

# Following Jesus: The Cost of Love

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The title of this paper is “Following Jesus: The Cost of Love.” I have chosen to base the paper on John 15:1-17 together with a briefer look at some parallel ideas in I John 3 & 4. I will begin with an examination of the main passage, then spend some time considering the expression “abide in me,” and finally discuss the love-command in verses 12 & 13 taken in parallel with I John 3:16.

As I began to plan this paper, my initial idea was to go straight to the love-commands, particularly 15:12-13. However, I have changed my plan for two reasons. *First*, these commands, both in the gospel and in the epistle, are set in the context of the command to *abide* and a presentation of the work of the Spirit. It would not be doing justice to the Biblical material to deal with love alone. *Second*, I have come to the conclusion that to tell people to love without telling them how to, is not only unbalanced but also dangerous. My message would degenerate into a “guilt-trip,” a rod for us to beat our backs. We are all painfully aware of how far we fall short of Christ’s ideal, and yet are all too ready to slip into a performance-based Christianity.

## 1. TRANSLATION

A translation of John 15:1-17 is set out on the following page. There are three reasons for doing this. a) Some of the words or expressions are translated in a way that particularly reflects what is going on in the original.<sup>1</sup> b) The text is set out in a way that reflects the parallelism and structure of ideas, and draws attention to the semi-poetic style of this passage, (a quality also characteristic of I John). c) Certain key words have been highlighted so that the flow of ideas might be seen more readily.

## 2. DISCUSSION OF PASSAGE AS A WHOLE

### Structure

Take a few minutes to examine the translation, paying particular attention to the key words. The word “fruit” is introduced in verse 2 and occurs repeatedly until verse 8. After that there is just one reference in verse 16. Two new themes are introduced in verse 9, that of love and that of keeping Christ’s commandment(s). The two ideas are intertwined until the final summary statement in verse 17. The *idea* of command is present before verse 9, as Christ’s word (*ton logon*) in verse 3 and utterances (*ta rhemata*) in verse 7, but it is interesting that John avoids the use of the key word, commandment (*entolê*), until verse 9.

The fourth key word/phrase that has been highlighted is that of abiding. This idea permeates the whole passage, particularly up to verse 10, and forms the bridge between 4–8 and 9–17.

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<sup>1</sup> See the Appendix for notes on the translation

## John 15:1-17

- 1 I myself am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.  
2 Every branch **in me** that does not **bear fruit** he clears away;  
and every branch that **bears fruit** he cleans (prunes), that it may **bear more fruit**.  
3 You are already clean because of the **word which I have spoken** to you.

- 4 **Abide in me**, and **I in you**.  
As the branch has **no power** to **bear fruit** of itself,  
unless it **abides in the vine**,  
neither you,  
unless you **abide in me**.  
5 I am the vine, you are the branches.  
The one **abiding in me**, and **I in him**, **bears much fruit**;  
for apart from me you have **no power** to do anything.

- 6 If anyone does not **abide in me**,  
he is thrown out like the branch and shrivels;  
and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.  
7 If you **abide in me**, and **my sayings abide in you**,  
what you desire you will ask, and so it shall come to pass for you.  
8 By this my Father is glorified,  
that you **bear much fruit**;  
so it shall come to pass that you are my disciples.

- 9 **Just as the Father loved me, I also have loved you;**  
**abide in my love**.  
10 If **my commandments you keep**,  
you will **abide in my love**,  
**just as I the commandments of my Father have kept,**  
and **abide in his love**.  
11 These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you,  
and your joy may be full.  
12 This is **my commandment**,  
that **you love one another**  
**just as I have loved you**.  
13 **Greater love** has no one than this,  
than he lay down his life for **his beloved**.  
14 **You are my beloved** if **you do whatever I command you**.  
15 No longer do I call you servants,  
for a servant does not know what his master is doing;  
but I have called you **beloved**,  
for all things that I heard from my Father I have made known to you.  
16 You did not choose me, but I chose you  
and appointed you that you should go and **bear fruit**,  
and that your **fruit** should **abide**,  
that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you.  
17 These things **I command you**, that **you love one another**.

The passage falls neatly into three sections. Verses 1–3 form the initial proclamation: the “I am” statement of Jesus, and the definition of the allegory. The emphasis on fruit, repeated three times, forms a bridge into the second section. Verses 4–8 are a beautifully balanced and symmetrical presentation of the relationship between abiding and fruit. Verses 9–17 are centred on Christ’s commandment to love and its relationship to abiding.

### Comments

John has given us the picture of Jesus as the living water (4:10) and the bread of life (6:35) which both emphasize the concept of utter dependence. The image of the vine is just as vivid. It is likely that verse 2a was intended to bring Judas to mind because of the similarity with John 13:10,11 “you are clean, but not all of you. For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, ‘You are not all clean.’”<sup>2</sup>

The rest of the passage can be seen as unpacking this introduction. Abiding is implicit in the metaphor. Bearing fruit is seen to have a life-and-death significance and the reader’s mind is focussed on the question, “How then can *I* bear fruit?”

Verse 4 immediately answers this question both negatively and positively. The section has a beautifully symmetrical structure:

Power to bear fruit	v.4 negative: no power if don’t abide
	v.5 positive: power if abide
Results of bearing/not bearing fruit	v.6 negative: destruction <sup>3</sup> if don’t abide
	v.7,8 positive: answers to prayer, glorifying the Father, and proof of discipleship if abide

Verse 5 re-states the theme in the starkest terms, “for apart from me you have **no power** to do anything,” (a double negative in the Greek).

The total dependence of the Christian upon Jesus, which is a *leitmotif* of Johannine thought, is expressed nowhere more eloquently than here. The last line of 5, “Apart from me you can do nothing,” has played an important role in the history of the theological discussion of grace. Augustine used it to refute Pelagius who stressed man’s natural power to do good

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<sup>2</sup> Hendriksen comments, “In 13:10, 11 this is amplified as follows: “ ‘And you are clean, but not all of you are.’ For he knew the one who was betraying him. It was for this reason that he said, ‘Not all of you are clean.’ ”—That would seem to settle the question with respect to the identity of the two groups. Group a. (branches that bear fruit and are cleansed) represents all those who not only come into close contact with Christ and the Gospel but also (by God’s sovereign grace and through faith) accept it. Group b. (branches that do not bear fruit and are taken away and burned) represents all the others who have come into close contact with Christ and the Gospel.” William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John* (The Geneva Series of Commentaries; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1954), 295. However, given the context of the apostasy of Judas it seems more likely that group b. are not merely those “who have come into close contact with Christ” but are those who have made a profession of being disciples and have had some kind of belief, but have apostatised, as in Hebrew 6.

<sup>3</sup> While the statement is general, it will have been difficult for the Evangelist and his readers not to think of Judas, and later of the “many Antichrists” who led out members from the Church and formed heretical groups (cf. 1 John 2:18–19; 4:1–6; ...). George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Word Biblical Commentary 36; Dallas: Word, 1987), 273

works worthy of eternal reward; and the text was cited in 418 by the Council of Carthage (DB 227) against the Pelagians and again in 529 by the Second Council of Orange (DB 377) against the Semi-Pelagians who defended man's natural power to do good works that were in some sense deserving of grace.<sup>4</sup>

In verse 8c, the verb is translated “shall be” [my disciples] (KJV, NKJV), “shall prove to be” (RSV, NAS) and “showing yourselves to be” (NIV). Brown explains this reading, “Thus, ‘bearing much fruit’ and ‘becoming my disciples’ are not really two different actions, one consequent upon the other. The sense is not that when the hearers bear fruit, they will become his disciples, but that in bearing fruit they show they are disciples.”<sup>5</sup> Yet the verb (*genêsthe*)<sup>6</sup> is stronger than “prove to be” and is commonly translated elsewhere as “become.” It might appear on the surface that this would make works a pre-requisite to discipleship. Hendriksen addressed this problem, “Thus those who, by God's grace, are already disciples *become* disciples more and more. To weaken the sense of the verb *become* (*genêsthe*) is neither necessary nor justifiable.”<sup>7</sup>

The most satisfactory answer can be found from considering verse 16, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit...” A non-fruit-bearing disciple is a contradiction in terms.<sup>8</sup> No-one can become a disciple without an active faith, i.e. one that is fruit-bearing, but such fruit is *guaranteed* by God's electing and sustaining grace in the ones he has truly chosen.

To summarize the flow of thought:

don't abide	→	no fruit	→	thrown out and burned
	→	<i>no power to do anything</i>		
abide	→	fruit	→	glory to the Father
	→	<i>power to do anything by prayer</i>		

We don't need to be experts in first century farming to feel the impact of the metaphor—a severed branch cannot possibly survive by itself. This was true with the other metaphors of Christ as living water and as bread from heaven, yet here Jesus does not rely on the vividness of the picture, but continues to press the case. The effect of stating the case twice, each time both negatively and positively is to give the maximum possible emphasis. At the end of verse 8 the reader is very focussed on the need to abide, and will be prepared and receptive to the radical command about to be presented.

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<sup>4</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (xii-xxi)* (Anchor Bible 29A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), 678.

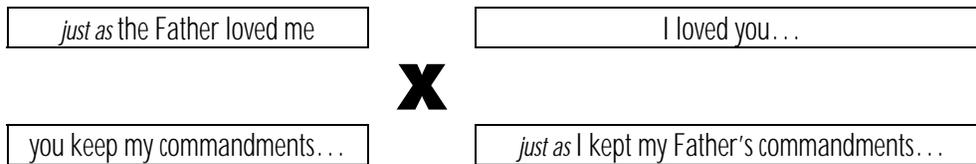
<sup>5</sup> Brown, *John*, 662f. He also points out that “There is a very close link with John 8:31 ‘Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are my disciples indeed.’”” 680.

<sup>6</sup> Translated “shall come to pass” in the translation provided. See the Appendix for reasons.

<sup>7</sup> Hendriksen, *John*, 302.

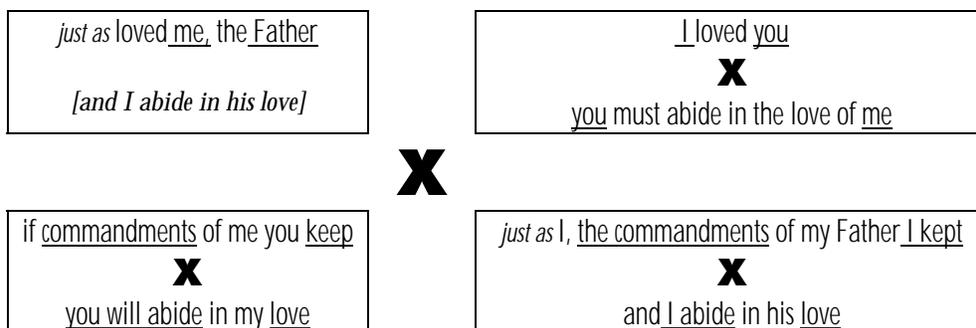
<sup>8</sup> The mark of the good ground in the parable in Luke 8:15 is *persevering* in fruit-bearing, “But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience.”

Verses 9 and 10 follow a chiasmic (cross-shaped) structure:



The logic is that the relationship between Christ and the Father is a *pattern* for the relationship between Christ and ourselves.<sup>9</sup> This pattern stands behind all of Christ's teaching on the Christian life in John (especially<sup>10</sup> chapters 5 & 6) and the concept will form a basis for the climax of the passage in verses 12, 13.

If we examine these two verses more closely, we find that there are three more chiasms inside:



In the first (verse 9b) the alternation is I—you—you—me. In the other two we have noun—verb—verb—noun, *viz.* commands—keep—abide—love. This literary pattern is not a mere stylistic embellishment but gives a double-reinforcement to the message: even the pattern of words in the text echoes the reality that *the shape of the incarnate Jesus' relationship with the Father is the paradigm for our relationship with Jesus and the foundation for our existence as his disciples.*

Verse 11 provides more motivation for us to regard Jesus in this way. If Jesus is our pattern, then not only commandments, but also joy and victory belong to us. Our joy is full and complete in the sense that we are utterly satisfied.

Verses 12 & 13 complete the argument of verses 9 & 10. The commandments are now focused on one specific commandment, and the whole force of the Jesus-our-example motif is concentrated in one climactic statement/command. We will return to this later in the paper.

Verses 14 to 17 are contained in an *inclusio*, “beloved...I command you,” verse 14 and “I command you...love,” verse 17. Were verses 15 & 16 removed, then 14 & 17 would still make perfect sense:

<sup>9</sup> The sequence is similar to that of the vinedresser—vine—branch in verses 1–3, but the allegory does not readily allow for the vinedresser—vine relationship to be a pattern for the vine—branch.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of John 6:57 see A. M. Fountain, “Eating Christ’s Flesh and Drinking His Blood,” *The Gospel Witness* 76.9 & 76.10 (1997), 134, 154.

<sup>14</sup>“You are my beloved if you do whatever I command you. <sup>17</sup>These things I command you, that you love one another.”

This would seem to form an excellent summary and conclusion to the discourse. What then is the purpose of the insertion of verses 15 & 16? Verse 13 has introduced a new category, that of “beloved”<sup>11</sup> (*philoî*). The purpose of 14–17 is to define this category.

- Membership (v.14) is based on following the great commandment of verse 12. At first glance this seems to place a condition on Jesus’ friendship, “You are my beloved if...” Brown’s answer is that:

We should not understand this verse to mean that obeying Jesus’ commandments makes one a *philos*—such obedience is not a test of whether or not one is loved by Jesus but naturally flows from being loved by Jesus. Verse 14 really repeats 10 in another way: “You will remain in my love if you keep my commandments.”<sup>12</sup>

However, a more satisfactory answer is found in verse 16 and will be discussed in a moment.

- The beloved are to be distinguished from servants, especially in the matter of being privy to the plans of the Father. Once again we have the sequence Father—Jesus—Us, this time with respect to the communication of “all things.”
- Membership in the beloved is by sovereign election. (If it were otherwise then how could Jesus have said “apart from me you have no power to do anything” ?)
- Bearing of fruit is inevitable, since we have been “appointed”<sup>13</sup> to it. This answers the problem mentioned above, since (*as far as God is concerned*) the condition is guaranteed to be filled in those who are truly chosen. Not bearing fruit is evidence of never having truly participated in the vine. However, we must not weaken the exhortations in the passage to produce fruit—life and death are set before the reader and the question of who is appointed can only be determined (*as far as we are concerned*) by the fruit produced.
- Membership brings the privilege of asking the Father for whatever we wish. Verse 7b contains an almost identical promise for those who abide in Christ, (and who also bear fruit), which should not surprise us since the categories of “beloved” and “those who abide in me” amount to the same thing.

Having defined the category of “beloved” Jesus continues in chapter 15 and into chapter 16 describing what the future had in store for them, especially in their relationship with those who are not “beloved.”

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix for justification for this translation.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *John*, 682

<sup>13</sup> There is an untranslatable verbal parallel in the Greek between *lay down* (*thê*) in v.13 and *appointed* (*ethêka*) in v.16.

### 3. WHAT DOES “ABIDE” MEAN?

At this point one of the key theological problems of the passage must be tackled. There can be absolutely no doubt of the importance of abiding, but what does it actually mean? The word translated *abide* is a favourite of John. “*menein* occurs 112 times in the NT, 66 times in the Johannine writings (40 in the Gospel, 23 in 1 John., 3 in 2 John.).”<sup>14</sup>

The argument of the passage runs something like this:

- a) if you abide in me → then you will have power to bear fruit
- b) if you obey my commands → then you will abide in my love  
(= love one another)

How do a) and b) relate together? There are broadly four approaches to answering this:

#### I. Abiding = Mystical Experience unrelated to Christ’s commands

The proponents of this view are generally not interested in seriously studying the passage, but find in the word “abiding” a useful hook on which to hang their experiences.

To empty the person so that the whole fullness of God can flow in is not something, of course, that can be acquired or forced by some technique of self-alienation. It is the mystery of love being enacted.<sup>15</sup>

It is unlikely that Haenchen would support this position, but his statement could easily be taken as representing it. The concept of “emptying oneself” is a common theme amongst the kinds of mystics who place a low value on reason, whether they be Christian or pagan.

#### II. Abiding = Obedience

This position would say that “abide in me” is identical to “abide in my love” and so abiding is quite simply obedience. Bernard, Hendriksen and Morris make comments which are suggestive of this viewpoint, (although they might not all wish to place themselves into this category).

The precept is “abide in my love,” and the way to obey it is to keep His commandments.<sup>16</sup>

Here the thought of positively abiding in Christ (see 15:4,5) returns and is explained. We learn that it means to heed the utterances of Christ, so that they become the dynamic of one’s life, taking complete control over a person (note: here not only “you abide in my words,” but “my words abide in you”), so that he both believes then and acts in accordance with them.<sup>17</sup>

And if he is really abiding in Christ he will live in obedience to the words of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> G. Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (10 vols.; eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76), IV.575

<sup>15</sup> Ernst Haenchen, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (2 vols.; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 2.131

<sup>16</sup> J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (2 vols.; The International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1928), 484.

<sup>17</sup> Hendriksen, *John*, 302.

<sup>18</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 672.

Supporters of this position would also appeal to verse 7a where “my sayings abide in you” are in parallel with “I [abide] in you,” and to I John 3:24. However, there is a fundamental flaw in this argument. Placing a) and b) together we are left with:

if you obey my commands → then you will have power to bear fruit  
(= love one another)

The argument is nonsensical, since love is, by any definition, a fruit, and the statement of verse 5c “apart from me you have no power to do anything” has been short-circuited.

The parallel in verse 7a is important and we will return to it later. The references to “abide” in I John are important, but the position can be answered easily.<sup>19</sup>

### III Abiding = “Means of Grace”: Prayer, the Word, Obedience

This position recognizes the pitfalls of (I) and the barrenness of (II) and seeks to find middle ground.

The connection is maintained by obedience and prayer. To remain in Christ and to allow his words to remain in oneself means a conscious acceptance of the authority of his word and a constant contact with him by prayer.<sup>20</sup>

While the attempt is admirable, and prayer, the word and obedience are all vital parts of abiding, the most important element has been missed.

### IV Abiding = Union with Christ, Experienced by means of Life in the Spirit

The Pauline concept of “in Christ” finds its counterpart in John’s “abide in me.”

In the Johannine writings such phrases are developed into distinctive personal statements concerning the lasting immanence between God and Christ or Christians and Christ. This is a stronger form of the Pauline *en Christō* [in Christ]. . . . Jn. keeps to an expression (*menein en*) [remain in] which maintains biblical theism and avoids the assertions of identity found in Hellenistic mysticism.<sup>21</sup>

Underlying the metaphor is a *real union* of the believer with Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom 6; Eph 2; Col 2).

To “remain” in Jesus has a deeper significance than simply to continue to believe in him, although it includes that; it connotes continuing to live in association or in union with him. *Meinate* (aorist tense), could signify “step into union with me,” which would be a suitable injunction for readers of the Gospel, and not wholly unsuitable for the group in the Upper Room in prospect of the new relationship with the Lord about to be initiated through his death and resurrection.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> 3:24a reads, “Now he who keeps his commandments abides in him, and he in him.” This could be taken as “keeping the commandments *results in* abiding,” or “keeping the commandments *is evidence of* abiding.” Support for the latter reading comes from comparison with a similar statement in 4:15: “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God,” and the more explicit evidential statement in 3:13 “By this we know that we abide in him, and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.” Unless John is suggesting three separate routes to abiding, it is better to take the verses as three different evidences that someone is already abiding.

<sup>20</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *The Expositors Bible Commentary* (ed. Frank E. Gæbelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 9.152

<sup>21</sup> Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, IV.576

<sup>22</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John*, 272

We are a new creation in Christ through the power of the Spirit<sup>23</sup> (Rom 8:11). It is no accident that John 15:1-17 is set in the context of Christ’s teaching on the Spirit (14:16-17, 26; 16:7–15). The same is true in I John where the discussion of abiding is closely associated with the work of the Spirit (3:24–4:16), especially in 3:24b “And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.” and 4:13 “By this we know that we abide in him, and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.”

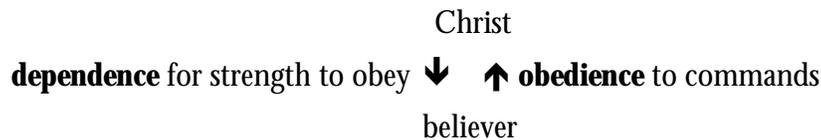
Language similar to John 15:15 can be found in Galatians 4:6-7, “And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’ Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.” The fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22) matches the fruit of John 17. The command to “abide in me” finds its echo in the command to be “led by the Spirit”, “live in the Spirit” and “walk in the Spirit” (Gal 5:25). It is not that believers are not already united with Christ and so indwelt by the Spirit, but they must enter increasingly into the reality and experience of that union.<sup>24</sup>

Yet the Spirit is the “Spirit of Christ” (Rom 8:9) and his presence makes possible a real and felt communion with God (Rom 8:14-16, 26). Walter Bauer describes this abiding as “an inward, enduring personal communion”<sup>25</sup>

There is a right kind of Christian mysticism—that which does not deny in any way the rational thought processes, but bathes them in communion with God. Those who are totally convinced of their powerlessness to do anything without Christ will develop the habit of constant prayer and awareness of his presence. As the old Puritan wrote:

It is no easy matter to convince believers of their own insufficiency without Christ, but again and again self-conceit will lift up its head, unless it be frequently hammered down; therefore it is again needful to assert, “without me ye can do nothing.”<sup>26</sup>

A picture of this communion as *dependent obedience* allows us to do justice to both a) and b) above.



Thus in verse 7 the downward arrow is “abide in me” and the upward arrow is “my sayings abide in you.” The same idea is found in Paul in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I

<sup>23</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John*, 290

<sup>24</sup> All Christians have the Holy Spirit, but that does not contradict the fact that some Christians enter more into life in the Spirit. Barnabas is described as “a good man and full of the Holy Spirit and faith.” (Acts 11:24). See also Acts 6:5; 7:55; 13:9, 52.

<sup>25</sup> The phrase *m. en tini* [remain in something] is a favorite of J [John] to denote an inward, enduring personal communion. So of God in his relation to Christ *ho patēr en emoi menōn the Father, who abides in me* J 14:10. Of the Christians in their relation to Christ J 6:56; 15:4a, c, 5-7; 1 J 2:6, 24c. Of Christ in his relation to the Christians J 15:4a, 5... (Gdspd., Probs. 112-15). Of the Christians in their relationship to God 1 J 2:24c, 27f; 3:6, 24a; 4:13. Of God in his relation to the Christians 1 J 3:24; 4:12f, 15. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 504.

<sup>26</sup> Hutcheson, George, *The Gospel of John*, (first publ. 1657; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1972), 316

now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me,” and Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Yet perhaps it is John himself who provides the clearest expression of abiding as dependent obedience: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on me will live because of me” John 6:56-57.

#### 4. LOVE THAT LAYS DOWN LIFE

We are now finally in a position to engage verses 12 & 13. From verses 1 to 8 we have learned the need to abide in Jesus in order to bear any fruit, and from verses 9 to 11 that Jesus’ life is to form the pattern for ours. The full force of these two streams of thought converge in verses 12 & 13 as we learn that the fruit demanded is none other than our emulation of Jesus’ sacrifice of love.<sup>27</sup> The logic is very simple:

- Jesus came to give his life for the sake of the people whom he loves.
- His life is the pattern for ours.
- We are therefore called upon to give our lives for those he loves.

This reasoning is perhaps even more explicit in I John 3:16, “By this we know love, because he laid down his life for us, and we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”

In what way is Jesus’ death for others held up as an example for (and the source of) the disciples’ love? It is clearly to be a model of the *intensity* of their love, but I John iii 16 would seem to interpret it also as a model for the *way of expressing* love: “The way we came to understand what love means was that he laid down his life for us; so must we too lay down our lives for our brothers.” ...modern Jewish teachers have been fairly unanimous in rejecting this sweeping demand for self-sacrifice, and it constitutes one of the classical distinctions between Christianity and Judaism.<sup>28</sup>

Elsewhere I have examined a number of Biblical accounts of the Day of Judgment.<sup>29</sup> Loving one another is so central to the life of a Christian that this particular fruit is selected as the decisive evidence of union with Christ. I have argued that the reason for this is that it cannot be counterfeited. Only those who have Christ living in them can demonstrate such a love for his people.

The difficulty comes when we attempt to put this example into practice. The situations in which we have an opportunity to literally sacrifice our lives for the sake of another believer are exceedingly rare, even under persecution. What is in view here is a death to self and self-interest. The call of Jesus to “deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me” is the equivalent expression which is found in the Synoptics (Matt 10:38; 16:24-26; 19:21; Mark 8:34-36; 10:21; Luke 9:23-26; 18:22).

Some practical application is given by John in the two verses that follow I John 3:16, “But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart

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<sup>27</sup> We cannot, of course, emulate the substitutionary character of his death. He died “the just for the unjust,” a perfect man, and furthermore he is the incarnate deity whereas we are mere humans.

<sup>28</sup> Brown, *John*, 682

<sup>29</sup> A. M. Fountain, “Loving One Another” *The Gospel Witness* 78.10 (2000), 3.

from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.” The statement is in the negative: absence of such basic caring cannot possibly be compatible with the indwelling of Jesus. But when we ask what a positive response should be, the provision of a few basic necessities for our fellow believers does not seem to match the intensity of the command to *die*.

I suggest that this death comes about in a thousand small deaths to self in our daily interactions with others. It is not a glorious and glamorous act, but the hard grind of fallen human beings grating against each other. Christ’s “beloved” are frequently irritating, rude, self-seeking and demanding. Their crude attempts to get attention and praise annoy us as much as their poorly concealed self-centredness. To live as a lowly servant to such people is indeed a death. In fact it is just not possible in our own strength, for not only are we just as dysfunctional as they, but it is only *Christ in us* who has the power to give us victory.

Love is speaking gently and kindly even when we are tired and irritated, not snapping back when we feel insulted, spending time with a hurting person instead of the pleasant activity we had planned to do. Love is willing to put itself out, to seriously inconvenience itself, or even to risk embarrassment or failure for the sake of another. Love is being willing to speak to the stranger in church, no matter how shy or uncomfortable we feel. It is opening our homes to others at the expense of our precious privacy or comfortable independence. Love is getting involved in the lives of others, even though we know it will demand personal sacrifice. So often we ask “how are you?” and just hope that the answer is “fine thank you” because if we were told all the problems then we would feel an obligation to get involved. We stay comfortable within our self-protective shells whereas Jesus calls us to come out and die. He left the comfort of heaven for us yet we are sometimes unwilling to die the smallest death.

If we were to take verses 12 & 13 out of the context of the passage, and attempt to live them in our own strength, our lives would be filled with frustration and failure. Such love, humanly speaking, is simply not possible. It is only as we are in constant contact with Jesus Christ, through the indwelling of the Spirit, that his life is able to be manifest in ours. It is not that we are passive—when we are in communion with him our minds and wills are able to function truly as they were intended to. We think his thoughts after him and our wills become aligned with his.

What this world needs is to *see Jesus Christ*. The gospel message is that Jesus loved his people so much he died for them, and now lives in them. When the world sees such love still in action then the effect is shattering. This is the most effective gospel proclamation that can ever be (John 13:35). When men and women can look at Christ’s people and see *him living in us*, then the invisible God is made visible:

No one has seen God at any time.  
If we love one another,  
God abides in us,  
and his love has been perfected in us. (1 John 4:12)

## APPENDIX

### Notes on the Old Testament and Inter-testamental context

The idea of Israel being likened to a vine occurs a number of times in the OT. The three most relevant places in this context are as follows:

#### **Psalm 80:8-16**

<sup>8</sup>You have brought a vine out of Egypt; you have cast out the nations, and planted it.

<sup>9</sup>You prepared room for it, and caused it to take deep root, and it filled the land.

<sup>10</sup>The hills were covered with its shadow, and the mighty cedars with its boughs.

<sup>11</sup>She sent out her boughs to the Sea, and her branches to the River.

<sup>12</sup>Why have you broken down her hedges, so that all who pass by the way pluck her fruit?

<sup>13</sup>The boar out of the woods uproots it, and the wild beast of the field devours it.

<sup>14</sup>Return, we beseech you, O God of hosts; look down from heaven and see, and visit this vine

<sup>15</sup>And the vineyard which your right hand has planted, and the branch that you made strong for yourself.

<sup>16</sup>It is burned with fire, it is cut down; they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.

Verse 16 is particularly relevant to John 15:2,6 where there is the image of God cutting down and burning. A similar image is expressed in the next passage, the “Song of the Vineyard”:

#### **Isaiah 5:1-7**

<sup>1</sup>Now let me sing to my well-beloved a song of my beloved regarding his vineyard: my well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill.

<sup>2</sup>He dug it up and cleared out its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, and also made a winepress in it; so he expected it to bring forth good grapes, but it brought forth wild grapes.

<sup>3</sup>“And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge, please, between me and my vineyard.

<sup>4</sup>What more could have been done to my vineyard that I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes?

<sup>5</sup>And now, please let me tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it shall be burned; and break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.

<sup>6</sup>I will lay it waste; it shall not be pruned or dug, but there shall come up briars and thorns. I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain on it.”

<sup>7</sup>For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant plant. He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; for righteousness, but behold, a cry for help.

In Psalm 80, the allegory is in the mouth of the psalmist who pleads with God that his vineyard is being destroyed from neglect. However in Isaiah it is God who makes the comparison. The allegory is extended so that behaviours contrary to the covenant (oppression, violence etc.) are pictured as wild grapes. This picture is taken further in the final passage, where idolatry is portrayed in v.20 as harlotry, and then in v.21 as an alien vine that has polluted the purity of the original stock:

## Jeremiah 2:20-21

<sup>20</sup>For of old I have broken your yoke and burst your bonds; and you said, 'I will not transgress,' when on every high hill and under every green tree you lay down, playing the harlot.

<sup>21</sup>Yet I had planted you a noble vine, a seed of highest quality. How then have you turned before me into the degenerate plant of an alien vine?

In all three places, just as in John 15, God is pictured as the farmer. In Psalm 80 and Isaiah 5 a whole vineyard is in view, however Jeremiah's image is like John's, that of a single vine.

There is good evidence that inter-testamental Israel identified the nation with the symbol of a vine. "Indeed in time the vine became a symbol of Israel and is found, for example, on coins of the Maccabees."<sup>30</sup>

One might expect that Jesus would identify the *church* with the vine, as a replacement for Israel, but the twist is that he *himself* is the vine, the new Israel, and we participate in this new entity as subordinate branches. Jesus identified himself as the *true* vine. It is instructive to note that the OT usage of vine as a type of Israel "...is always thus used of *degenerate* Israel."<sup>31</sup> Jesus frequently denounced Israel's failure to live as the true people of God, and this forms the theme of many parables, but it is interesting that there is no development of this idea in John 15.

It is remarkable that the allegory of the Vine contains no polemic. Its utilization of the imagery of vine and vineyard, so familiar from the OT, is compatible with the continuation of Israel-Church as the people of God.<sup>32</sup>

It does not seem that in claiming to be the real vine Jesus is directly polemicizing against a false vine; rather he is emphasizing that he is the source of "real" life, a life that can come only from the Father.<sup>33</sup>

Regarding the OT and inter-testamental usage of *menein*, "to abide or remain", Garlington has made the following observations:

*Menô* (actually *emmenô*) is used by the LXX to translate *yaqim* (the hiphil of *qum*) in a passage like Deut 21:27. That is understandable, given that the verb has the meaning of remaining within a specified territory. Its selection may reflect the climate in which portions of the translation took place, i.e., the necessity of persevering in "the holy covenant" (1 Maccabees 1:15) in the face of the Hellenistic onslaught. Elsewhere, *menô* likewise means "persevere in" (Sirach 2:10; 6:20; 11:21 [in parallel to *pisteuô*]; 1 Maccabees 10:26, 27; Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.257; cf. Num 23:19). Furthermore, in other crucial passages in Deuteronomy, the kindred *menô en*, as it reproduces *dabaq be* ("cleave to"), denotes dedication to Yahweh and continuance in his ways (e.g., 11:22; 13:4; 30:20; cf. Josh 22:5; 23:8-11). In these verses, the phrase stands in parallel with the synonymous expressions "keeping the commandments" and "loving Yahweh." Not surprisingly, the idea of "remaining"/"abiding"/"cleaving" is taken up by later Jewish literature. Ben Sirā, for example, more than once correlates cleaving to God with obedience (e.g., Sirach 11:22; 13:4; 30:20). To "cleave" to God entails dispositions such as love, fear and faith, virtues

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<sup>30</sup> Morris, *John*, 668. See also Beasley-Murray, *John*, 272 and Bernard, *John*, 478.

<sup>31</sup> Bernard, *John*, 477.

<sup>32</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John*, 289.

<sup>33</sup> Brown, *John*, 674

commended by the scribe throughout his book. The usage carries over into the NT in such passages as John 15:1-11, according to which the disciples must “abide in” Christ.<sup>34</sup>

## Notes on Translation

### v.2,3

There is a verbal parallel that is very difficult to translate between the word *airei* translated “clears away” in v.2a, the word *kathairei* translated “cleans (prunes)” in v.2b, and the same word *katharoi* translated “clean” in v.3.<sup>35</sup> By using the same word in 2a and 2b, John highlights the parallelism within the verse. Most English translations do not translate *katharoi* in v.3 in a way that makes it possible to see the connection with v.2b, thus greatly obscuring the meaning of v.3. I have tried to show the correspondence in my translation.

Bernard comments on the translation of “because of the word which I have spoken to you”:

We have seen (on 6<sup>57</sup>) that *dia* followed by an acc. is to be distinguished from *dia* with a gen. The text here is not *dia tou logou* which would suggest that the Word of Jesus is the *instrument* of cleansing; but *dia ton logon* signifies rather that it is because of the Word abiding in them (v.7) that they are kept pure. The *logos* which had thus, in some measure, been assimilated by them (cf. 5<sup>38</sup>, 8<sup>43</sup>) was the whole message that Jesus had delivered during His training of the Twelve. In so far as this continued to “abide” in them (v. 7), in that degree were they “clean.” As it abides in them, so do they abide in the True Vine ( I Jn. 2<sup>24</sup>).<sup>36</sup>

### v.4,5

I have translated *ou dunatai* in v.4 and *ou dunasthe* in v.5 as “no power to”. This is somewhat stronger than it’s usual translation “cannot” but I have done this because of the strength of the metaphor in view. Morris says:

Though John does not use the noun *dunamis* at all he employs the verb *dunamai* more often than any other book in the New Testament (Matthew 27 times, Mark 33 times, Luke 26 times, John 36 times). He is quite interested in what is and is not possible.<sup>37</sup>

### v.7,8

The same verb *ginomai* is used for answering the prayers of those who abide v.7b and confirming their discipleship v.8c. I have tried to show this in the translation by using the phrase, “it shall come to pass” in both cases, and thus bring out the parallelism.

### v.10

In a number of places, as in this verse, I have changed the English word order to reflect the Greek for the purpose of showing the parallelism between the lines.

### v.13-15

I have followed the suggestion of Brown in translating *philoï* as “beloved”.

The noun in 13–15 that we have translated as “those he loves” is *philos*, “friend,” a cognate of the frequent Johannine verb *philein*, “to love.” The English word “friend” does not capture sufficiently this relationship of love (for we have lost the feeling that “friend” is related to the Anglo-Saxon verb *frêon*, “to love”). In Johannine thought Jesus is not

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<sup>34</sup> Don B. Garlington, private correspondence, (2000).

<sup>35</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John*, 268.

<sup>36</sup> Bernard, *John*, 480.

<sup>37</sup> Morris, *John*, 215.

addressing the disciples here as casually as he addresses them in Luke xii 4: “I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body”—the only Synoptic use of *philos* for the disciples. Rather vs. 14 is similar to 10, and the “You are my *philo*” of 14 is the equivalent of the “You will remain in my love” of 10. Lazarus is the *philos* of Jesus (xi 11) because Jesus loves him (*agapan* in xi 5: *philien* in xi 3. Sometimes in relation to this verse of John, the title of Abraham as “the friend of God” is recalled (*philos* in James ii 23). However, it should be noted that the LXX of Isa xli 8 speaks of Abraham as the one “whom God loved” (*agapan*). Thus the title of Abraham becomes another example of our thesis that *philos* means “the beloved.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Brown, *John*, 664