home in our hearts, and we are rooted and grounded (Ephesians 3:17) in the love and power of Christ. The life-giving sap of this organic connection to Jesus Christ will bring immeasurable fruit to your lives.

Prayer: Father, please have your way in pruning the dead wood of my life. I give myself to you in humble submission to the pruning shears of your Spirit. May the life-giving sap of your life flow in me and through me. Amen!

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