

# THE UNFRUITFUL BRANCHES IN JOHN 15

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## INTRODUCTION

The text of John 15 has been one of the historical battlegrounds of doctrinal interpretation. Perhaps only the passage in Hebrews 6 has been the scene of more battles between the Calvinistic and Arminian schools of interpretation concerning the matter of eternal security. Not only has this text provided the field for many battles between these two schools of theology, but there have also been a great many skirmishes within the two camps upon this same battlefield. Particularly among Calvinists there has been disagreement as to the interpretation of this passage.

Though there are other important problems in the parable of John 15:1-8, the most significant question concerns the identification of the unfruitful branches mentioned in the parable.

Arminians have generally understood the unfruitful branches as representative of true believers who, because they become unfruitful, lose their salvation and consequently are ultimately cast into the fires of hell.

Calvinists have been divided as to the identification of these branches. Some have taught that they represent true believers. Most have taught that they represent unbelievers who profess to be believers. Still others have taught that two kinds of unfruitful branches are discussed: professing Christians, and true Christians who do not produce the fruits of Christianity.

Though Arminian views will be rebutted briefly, the primary purpose of this study is to investigate the major interpretations of the passage that have been suggested by Calvinists and to determine, by a careful study of the text and its context, wherein these interpretations have departed from the intent of the Speaker. The identification of the unfruitful branches will be the principal concern.

## THE OCCASION AND BACKGROUND FOR THE PARABLE

The parable of John 15:1-8 is part of a very lengthy series of instructions given by our Lord on the last evening before His crucifixion. The scope and significance of the revelations

given by Christ on that evening have never been exceeded. On no other single occasion has so much of God's revelation been given to man. Christ knew that His crucifixion was near and every moment was spent in imparting important information to His disciples. Since the time was so short only vital matters were discussed. The fact that the parable under discussion was given during the middle part of that evening's instruction is indicative of its importance.

The evening had begun with the "Last Supper" and the institution of the Christian memorial of Christ's death--the ordinance of the "Lord's Supper." During the supper He had washed the disciples' feet and had taught them that this was a picture of the daily cleansing from sin that is necessary after the original bath of salvation if believers are to have fellowship with Him ("part," Jn. 13:8). Then He had told them that one of their number was actually a pretender, not a real believer, and would that night betray Him. He then proceeded to teach Peter and the others that they had no strength of themselves to be faithful disciples, rather the strength and comfort which they needed was to be supplied only through their relationship with Him. This relationship was soon to assume a new form in that He was leaving, but the Holy Spirit would come as His Representative. With the arrival of the Holy Spirit there was to begin a new and vital relationship (John 14). The parable of John 15:1-8 was given at this point in His instruction, in order to illustrate this new relationship.

After the parable the Lord explains that this relationship, this union of the disciples with their Lord, would mean that they would be persecuted. Only the Holy Spirit's ministry could sustain them in this persecution and enable them to perform the task set before them (John 16). Just before His arrest, He prays earnestly that the unity of believers with Himself and with one another may be fully realized by His disciples (John 17).

There have been numerous suggestions as to the specific occasion for the choice of the figure here employed.

1. Meyer, Trench, and others have suggested that the figure was prompted by the wine that had been used in the Lord's Supper just initiated. This does not seem likely, however, since they were no longer in the upper room (14:31).

2. Others have suggested that there may have been a vine which hung over or into the window of the upper room. This should be rejected for the same reason as the preceding view was rejected.

3. Jerome thought that the great golden vine which was on the wall of the temple was in view. Many have followed this interpretation. This vine was one of the chief ornaments of the temple. "Many a great man had counted it an honour to give gold to mould a new bunch of grapes, or even a new grape on to that vine."<sup>1</sup> But again, this does not seem to be a likely explanation. During Passover season the temple was kept open at night but because of the huge crowds it seems unlikely that such an intimate discussion would be appropriate, or even possible, in the busy temple area.

4. Some have suggested that a real vine was encountered, either on the side of a city street or more likely, on the walk down to Cedron. While this is, of course, possible, it

is not required by the context. This view may be combined with one or both of the following views.

5. Lange and others have taught that this was the time of year for pruning-fires, and that it was very likely that the slopes of the Cedron valley were dotted with the fires which indicated to Jesus and His disciples that the worthless prunings were being burned. The same comments apply with this as with the preceding view.<sup>2</sup>

6. Others suppose that the figure was used by Jesus because of the usage of the figure of the vine and vineyard in the Old Testament. A mental reflection would thus furnish the occasion for the parable, rather than any external stimulus. As has been suggested, however, it is entirely possible that Jesus had in mind the Old Testament figure and also used some visible object such as a vine or a pruning-fire, as an object lesson.

A careful study of the passage clearly indicates that Jesus did have in mind the familiar Old Testament usage of the vine as a symbol of Israel. This symbol was well-known to all Jews. Everyone knew of the temple-vine already mentioned and they no doubt had been taught from childhood the significance of this symbol. The vine was the recognized emblem of the nation Israel just as the eagle is the recognized emblem of the United States. During the Macca-bean period the figure of a vine was stamped on the coins of the Jewish nation.<sup>3</sup>

The figure of the vine was suggested by numerous Old Testament passages.

Now will I sing to my wellbeloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My wellbeloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein: and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes? And now go to; I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down: And I will lay it waste: it shall not be pruned, nor digged; but there shall come up briars and thorns: I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: and he looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry (Isa. 5:1-7 AV).

Yet I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed: how then art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto me? (Jer. 2:21 AV).

Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt: thou hast cast out the heathen, and planted it. Thou preparedst room before it, and didst cause it to take deep root, and it filled the land. The hills were covered with the shadow of it,

and the boughs thereof were like the goodly cedars. She sent out her boughs unto the sea, and her branches unto the river. Why hast thou then broken down her hedges, so that all they which pass by the way do pluck her? The boar out of the wood doth waste it, and the wild beast of the field doth devour it. Return, we beseech thee, O God of hosts: look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine; And the vineyard which thy right hand hath planted, and the branch that thou madest strong for thyself. It is burned with fire, it is cut down; they perish at the rebuke of thy countenance (Ps. 80:8-16 AV).

And the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Son of man, What is the vine tree more than any tree, or than a branch which is among the trees of the forest? Shall wood be taken thereof to do any work? or will men take a pin of it to hang any vessel thereon? Behold, it is cast into the fire for fuel; the fire devoureth both the ends of it, and the midst of it is burned. Is it meet for any work? Behold, when it was whole, it was meet for no work: how much less shall it be meet yet for any work, when the fire hath devoured it, and it is burned? Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD: As the vine tree among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so will I give the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And I will set my face against them; they shall go out from one fire, and another fire shall devour them; and ye shall know that I am the LORD, when I set my face against them. And I will make the land desolate, because they have committed a trespass, saith the Lord GOD (Ezk. 15 AV).

Israel is an empty [luxuriant with many leaves but little fruit] vine, he bringeth forth fruit unto himself. . . [but not unto God] (Hos. 10:1 AV).

Many other Old Testament passages use this figure, but the major thoughts from which Jesus drew and which would have been aroused in the disciples' minds may be found in the passages quoted above. For this reason these passages should be examined in detail, and for this reason they have been quoted in full.

It is clear from the way that Jesus introduced the parable that He had in mind this unproductive Jewish vine. He begins by saying, "I am the vine, the genuine one,"--the one that is all that a vine should be. He is thus placing Himself in sharp contrast to the unproductiveness of Israel. Barclay's comment is noteworthy. "It is a curious fact that the symbol of the vine is never used in the Old Testament apart from the idea of degeneration."<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to that vine, Christ is the true vine that must produce fruit.

With this as background, preparation has been made for an attempt to identify those who are represented by the unfruitful branches.

AN INCORRECT INTERPRETATION:  
THE UNFRUITFUL BRANCHES REPRESENT BELIEVERS  
WHO LOSE THEIR SALVATION

Arminians have consistently argued that those represented by the unfruitful branches are those who were once true believers, who had once been born again, but who subsequently lost their salvation. Because they are lost they are consequently doomed to hell (15:6) as are all whose names are not written in the Lamb's book of life (Rev. 20:15). This means that the Arminians must teach that a true believer's name may be blotted from the book of life--something which the Scriptures clearly state will never happen (Rev. 3:5). They must also teach that the Holy Spirit is taken from such a person after a period of indwelling--something which is never intimated in Scripture and is clearly denied by several Scriptural concepts. When Christ promised the Holy Spirit, He said, "I will come to you" (in the person of the Spirit), He also said, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee" (Jn. 14:18; Heb. 13:5).

Adam Clarke seems to have given one of the clearest presentations of this Arminian interpretation.

As the vinedresser will remove every unfruitful branch from the vine, so will my Father remove every unfruitful member from my mystical body, even those that have been in me by true faith (for only such are branches). But such as have given way to iniquity, and made shipwreck of their faith and of their good conscience, he taketh away. . . . Our Lord, in the plainest manner, indicates that a person may as truly be united to him as the branch is to the tree that produces it, and yet be afterward cut off and cast into the fire. A branch cannot be cut off from a tree to which it was never united: It is absurd, and contrary to the letter and spirit of the metaphor, to talk of being seemingly in Christ--because this means nothing. If there is only a seeming union, there could only be a seeming excision; but that which is here spoken of is terribly real.<sup>5</sup>

This Arminian view is also strongly stated by Sadler.

It is impossible to avoid the inference from this that a branch may abide for a time in Christ, and then be taken away. All attempts to get rid of this conclusion are dishonest and futile. . . .<sup>6</sup>

It is admitted that this parable contains difficulties, but it is not dishonest to attempt to harmonize its teaching with clear Scriptural statements elsewhere. It is certainly as bad as dishonesty, however, to interpret this passage as contradicting Christ's clear statement on security only a few chapters earlier.

And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand (Jn. 10:28-29, AV).

To build upon a parable, such as this one in John 15, a doctrine that contradicts clear Scriptures elsewhere is certainly a dangerous procedure. It should be remembered that a parable or type is for the purpose of illustrating truth that is being taught. No doctrine, not clearly taught elsewhere, should be deduced from a parable.

A POSSIBLE INTERPRETATION:  
THE UNFRUITFUL BRANCHES REPRESENT BELIEVERS  
WHO ARE CHASTENED

A number of recent conservative and Calvinistic Bible teachers have taught that the unfruitful branches represent true believers who are chastened because of their failure to produce spiritual fruit. Some have varied this view by teaching that the unfruitful branches in verse 2 are true believers, but the unfruitful branches in verse 6 are only professors. A. W. Pink is one who has suggested this interpretation. This view, however, runs into grammatical difficulties in both verse 2 and verse 6.

The interpretation of verse 2 in this manner is built upon a special significance of the word airō.

It cannot be a mere professor who is here in view--taken away unto judgment. Again a difficulty has been needlessly created here by the English rendering of the Greek verb. Airō is frequently translated in the A. V. "lifted up." For example: "And they lifted up their voices" (Luke 17:13, so also in Acts 4:24), "And Jesus lifted up his eyes" (John 11:41), "Lifted up his hand" (Rev. 10:5) etc. In none of these places could the verb be rendered "taken away." Therefore, we are satisfied that it would be more accurate and more in accord with the "analogy of faith" to translate, "Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he lifeth up from trailing on the ground."<sup>7</sup>

Since Pink's suggestion has been accepted by so many, it should be helpful to list the usages of airō. It is used 101 times in the N. T. and in its various forms is translated in the King James Version in the following eleven ways:

TRANSLATION	NUMBER OF TIMES SO TRANSLATED
"bear"	3
"bear up"	2
"carry"	1
"lift up"	4
"loose"	1
"put away"	1
"remove"	2
"take"	25
"take away"	25
"take up"	32
"away with"	5

This list should make it obvious that airō only indicates a removal of some kind and that the object, purpose, and direction of that removal can be determined only from the context--not just from the word itself. This can be supported by examining any good lexicon.<sup>8</sup>

Since the context must determine what kind of removal is in view, it is certainly not the best method of exegesis to interpret the word in a manner that is contradictory to the context. But that is exactly what has been done by Pink and the others who make airō mean "lift up" or "take up" in a good sense. In the context, verse 6 describes the taking away in no uncertain terms as a taking away to judgment.

Dr. L. S. Chafer of Dallas Theological Seminary was one who followed Pink's interpretation. When he wrote his book Salvation, he thus sharply distinguished between the unfruitful branches in verses 2 and 6.

Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away. The reference is evidently to true branches, which is not the case in verse six. From the fact that the Greek word airō has the meaning 'lifting up out of its place,' . . . it would seem probable that the reference is to the last form of chastisement mentioned in I Cor. 11:30. Such branches are taken home to be with the Lord. . . .<sup>9</sup>

As has been pointed out, this interpretation makes the removal of verse 2 a loving one involving believers, whereas the removal of verse 6 is understood as referring to the doom of unbelievers. But it should be noted that believers taken to heaven are not removed from the "Vine." Apparently because there is no contextual support for so sharply distinguishing between the two kinds of removals and thus requiring two kinds of unfruitful branches, Dr. Chafer in his later work, Systematic Theology, presented the view that both verses refer to believers. His understanding of verse 2 remained as quoted above, but concerning verse 6 he wrote as follows:

With the background of what has gone before, approach may be made to John 15:6, in which the truth is declared that if a man abide not in Christ, he will come under the condemning judgment of men. The believer's testimony to the world becomes as a branch "cast forth" and "withered." The judgment of the world upon the believer is described in the severest of terms. . . . If it be asked how in practical experience men burn each other, it will be seen that the language is highly figurative, for men do not in any literal sense burn each other; but they do abhor and repel an inconsistent profession.<sup>10</sup>

Dr. Charles Ryrie, also of Dallas Theological Seminary, agrees with Pink and Chafer that the unfruitful branches in verse 2 refer to believers. He differs from Chafer, however, in that he does not understand airō to refer to the taking of a believer to heaven, rather he understands that the believer is encouraged or "lifted up" in this life.<sup>11</sup> But again it may be objected that the passage seems to indicate a removal from association with the Vine. This view allows no such removal. Concerning verse 6, it is frequently taught that the being "cast

forth and withered" refers to the believer's loss of testimony, and that the judgment of fire refers to the judgment of the believer's works as described in II Corinthians 3. There is no warrant, however, for interpreting airō in a bad sense in verse 6, while declaring that it is used in a good sense in verse 2. In fact, as it will be pointed out later, verse 6 requires the burning of the "branch" itself--not its "fruit" (works) or its "leaves" (testimony).

From the above discussion it can be clearly seen that there is no legitimate basis, grammatical or otherwise, for interpreting verse 2 and verse 6 as referring to two different kinds of unfruitful branches. To be consistent and true to the context one must say that both verses refer to the same kind of branches.

Those who try to interpret both verses as referring to non-producing believers, however, run into serious difficulty with verse 6. To use Dr. Chafer's terminology, they must interpret the verse in a "highly figurative manner." In fact it would be hard to choose words that would better picture the fate of unbelieving professors than those used in verse 6. More will be said about the interpretation of this verse in a later section of this study.

#### A PREFERABLE INTERPRETATION: THE UNFRUITFUL BRANCHES REPRESENT UNSAVED PROFESSORS

##### The Problem of the Phrase "in me."

That the unfruitful branches represent unsaved professors, has been the standard interpretation of the great majority of Calvinistic commentators. But neither is this view without its difficulties. The major difficulty with this view is the phrase "in me" in verse 2. Those who hold that the unfruitful branches represent Christians base their interpretation largely upon this phrase and allow it to determine their view of the rest of the passage. Most commentators, however, have felt that the rest of the passage is so clear that this one phrase should be carefully weighed in the light of the whole context.

It should be recalled that the baptism of the Holy Spirit whereby a believer is placed into the body of Christ was not explained until Paul wrote about it in I Corinthians 12:13. The familiar technical usage of the phrase "in Christ," as it is found in Paul's prison epistles, was not until many years later. At the time when Jesus spoke these words no one was "in Christ" in this technical sense because the baptism of the Holy Spirit did not begin until Pentecost. When these words were spoken, to be "in Christ" was no different from being "in the kingdom." Jesus' parables about the kingdom being composed of wheat and tares, good and bad, fruitful and unfruitful, are very familiar.

It is true that the word "kingdom" is sometimes used in a more restricted sense of believers only. But there is a "kingdom" during this age which contains unbelievers, and even the millennial kingdom after the first few years, will contain unbelievers. It is also true that those who merely profess to be in right relationship to God will be excluded from entering the millennial kingdom. "But the children of the kingdom shall be cast into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt. 8:12, AV).



Some have suggested that there is a mystical sense in which all humanity may be said to be "in Christ." In the very first chapter of this book, John says that every man receives life, and therefore light, from Christ (Jn. 1:3-9). As life-giver and Creator there is a sense in which all are in Him and share in His Life.<sup>12</sup> But this is obviously not what Jesus had in mind in John 15. He is not referring to all of humanity but only to those who profess a certain relationship but do not evidence that relationship by their lives. Also, by designating Himself as the "genuine vine," He has implied the existence of a non-genuine vine (or vines). The "in me" of verse 2, then, is not a designation for all of humanity.

Concerning the phrase "in me," John Gill has commented as follows:

There are two sorts of branches in Christ the vine; the one sort are such who have only an historical faith in him, . . . they are such who only profess to believe in him, as Simon Magus did; are in him by profession only; they submit to outward ordinances, become church members, and so are reckoned to be in Christ, being in a church-state, as the churches of Judea, and Thessalonica, and others, are said, in general, to be in Christ; though it is not to be thought that every person in these churches was truly and savingly in him.<sup>13</sup>

Alexander MacClaren has presented in masterful fashion the view that the unfruitful branches represent unsaved professors.

It seems to me that the very language of the metaphor before us requires us to interpret the fruitless branches as meaning all those who have a mere superficial, external adherence to the True Vine. For according to the whole teaching of the parable, if there be any real union there will be some life, and if there be any life, there will be some fruit, and, therefore, the branch that has no fruit has no life, because it has no real union. And so the application, as I take it, is necessarily to those professing Christians, nominal adherents to Christianity or to Christ's church, people that come to church and chapel, and if you ask them to put down in the census paper what they are, they will say Christians. . . but who have no real hold upon Jesus Christ, and no real reception of anything from Him.<sup>14</sup>

As Dr. MacClaren has stated, verses 4 and 5, taken alone, would most naturally lead one to conclude that the unfruitful branches represent professing unbelievers. Likewise, it should be conceded by all that the judgment of verse 6 can most naturally be understood as the judgment that lies ahead for professing unbelievers.

But not only do verses 4, 5, and 6 support this identification--verse 3 also supports it. In fact, it can hardly be denied that Jesus' choice of the word "clean" in verse 3 was intended to remind the disciples of His discussion with them only a little earlier that evening. In His conversation with Peter concerning the washing of his feet, Jesus remarked that the disciples were all "clean" except for one, the son of perdition, who was about to betray him (cf. Jn. 13:10, 21; 6:70-71; and 17:12). With this usage in mind, the disciples would have understood that Jesus, in John 15:3, was telling them again that he knew them to be true believers and not just

professors as was Judas. His terminology clearly implies that there are (and will be) others who, like Judas, are mere pretenders. These eleven, however, are true believers. As such He wishes them to realize that their only source of strength was in Him, not in themselves.

Verse 1 also supports the identification of the unfruitful branches as false professors. By introducing Himself as the vine, "the genuine one," Jesus is clearly contrasting Himself to the well-known unproductive vine--Israel. So He is saying in effect, "I am God's true vine, the One through whom all of Israel's promises will be fulfilled, and the One in and through whom Israel, and the rest of redeemed humanity, will at last produce fruit for God." Just as there were those in Israel (the old unproductive vine) who were not really "of Israel," that is, who were not true believers, there were also some who, outwardly at least, appeared to be "of Christ," but who were not inwardly united with Christ. These were in the "Jesus movement" just as the Sadducees were in the "Jewish movement."

Hengstenberg believed that Jesus had in mind, throughout this whole parable, the unbelieving Jews who were to be severed from the "True Vine" because of their unbelief. Concerning the phrase, "Every branch in me that beareth not fruit," he makes the following remarks:

. . . the Jewish branch is primarily meant; as by the contrasted fruit-bearing branch we are to understand primarily the Apostles, the Christian church having its germ in them. That even the Jews were a branch in Christ the True Vine, is as certain as that, according to chapter 1:11, when He came to the Jews, He came to His own property. . . But the evidence that Jesus had primarily in view the Jews, when He spoke of the branches not bearing fruit, is found in the fact that the same thought recurs in verse six, where the reference to Ezekiel 15 places the allusion to the Jews beyond doubt.<sup>15</sup>

The validity of these statements is obvious and will be supported by an exegesis of the passage, but application should not be limited only to the Jews. Any who merely profess to be in union with God face the consequences stated by Jesus in verses 2 and 6. The Jews, of course, would have been particularly in view at the time when Jesus spoke these words.

The famous Greek exegete, Godet, suggested that the phrase "in me" may refer to the "branch" or to the participle "bearing." In the latter case the verse would read, "every branch which is not bearing fruit in me He takes away."<sup>16</sup> The text, however, while it allows this construction, favors the common reading.

With these considerations in mind it is evident that it is not impossible to harmonize the "in me" with the identification of the unfruitful branches as merely professors. The later exegetical sections of this study will further support this identification.

#### Do All Christians Produce Fruit?

Another problem that has sometimes been urged against this interpretation is that it requires that all true believers will produce fruit. It is objected that the Scriptures clearly

teach that it is possible for Christians to be carnal, out of fellowship, and walking in darkness. That such a condition is possible is admitted by all, but this is not the same as saying that such a Christian does not, never has, or never will produce fruit. In fact, it must be insisted, on the basis of Scripture that all who are truly saved do produce fruit.

But what is this fruit? A popular conception, frequently heard in testimonies, is that a Christian's sole purpose is to win souls and that soul-winning is therefore the fruit bearing for which a Christian is responsible. But of the sixty-six times the word fruit is used in the New Testament, only one verse uses it for soul-winning (Jn. 4:36).<sup>17</sup> The other non-literal usages of the word all refer to spiritual fruit; the fruit of the Spirit, or the fruits of righteousness which are the general result of the Holy Spirit's work in and through the believer. These "fruits" are primarily attitudes produced in the believer. These attitudes are of course, manifested in the believer's actions.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith [fulness], meekness, temperance [self-control]: against such there is no law (Gal. 5:22-23, AV).

Can a believer conceive of a Christian who has never experienced the love, joy, or peace, that the Holy Spirit produces? If such fruit has never been produced, then it may be affirmed that the Holy Spirit is not resident in such a person.

This present generation of Christians has emphasized the doctrine of carnality while de-emphasizing the doctrine that a true faith must produce fruit. Earlier generations of Christians were more insistent upon this latter point as well as the first. Only a generation ago Dr. Ironside spoke emphatically upon this point.

. . . when you are born again, you love to follow Jesus, and if you do not, you are not a Christian. Take that home. Examine your own foundations a bit. . . . It makes a tremendous difference what you do. If you do not behave yourself, it shows that you are not a real Christian. I know that a real Christian may fail, but the difference can be seen in Peter and Judas. Peter failed, and failed terribly, but he was genuine, and one look from Jesus sent him out weeping bitterly; his heart was broken to think that he had so dishonored his Lord. But Judas accompanied with the Lord almost three-and-a-half years, and was a devil all the time; he was a thief, and was seeking his own interest. He was even made the treasurer of the company, and he held the bag, but we read, "He bare away what was put therein" (John 12:6), as this has been literally translated. At last remorse overtook him, not genuine repentance, and what was the result? He went and hanged himself. He was never a child of God. There is a great difference, you see, between a Christian and a false professor.<sup>18</sup>

The only proof that a person is a real Christian is the "fruit" produced in his life. "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Mt. 7:20). Indeed, this very truth is taught by the parable under consideration. The following comments are appropriate.

. . .no one can be a branch in Christ, and a living member of His body, who does not bear fruit. Vital union with Christ not evidenced by life is an impossibility and a blasphemous idea.<sup>19</sup>

Can anyone who is ingrafted into Christ be without fruit? I answer, many are supposed to be in the vine, according to the opinion of men, who actually have no root in the vine. . . . By these words He declares that all who have a living root in him are fruit-bearing branches.<sup>20</sup>

So, one should not consider himself to be a branch of the Vine just because he is a Jew. Rather, is the test a matter of bearing "fruit" (15:2). Indeed many professed to believe in Jesus who really did not (see 2:23-25). These non-fruit-bearing 'branches' the Cultivator would remove.<sup>21</sup>

. . .by their fruitfulness or unfruitfulness they declare themselves to be true or counterfeit branches, and to be really, or in show only, engrafted in Christ. . . The true touchstone whereby to discern one sort of branches from another is, not their leaves or profession, but their fruit. . . .<sup>22</sup>

Can one be in Christ yet remain fruitless? . . . This at least is certain, that as the fruitless branch can have no living connection with the vine, no more can the fruitless professing Christian with Christ. Something is as it should not be; though man's eye may not detect the cause, the union is not the same kind of union as that of the fruitful branch or Christian.<sup>23</sup>

. . .so will God take away from his church all professed Christians who give no evidence by their lives that they are truly united to the Lord Jesus. . . . 'Every branch that beareth fruit,' that is, all true Christians; for all such bear fruit.<sup>24</sup>

These quotations represent the consensus of conservative commentators on this subject. They agree that true Life is evidenced by fruit. Where there is no fruit, there is no Life. This is what Jesus said in Matthew 7:15-20 (AV).

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

Fruit will be produced if the union with Christ is real. Paul tells believers that they were saved "unto good works" (Eph. 2:10). He also states that when believers stand before the Bema, "then shall every man have his praise of God" (I Cor. 4:5).

The objections, then, do not prohibit the identification of the unfruitful branches as merely professors.

In view of his recognition as a godly defender of the faith, Dr. Ironside's endorsement of this view is noteworthy.

There are a great many believers who bear very little fruit for God, but all bear some fruit for Him. There are many people in the Vine (and the Vine speaks of profession here on earth) who bear no fruit for Him, and will eventually be cut off altogether when Jesus comes. There will be no place with Him because there is no union with Him.<sup>25</sup>

### Contextual Support for this View

It has already been mentioned that verse 6 provides perhaps the strongest support for this view. "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned."

It should be noted that the preceding verse used personal pronouns and was addressed directly to the Apostles. It is not insignificant, then, that the Holy Spirit here changes to the indefinite pronoun "anyone" (tis). Jesus knew that the disciples, who were true believers ("clean," v. 3), would not come into the judgment here described.

But what is meant by "abiding" in Him? According to I John 4:15, the one who confesses that Jesus is the Son of God "abides" in God. Also according to I John 3:24, "he that keepeth his commandments (the chief of which is named in the preceding verse as believing on him) 'abides' in him."

Thus to "abide in Christ" is equivalent to "believe in Christ." The relationship of abiding is initiated by saving faith and is continued by walking in faith.<sup>26</sup>

Marcus Dodds translates this phrase, "If anyone shall not have abided in me. . . ." <sup>27</sup> This would be the equivalent of saying, "If anyone does not produce fruit because he is not vitally united to the vine and consequently is removed (as verse 2 describes) then that one has nothing to look forward to but the same type of judgment that awaits literal branches that have been cut off." John Owen's comment on this phrase is appropriate.

The expression 'if a man abide not in me,' does not imply the termination of a living connection, but that true union and fellowship with Christ was never enjoyed by this worthless branch.<sup>28</sup>

The "withering" described may well be taken as a graphic picture of what happens to the unbeliever's body during the period between his death and the resurrection of his body in order that it may be cast into hell.

The phrase in the King James text, "men gather them," is incorrect and should be simply, "they gather them." The statement was undoubtedly made without a noun or pronoun as subject so as to include men in the case of the literal branches and angels in the case of the unbelievers represented.

The phrase, "they are burned," is again an incorrect translation. The Greek text uses a present passive singular verb which should be translated simply "it burns," or "it is burning." The present tense is for vividness and allows for a continual burning in hell. The singular verb is in agreement with the singular noun "branch." It is thus the unfruitful branch itself that burns. The view that this branch is a believer and that only his testimony is destroyed during this life does not satisfy the grammar of this verse. Neither is the view that the burning refers to the judgment of the believer's works satisfactory. The change from the plural to the singular specifically rejects both views. The judgment described is the same as that described by Jesus in Matthew 13:49, 50 (AV).

So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

It is interesting to note that in the same chapter Jesus had just described a sowing which had produced two kinds of plants that for a time looked like the real thing, but never produced any fruit and consequently withered and died (Mt. 13:20-22). He also describes a sowing which produced tares as well as real wheat. The tares could not outwardly be distinguished from the wheat until the absence of 'fruit' could be noticed at harvest-time. At that time the tares were to be consigned to the fire.

A proper exegesis of verse 6 not only supports the identifying of the unfruitful branches as unsaved professors, but eliminates any view which would make them represent believers. It is admitted that the verse is figurative but to make it apply to believers it must be taken as "highly figurative," as before noted. The following comment by Powell is an example of the treatment which must be given to this verse by those who make it refer to believers: "There is no doctrinal significance in the burning of the branch; this was the natural procedure, with dead wood."<sup>29</sup>

But if verse 6 is determinative, the other verses in the parable also support the same conclusion.

In verse 1, the usage of the adjective "genuine" has already been mentioned as support.

In verse 2, the expression "he taketh away" offers strong support for this view. As before noted, the basic idea of airō involves a removal. If this refers to the removal of unbelievers, then the removal is from any supposed connection with Christ. Unbelievers may be removed from the sphere of profession (as was Judas), by discipline, by persecution, by tribulations, by temptations, or by death.<sup>30</sup> Any and all of these removals will result in the judgment of verse 6.

But if these branches be taken as Christians, what can the removal signify? The taking to heaven of sinning believers, as suggested by Chafer, does not remove them from Christ or from profession in Christ. If Jesus wanted to teach the truth that sinning believers may be removed to heaven it does not seem likely that He would have chosen this figure. What happens to dead and removed branches is not good.

Nor is it satisfactory to say that airō refers to a "lifting up" or encouragement during this life, as Pink, Powell, and others have stated. Again this is no removal from Christ--the true vine, or from profession in him, and therefore, does not fit the common usage of airō or the remainder of the context. Powell's comment indicates the force of these considerations.

This verse as it stands suggests severance from the main vine, the result of cutting or pruning by a husbandman who had lost patience with an unproductive branch. But this is not true.<sup>31</sup>

The meaning of the word, however, and the context, support the contention that a removal is described.

Concerning the "purging" mentioned in verse 2, Barnes has given a helpful comment.

'He purgeth it, ' or rather he prunes it, or cleanseth it by pruning. There is a use of words here--a paranomasia in the original--which cannot be retained in the translation. It may be imperfectly seen by retaining the Greek words. 'Every branch in me that beareth not fruit, he taketh away (airei); every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it (kathairei) now ye are clean (katharoi). . . .<sup>32</sup>

The "purging," or "pruning," or "cleansing" is something quite different from the "taking away" of the unfruitful branches. As has been noted, all Christians bear some fruit, so when He said "every branch that beareth fruit he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit," He was referring to a work done with all believers. This is the same truth as that stated in Hebrews 12:8. "But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons."

Dr. Tenney has properly noted the distinction between the two actions involved in verse 2. "In pruning a vine, two principles are generally observed: first, all dead wood must be ruthlessly removed; and second, the live wood must be cut back drastically."<sup>33</sup>

The use of the word "clean" in verse 3 has already been cited as evidence to support the view being presented. Hutcheson's comment on this verse is adequate at this point.

In this verse is contained a declaration what sort of branches they were--namely, not fruitless; but "clean" ones, that is, who, by being purged and cleansed from their superfluities, (as is promised, ver. 2), are assured that they are fruitful branches, really and internally engrafted in Christ; and so were they regenerated, justified, and sanctified in part.<sup>34</sup>

Verse 4 harmonizes with all that has been said. Using John's definition of "abiding" (I Jn. 4:15), the thought of the verse may be expressed as follows; "continue believing in me; your belief ensures the vital union with me that is absolutely necessary if fruit is to be borne." The fact that an imperative is used may indicate that a choice is involved, but this does not mean that one who was a true believer may stop "abiding." If one should stop "abiding," then that would indicate that he was not truly a believer in the first place.

To continue in the vine is for a branch the condition of life, and consequently its only law.<sup>35</sup>

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all together of us (I Jn. 2:19, AV).

To "abide," then, is to maintain a vital connection to Him by virtue of believing in Him. This relationship is initiated and continued by faith. "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him (Col. 2:6).

Verse 5 repeats the theme that union with Him is necessary for fruitfulness. The phrase translated "without me," is literally, "apart from me"--meaning "not simply without my help, but separated from me."<sup>36</sup> In other words, a branch that is not united to the vine cannot produce fruit. This again supports the view that the unfruitful branches represent unsaved people because believers are not separated from him even when they have sin in their lives.

For true believers the variable factor in verse 7 is not whether they abide, but whether they allow His Word to abide in them. "If you abide in me (that is, if you are a true believer), and (if you allow) my Words (to) abide in you, whatever you wish you shall ask and it shall come to pass for you."

The remainder of the passage is of interest to all believers but has little bearing on the question of identifying the unfruitful branches and so will not be discussed.

## CONCLUSION

The conclusion drawn from this study is that our Lord, in His remarks about the unfruitful branches and what happens to them, is referring to unbelievers.

Many reasons for this conclusion have been discussed, the major reasons found in the passage itself may be summarized as follows.

1. Verse 6 seems to demand this conclusion and the rest of the context also favors it.
2. The word airō, in verse 2, best harmonizes with this view since it usually signifies a removal.



3. Verses 4 and 5 seem to teach that a branch truly united to the Vine must produce fruit. Any branch, therefore, which does not produce fruit is a dead branch not vitally united with Him, and will eventually be removed.

4. Verse 3, and also the whole passage, seems to indicate that the example of Judas was in mind. Judas was certainly an unsaved pretender.

5. By the statement, "I am the vine, the genuine one," Jesus was most certainly drawing the disciples' attention to the familiar Old Testament figure of the vine. Gill and others have remarked that not only was the nation Israel frequently designated as a vine, but the Targums also refer to Messiah himself as a vine.<sup>37</sup>

Since the disciples would have thought of the Old Testament imagery it is interesting that several Old Testament passages describe the burning of unfruitful branches (see particularly Ps. 80:15-16). There can be no question but that in these passages the fire refers to the judgment of unbelievers.

There is much merit to Hengstenberg's "dispensational" interpretation of the passage.

. . . Jesus, in the whole verse [v. 6], has primarily in view the unbelieving Jews, who were as certainly branches in Christ, as they belonged to the people of God: the Jews had originally stood in relation to Christ--He was their divinely-appointed Shepherd, and they His flock; but they did not abide in Him, they violently sundered themselves from Him. A comparison with Ezekiel 15 makes this allusion to the Jews indubitable. There the Jews appear under the image of a degenerate and wild vine, which was fit for nothing in the world but to be burnt. . . .<sup>38</sup>

It appears certain that Jesus had in mind those unbelieving Jews who pretended to be in right relationship to God (like the Pharisees--even like the high priest), but who were actually not united to the true Vine. The figure is wide enough to insist that He also had in mind those who "believed in his name" (superficially), but in whom He did not believe (Greek text, Jn. 2: 23-24). These were professors like Judas, and like much of "Christendom" today.

In Romans 11, Paul gives a similar analogy which describes the removal of branches because of unbelief.

And if some of the branches be broken off, and thou, being a wild olive [branch], wert grafted in among them, and with them partakest of the root and fatness of the olive tree; Boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee. Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in. Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear: For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee. Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God; on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou

also shalt be cut off. And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again. For if thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and wert grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree: how much more shall these, which be the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree? (Rom. 11:17-24 AV).

6. The word "branch" (*klēma*) used in John 15 is not used elsewhere in the New Testament. It means a "cutting" or a "slip."<sup>39</sup> Our Lord may have chosen this word as a designation for branches that are grafted into the vine. Based upon this possibility, Dr. Ironside's comment is very interesting.

There are no natural branches in the living vine. We are grafted in by faith. I do not know much about grafting, but I do know that it is one thing to put a graft in, and it is another thing for a graft to strike. It is one thing for a person to be outwardly linked with Him, and quite another for that person to have life in Christ. What is the test that proves whether he is really in the vine? If he bears fruit. All who have life bear some fruit for God. If there is no fruit, you can be sure there is no life, no real union with Christ.<sup>40</sup>

Such a grafting, then, would be to make a profession of faith in Him--to profess a relationship with God. With this agree the words of Jesus, "every planting which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up" (Mt. 15:13).

The words of another famous Bible teacher of the past generation, Dr. Gaebelein, are an appropriate conclusion.

The branches which bear no fruit, which are taken away and finally perish do not represent true believers at all. Whenever a person takes upon himself the profession of a Christian, he claims by that outward profession to take the place, the position, the privileges and responsibilities of a believer in Christ, a separated one and also a branch in the vine. But while his profession in church membership indicates all this, in reality this person is only nominally a follower of Christ. He has not the reality of it, he does not possess what he has taken upon himself in profession, for he was never born again. As a result there is no fruit, because there is no life. . . . That there are thousands upon thousands of such branches, dead and unfruitful in the professing church, does not need any demonstration. . . . It is only too evident.<sup>41</sup>

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