

WHAT IS THE 'FRUIT' OF THE 'VINE' IN JOHN CHAPTER 15?

Jesus Christ has just dropped an atomic bomb whose fallout will reach around the whole world! In John 15:1 he has just said: 'I AM THE TRUE VINE,' but what is he actually talking about and why is this a statement of atomic bomb proportions?

Our search for the answer must start in the OT because as we all know every NT verse has an OT background of some sort, a background which can be conveyed to us most directly and strongly in the form of an exact quotation, then at a weaker level we can recognise a strong allusion to an OT theme or passage, then all the way down to the sort of 'echo' or general cultural reference which is always there – 'in the Jewish blood' as it were – and which no one needs to explain. But there is another background we must keep in mind as we think about this chapter, and that is the way we ourselves are used to hearing the passage preached about by Evangelical preachers who are repeating the 'Traditions of our Evangelical Fathers.' How many millions of times have we heard the following, as a preacher faces his congregation and says:

Jesus is the vine

He says 'You are the branches'

So get out there and start bearing the 'Fruit of the Spirit.'

Amen. End of story! ?

So I want us, as we read, to be able to hold the following three things in our minds at the same time – the OT background – the things Jesus is actually saying in John 15 – and the typical treatment by so many modern Evangelical preachers. Never short of earnestness and passion they nevertheless routinely ignore the context in and around this passage in John and get the whole thing almost completely wrong! I will try to show not only how they get it wrong but also why they are led to say what they do.

1. The true vine:

The nation of Israel was the Lord's vine, as we see in Psalm 80:8 – 11:

You brought a vine out of Egypt, you drove out the nations and planted that vine, you prepared the ground and it took deep root and filled the land, the mountains were covered with its shade and the mighty cedars with its branches, it sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River.

Here we have the positive picture of Israel as the vine – Israel as entirely the work of the Lord – Israel as amazingly successful under David and Solomon who stretched its borders north and north-east to cover a vast amount of territory and subdue many peoples. Isaiah 27:2-6 has an even bigger future for this vine – a global future:

In that day: A pleasant vineyard, sing of it!

I, the Lord, am its keeper; every moment I water it.
Lest any one harm it I guard it night and day
In days to come Jacob shall take root,
Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots
And fill the whole world with fruit.

But the negative side of things was that Israel was a fragile vine and a vulnerable vineyard which often failed to give fruit for the Lord and was often punished by him. He did this by bringing in troublesome and hated neighbours to rob and burn and destroy Israel, and the last of these was of course to be the Romans. By the time we get to the preaching of Jesus we see that Israel had failed to do its job but the promise itself had not failed – there was still a work of God which would fill the earth with fruit, but it would not be national Israel or 'Israel as nation' which did the work. Something new was needed and Jesus Christ claims to be that new something – the vine which was new and true but planned and promised from of old.

In John 15:1 Jesus claims to be not just a vine, any old vine, and not just 'the' vine, but the TRUE vine, the single, the unique, the one and only true vine, and in saying this he is very definitely ruling out any claim that national Israel might still make to be the world vine of the Lord. That is his atomic bomb with global fallout – he himself is a Jew and he is the final and greatest product of Israel the nation, and as such he has fulfilled and transcended and replaced national Israel as the Lord's vine who will fill the world with fruit – he alone is the Lord's true vine and his fruit will be the Lord's fruit.

2. The branches

So Jesus identifies himself as the one true vine – that bit is easy enough – but who or what are the branches? To answer this question we will have to look very carefully at the internal structure of the Gospel according to John in comparison to the other three Gospels. His plan is strikingly different from theirs. The others have a very brief Last Supper and final instructions between Jesus and the Twelve, the longest being in Luke 22:14 – 46, just 32 verses, while John by contrast chooses to create a unique separate major block of five whole chapters, 13 to 17 inclusive. This alone throws out a very strong challenge to us in our attempts to read and understand John – we will need to be on our toes in order to stay with him!

So what is John the writer doing with these five remarkable chapters? The absolutely essential fact we must understand about this whole study is that Jesus has at this point withdrawn into a private room with his closest disciples, the Twelve whom we usually call *Apostles* (although John himself avoids using this word as a name in the way the other writers do). Jesus' public ministry to Israel is now over and on the night of this last meal he fills the hours before his arrest with intense private teaching of these disciples, and so the block of chapters from 13 to 17, which are usually called the 'Final Discourses,' should, I will insist, be called the **'PRIVATE**

Final Discourses.' They are in a special and very deliberate way separated in their own box within the gospel and must be kept together and read together, with the important result that the context of any one thing said or done in these five chapters will be the whole of the rest of the content of these five chapters, and the meaning of anything which is recorded in them, or the answer to any question which arises in them, must be sought within these chapters in the first instance, before we look more widely for the answer. John was a highly intelligent and organised writer so we must expect these chapters to be sufficiently clear in themselves to answer any question we put to them, but only if we will do the work of studying them – if we are lazy and do not do the study we will make the usual mess of things.

I don't want to write a full commentary on John 15 but just pick out the main points for our search for the branches, and everything I am about to say must be understood against the background outlined above – that Evangelical preachers tell us today that WE are the branches in this passage – but can this 'default setting' of ours possibly be right?

In words which recall the work of the Lord God in Isaiah 27, quoted above, Jesus says: 'My Father is the vinedresser who cuts away every one of my branches which does not bear fruit, and every one which does in fact bear fruit he prunes and cleans up so that it bears more fruit,' and of course he is speaking to the Eleven men who are still there with him. It is a great promise to them but also a stern warning. The positive note of promise and encouragement is seen in the way he assures them that they are already cleansed (pruned and made ready) by the word which he has spoken to them, so they will not be cut off and burnt by the Father. On the other hand the stern warning is that they must not follow the example of Judas who had begun the evening with them but has now gone out into the darkness. For a long time now Judas has heard exactly the same teaching from Jesus as the Eleven have heard, but in his case it has not cleansed him but has served only to confirm his lack of faith and he has cut himself off completely – his doom is sealed. From one point of view his loss is his own choice and his own fault because he has chosen not to remain in Jesus the true vine, while from another point of view he has been cut off by the word and work of God. 'Be warned' says Jesus to the others.

This whole chapter is about unity (as are all these chapters from 13 to 17) – the unity between Father and Son, that between the vine and his branches, and among the band of disciples themselves. They are called to love but they are also being called to face danger and suffering, for he says: 'No one has greater love than laying down his life for his friends.' These twelve men did **not** love each other very deeply – there was a great deal of jealousy and competition among them as seen on this very night when in their hearts they refused to humble themselves and wash the feet of others – the fact that Jesus had to do it was partly meant to embarrass them but also to show them what they must do for each other from then on. They still had a long way to go – if they would not wash each other's feet, or if they competed for the highest seat at supper, how could they possibly be prepared to lay down their lives for the others?

Here again Jesus knew that he himself was about to become the ultimate example of what he was talking about – the shadow of the cross lies heavy upon these five chapters.

Having just spoken about loving one's friends in verse 14, Jesus moves on to a new and very important stage in the unity he has with them. The illustration of vine and branches can only take them so far – after all he is not a vine and they are not branches – that is only a word-picture of their organic unity. Now in 15:15 he talks about his relationship to them as man to men, saying: 'I no longer call you servants because servants do not know what is in the mind of their master.' Servants just do what they are told – or else! Did Jesus ever treat these men as servants in this way? I think the answer is 'Yes' because we have seen them earlier in the story very much as servants – buying food, picking up scraps, organising the seating, rowing the boats, but now he says: 'I am calling you Friends because everything I heard from my Father I have made known to you.'

What does he mean by this? Modern research has given us a much better understanding of this word 'Friend' in the first century. Such a 'Friend' was not a pal or bosom-buddy but a person from outside your immediate family who was tied to you by gift-exchange and strong social obligations and inter-dependence. That particular type of society (like many of the more 'traditional' ones today) created and relied on networks of social debt and mutual help. If a man faced a crisis or began a major project he could call in his debts and get help from his Friends. They could not refuse – this was the social contract. So in calling the Eleven his *friends* the Lord is bringing them into his confidence as his peers, his equals, co-workers, supporters and defenders. Since friends were privileged visitors to the family home all the resources of the family are made available to them, so in this new great project which they are now joining they can ask anything of the Father of the household and He will give it to them. They will share in the family resources. We should also note that John is the only gospel which says that Pilate was a 'Friend' of Caesar (19:12) and therefore strongly attached to the royal household of the Empire. We know he was in Jerusalem as Caesar's own personal representative with great authority, but if Pilate failed Caesar failed, and that could easily cost Pilate not only his 'Friendship' with Caesar but his head to boot! This contrast between the household of Caesar and the household of God is not accidental. We continue in John 15:

So this verse 15:15 is in fact a very important verse which shows a new development in the dynamic relationship between Jesus and the Eleven, and John's Gospel overall is very dynamic and full of movement and change of one type or another – both physical and spiritual. These men are about to enter a stage of huge responsibility and they need to understand exactly what their job is to be – they need to know what the Father's plans are and how they as 'Friends' will fit into things. This story of massive change in their status does not end until 20:17 where Jesus, risen from the dead, tells Mary to go and tell what she has seen and heard 'To my brothers.' So this is a grand story of social mobility, one in which his servants become his friends for

whom he lays down his life, and his friends then become his brothers, sons of the same Father, and it transforms their lives! Because of the high rate of infant mortality in the Roman empire adoption of male infants or young men of promise was very common, and there were many great stories of adoption (especially that of the great Julius Caesar's adoption of the young man who would become the future Emperor Augustus) but this story in John's gospel of these *douloi* or slaves becoming first 'friends' and then being adopted by God himself is the greatest adoption story of all.

In John 13:13 Jesus says to them 'You call me Master and Lord and you are quite right to do so,' and returning to John 15:16, we see Jesus remind them that they did not choose him but he chose them, and he chose them for the very specific purpose that they would go and bear fruit, and that their fruit would 'remain' or 'endure.' He goes on to assure them of the Father's support in all they will be called upon to do for him, and in the persecutions they will suffer for him. He will send the *Paraclete* (the Holy Spirit) to stand with them and bear witness to Jesus, then in v. 27 he adds these words which are really important for our theme: 'You also will bear witness because you have been with me from the beginning.' Here at last in 15:27 we can say who and what the Branches of Jesus in this chapter are – they are these same eleven men who were with him that night – eleven men who were personally chosen by him, who were with him from the beginning, who were trained by him and 'cleansed' by the words he spoke to them, and who will now become his 'witnesses.' Now, my Christian friends of the 21st century, let us face up to the facts: I was not there that night and neither were you and neither was your preacher, so why would he tell you that the words: 'You are my branches' were addressed to you on that night? or written about you? You cannot simply **assume** that is what John wants you to say – you would have to **prove** it. Finally, seeing that the branches in question were to bring forth fruit, what was the fruit in question?

3. The fruit

In John 15:16 Jesus said to the Eleven that their fruit would endure – but endure for how long? The answer must be: 'Endure forever, remain forever, persevere forever, persist forever, be preserved forever.' But even here Jesus does not spell out exactly what he means by this preserved fruit and it is this fact which creates problems for many readers. Having already taken the **false** step of convincing themselves that they (and all other Christians) are the branches being talked about, they are then forced to look around in the scriptures for a species of 'fruit' which is appropriate to themselves and all believers, instead of seeing that the branches are the eleven Apostles and therefore the fruit will be a species of fruit appropriate to the Apostles and their particular work. Now one species of fruit common to all believers is the 'Fruit of the Spirit' in Galatians 5, so this beautiful bowl of fruit in Galatians is conveniently lifted out and placed in John 15. No permission having been asked or granted it is an act of (pious) theft, but it also defies common sense! It breaks one of the basic rules of mature Bible reading and exegesis, which is: 'Do not cut and paste Bible passages.'

Paul wrote a pastoral letter to the Galatians while John wrote a gospel, and both men would be appalled to learn that modern readers cannot tell the difference between these two things but are willing to mix-n-match and cut-n-paste Bible texts to their hearts' content. No, friends, that is the lazy man's way out of a small difficulty. Let us exercise some self-discipline here – let us read Paul to answer a question raised in Paul, but let us read further in John to answer a question raised in John, who, as we will soon see, has no shortage of material for us and it is all easy to understand. John uses the word fruit (*karpos*) in three different contexts only, in chapters 4, 12 and 15.

Fruit: the first witness

Well before our chapter 15 the writer of John has already used this key word 'fruit' (*karpos*). John 4:36 is very telling. Jesus (as it seems to me) sent all the disciples (as servants) away into town to buy food so he could speak privately to the Samaritan woman at the well. When she herself has later returned to town and given her amazing report everyone who is able to goes out to see this stranger, and Jesus then challenges his disciples who have also returned to 'lift up their eyes' and see this mobile crop, these people willingly coming to him to be harvested. He goes on in 4:36a 'Already the reaper is receiving his reward.' What does this mean – where does this come from? Here the OT warning bells are ringing loud and clear – surely you can hear them:

Psalm 126:5-6 'May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy! He that goes forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.' Again Amos 9:13 says 'Behold the days are coming ... when the ploughman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes overtake him who sows the seed,' – this harvest will be miraculously swift and plentiful. To these we must add various wonderful words of comfort from Isaiah, such as 'Behold the Lord God comes with might and his arm rules for him; behold his reward is with him and his wages before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young,' Isa 40:10-11. 'Say to the daughter of Zion "Behold your salvation comes; behold his reward is with him,"' Isa 62:11. The Saviour is God and the wages or reward he is carrying is his own redeemed sons and daughters! Now John loves the text of Isaiah and when both these writers talk about the 'reward' and the 'harvest' they mean the same thing: This mobile harvest can only be a harvest of PEOPLE! and in John 4:36 Jesus says 'Already the harvester is receiving his reward and collecting FRUIT unto eternal life.' These Samaritans, blessed by God, are this fruit. The fruit is human.

Fruit: the second witness

This witness of John 4:36 is confirmed by the further witness of John 12:24 where Jesus says: 'Unless a grain of wheat, falling into the soil, dies, it remains alone, but if it should die it will bear much **fruit**' – please note that the product of this death is not

called grain but fruit (*karpos*). John's second use of the word 'fruit' (quite different from Paul's use of the word in Galatians) comes shortly before the context of chapter 15 and it emphasises the organic relationship of this new-born fruit to the original source – the seed and the fruit always share the same DNA. So when we turn to the vine and the fruit in John 15 (which is of course our Third Witness) we should be looking for a type of fruit which has the same sort of organic relationship with the vine and shares the same spiritual DNA with the vine, and here the Galatians passage on the 'Fruit of the Spirit' would be totally inappropriate and quite bizarre.

Fruit: the fourth witness

John however makes this whole thing even easier for us when we read on into chapter 17 (why do we give up so soon – why do we fail to see that chapters 13 to 16 are one sustained argument which comes to its fulfilment in chapter 17 – why do we seek the answer to John's question in chapter 15 in the writings of Paul – why do we not respect each writer and let him speak for himself?). Now the great prayer in John 17 is worthy of our closest study. I want to re-name it '**The Prayer for the Vine**' because calling it the 'High-priestly Prayer,' (the traditional title cut-and-pasted out of Hebrews), is yet another example of confused exegesis because the concept of Jesus as High Priest finds almost no resonance in the text of John's Gospel in general, nor in the particular historical context of John 17.

This 'Prayer for the Vine' begins with the relationship of the Father and the Son, then Jesus turns his attention to the men who are with him in the garden, and verses 6-19 are a summary of his whole time with them 'from the beginning,' including a vital explanation of just why Judas has been cut off. Then in 17:20 he says to his Father words which are the answer we have been seeking: 'I do not ask only for these men here but also for all who are believing in me because of their word.'

Here then is **the fruit appropriate to the Apostles**. As Jesus casts his eye forward through the entire course of church history he sees bunches of believers – he sees you and me and he prays for us. We are the fruit of the vine in John 15. We are not the branches – we are the fruit – and this fruit is now found around the whole world as the OT said it would. Even though the Apostles themselves are long dead their living ministry as Christ's branches continues, because we too have been brought to new spiritual life through them, that is through their living message, and we continue to be spiritually fed by their writings, and our spiritual fellowship with our heavenly vine and source, Jesus Christ, and with each other, is sustained through their words. We abide in Christ only as we abide in his words given through them, just as he says they will abide in him only as they abide in his words to them, and in this way they remain essential to our Christian lives and our salvation. Let us be very clear about this – they do not save us, of course not, but our salvation comes only through them and their words. When we abide in their words we abide in Christ. This point is restated and confirmed in the letter of I John, where you will note that the writer's distinction between himself as an Apostle/Branch on the one hand, and his readers on the other

hand, is carefully maintained. In his introduction in I John 1:1-2 he clearly states that HE is bearing witness and making proclamation to THEM. That is what the Apostles did – that was their job – that is why they were created. This is very very obvious in the NT but it does not sit well with many modern Western Evangelicals!

Further light is thrown on these things when we take Peter as a representative of all of the Apostles. Whether Jesus speaks of Peter as harvesting fish, or sheep, or grain, or fruit, there is only one harvest that counts – the gathering together of people, believers – and there is only one Lord of that harvest, and the Apostles are to be the labourers. Paul was not there from the beginning of course but he later sums up the situation of the Apostles: 'Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel' (I Cor 9:16) (and notice that neither Paul nor anyone else in the NT ever says to us as readers 'Woe to YOU if you do not preach the gospel.')

Finally: The source of the confusion

We should be thankful for all these wonderful things and this story of grace and love, but I know that many people will be shocked to be told they are not the branches but are the fruit in John 15, and perhaps even deeply disappointed or very angry. This is easy to understand because (1) so many of us have grown up being told we are the branches, or (2) because we do not like being told that our understanding has been on the wrong track, or (3) because being a branch seems somehow easier to understand than is being part of the fruit. But I am sure there are also much deeper and more important forces at work here and I will discuss each of them briefly.

1. The first is our inflated modern western view of ourselves as individuals. Just like the disciples of old we want to promote ourselves, we jostle each other for the chief seats and resent any hint of demotion of ourselves or favouritism to another, and those of us who have grown up thinking we were branches of Christ will readily resent being told we are the fruit and not the branches. We have just been demoted, have we not? What about you – given the choice would you rather be called one of the branches or part of the fruit?

Closely related to this is our modern failure to deal with 'reference groups' when they crop up in scripture. As a simple example we could find some ancient statement such as 'We want to come to you and talk about them.' It may take us a long time to work out who these groups were – the WE and the YOU and the THEM – but we today cannot read and make sense of words like this until we do work it out. Certainly we should not just jump in and assume that **we** are any one of these three, and yet this is what happens all too often – when we see the words WE, YOU and US we jump right in with our eyes shut! We are always delighted to find that we are there in any text, so that when Jesus says 'You are the branches' we simplistically take this as referring to ourselves, but the resulting exegesis is nonsensical.

2. The second thing at work is the way we downgrade the place, position, power and primacy of the Apostles. We sort of know they were there at the table that night right from the beginning in John 13 but they soon become invisible to us, so that by the time we get to read John 15 we routinely ignore them – Jesus is there as the vine, we are there as the branches, and the Apostles are nowhere! They have simply disappeared, evaporated, in spite of the fact that the chapter is all about them. The tragic irony in all this is that in the very place where Jesus turns the spotlight on these men, we choose to ignore them, and in the very place where he chooses to **promote them** we use his very own words to **promote ourselves** from fruit to branches. Not only do we actually overturn everything he intends and says and does, but we then go on to congratulate ourselves on how pious we are to be putting such emphasis on the 'Fruit of the Spirit' which is – as we have seen – fruit stolen from Paul. But let us note this well – piety does not emerge through bad Bible exegesis but piety is often used to camouflage it. In this particular case we end up with John 15 as a forged document – it is neither fish nor fowl, neither John nor Paul – a document we ourselves have created in pious ignorance and self-promotion.

3. The third thing at work here is of course the 'Traditions of the Evangelical Fathers,' the default settings with which we began this essay. If a traditional way of reading is wrong and remains unchallenged it will go on forever.

4. So what now? Questions of 'Application' of the Vine/Branches/Fruit in John 15

No doubt some readers who find these ideas to be new or difficult will immediately ask: 'But now that we have been deprived of the precious dramatic element of seeing ourselves as branches, how can we in a useful and entertaining way find an 'application' in any Bible study or sermon on John 15 with this new idea that we are now the fruit rather than the branches we used to be?' It is not easy, but here are some starting suggestions for this, remembering that this essay and the points which follow refer only to our reading of John 15 and not to other passages of the NT, not even John 4 which does indeed speak of 'other labourers' in every age:

1. We must deal honestly and truly with the text of John and restore the eleven disciples to the prime position and unique privileges and responsibilities he gives them.

2. We should present the whole matter of branches and fruit in a positive, joyful and thankful way as an outcome of God's wonderful grace, provision, and love. After all it is only by his mercy that we are living fruit and are not dead and burned like many others!

3. We can express our admiration and thanks for these eleven disciples who dedicated themselves to their work among the churches, and who suffered so much and fought so hard to produce and preserve and pass on what they had seen and heard and what they had written.

4. We can talk about keeping our own spiritual life healthy by applying ourselves

to their written message, as the Letter of I John demonstrates.

5. We can expand on our privileges and responsibilities within the bunches of believers to which we belong as individual grapes.

6. We can embrace and explore the gift of humility.

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