

"THE TRUE VINE"

Chapter 14

Studies in the Gospels

by

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John xv. 1-6.

(Note: Since many of the footnotes are in Latin and often include considerable Greek, we have either shortened or omitted a number of them.)

Many interpreters have thought it necessary to look in the external world for some object which will have suggested this similitude to the mind of the Lord. Some, for example, who suppose that his 'Arise, let us go hence,' with which the preceding chapter concluded, was not acted on at once, but that He lingered still, have imagined to themselves a spreading vine, whose branches found their way into the chamber in which He and his disciples had just celebrated their last supper together (Ps. cxxviii. 3). But surely those words of his, 'Arise, let us go hence,' leave no room for this supposition. On the part of the disciples there could have been no tarrying, after they had received such a summons; and when the Lord used these words, He must have intended what He said. When others suggest that passing, as He may very well have done, through a vineyard on his way to the brook Kedron, He found his motive there, one can only reply that this and every other suggestion of like kind appear merely and altogether superfluous; that it becomes us far better to believe that, as all worlds, natural and spiritual, lay ever open before Him, and the innermost essences of things, so He drew freely from this inexhaustible storehouse whatever was most adapted to his present need. There was quite enough to suggest this image of closest union between Him and his people in that sacrament of union, which had just been instituted by Him, and in which He had declared of the fruit of the vine, of the 'pure blood of the grape' (Gen. xlix. 11; Deut. xxxii. 14), blessed and consecrated by Him, 'This is my blood of the New Testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.' We may dismiss then, as unnecessary, all speculations on the external motive which He found for this discourse.

At the same time when our Lord affirms of Himself, '*I am the true vine*,' with what, it may be very fitly asked, does He liken Himself, over what assert a superiority; for in that '*true*' He manifestly claims Himself actually to be what some other persons or things falsely pretended to be; or if not all this, claims to be fully and perfectly what they only partially, inadequately, and most imperfectly were? The word which He employs is decisive that it is the latter which He intends;¹ to keep which in mind will help us much to understand what follows. And first, He certainly does *not* liken Himself, which is Lampe's suggestion, to that golden vine of exquisite workmanship, a symbol no doubt of the theocracy, which was the chief ornament of

1 For the distinction between ἀληθής and ἀληθινός see my *Synonyms of the New Testament*, § 8. Ἀληθής (= verax) is the true as set over against the false (Rom. iii. 4); ἀληθινός (= verus) is the true as set over against the imperfect, the inadequate, that which has at best but types, shadows, and outlines of the truth; as Origen puts it well [footnote shortened].

Herod's temple,² nor avouch Himself as '*the true vine*,' by comparison with it. And if not to that dead work of man's art and device, as little does He name Himself '*the true vine*,' as contradistinguished from the natural plant. Not a few have understood Him thus; Tholuck, for example: 'The Saviour would intimate here that the relation which finds place between the vine and its branches is one which reveals itself in its highest potency in the spiritual relation between the Saviour and them that believe on him; the kingdom of nature being a prophecy of the kingdom of grace, so that in this last are found continually the fulfilments of the prophecies of the kingdom of nature.'³ This last, being most true, and earth the shadow of heaven, and the things on earth the copies of things in the heavens, is yet not the truth of this passage. An antagonism far deeper, and moving far more distinctly in the region of moral and spiritual things, the Lord would indicate here. The key to the right understanding of this statement lies, as was long ago noted by Grotius,⁴ in some words of Jeremiah (ii. 21), '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?'⁵ and Christ, claiming to be '*the true vine*,' claims perfectly to realize in Himself that divine idea which Israel after the flesh had altogether failed to fulfil. Planted as this 'right seed,' it had become 'an empty vine,' which brought forth fruit to itself (Hos. x. 1), and none to God; and should end in becoming that 'vine of the earth,' the clusters of whose grapes should be cast into the winepress of the wrath of God (Rev. xiv. 18-20). In confirmation of this view it is hardly necessary to observe that not in these passages only, but continually in the Old Testament the Jewish Church is set forth as a vine or vineyard (Ps. lxxx. 8-16; Isai. v. 1-7; Cant. viii. 11; Ezek. xix. 10-14), is rebuked for not being a true vine, for bearing grapes of Gomorrah, bitter fruit or none (Isa. v. 4; Deut. xxxii. 32, 33; cf. 2 Kin. iv. 39), our Lord taking up the same language in the New (Luke xiii. 6; Matt. xxi. 33). But what Israel should have been, and was not, this Christ, the True Israel, was.

'*And my Father is the husbandman.*'⁶ This was a very favourite passage with the Arians; as many slight allusions or longer discussions on the part of those who took share in the Church's great conflict with these gainsayers, abundantly attest. The reason is obvious. The doctrinal statement of this verse, not qualified by other statements, was capable of being made to imply an entire subordination on the part of the Son to the Father, the relations in fact of a creature to a Creator. Augustine and other theologians before him are careful to reply that it is in his humanity that Christ is '*the true vine*.' It was of the very essence of his mediatorial work, of the

2 Josephus, *Antt.* xv. 11. 3.

3 So Maldonatus: Quia melius et perfectius homines in se per fidem natos nutrit, quam sarmenta sua naturalis vitis.

4 Ergo cum se illam veram vitem vocat, intelligit sibi demum excellenter competere ista epitheta, Jer. ii. 21. Genuina, non fera vitis.

5 [Omitted.]

6 The word which our Lord uses here is γεωργός, not ἀμπελοουργός. It is true that ἀμπελοουργός would more directly designate the actual cultivator of the vine, whose own hands dress and prune it; yet at the same time his office is altogether a subordinate one (see Luke xiii. 7); while γεωργός, by Philo distinguished from γεωπόνος or the actual labourer, in no way marks out a humble social status, as is sufficiently shewn by such a passage as 2 Chron. xxvi. 10, where of King Uzziah it is said that he was a 'husbandman' (γεωργός ην). Noah in like manner is called ἄνθρωπος γεωργός γῆς (Gen. ix. 20). So too by the γεωργοί of Matt. xxi. 33-41 are intended the chiefs and leaders of the Jewish theocracy. Not that the γεωργός need in the least be assumed to 'prune' or prune only by the hand of others. The labour of the vineyard is exactly of that lighter kind, in which the proprietor may be well pleased himself to take a share.

daysman who should lay his hands upon both, that as on the one side He could say, 'I and my Father are one,' so upon the other, 'I and my brethren are one;' and He is here asserting the latter relation, not excluding the former.⁷ But while the vine and the vine-branches must thus both be partakers of the same nature, for He that sanctifieth and they that are sanctified must both be of one (Heb. ii. 11), He will presently challenge for Himself, as Augustine does not fail to notice, a share in the work of the husbandman, an office, which, only as He is one with the husbandman of this allegory, He could have any right to challenge for his own.⁸ He too has power to 'purge' or cleanse through his word (ver. 3). Neither, when we affirm that in his humanity He was '*the true vine*,' may we leave out of sight for a moment, that it was a divine humanity in which He was this, in a humanity united to his divinity, ennobled, and, as one may say, deified, through this union; for only so could it have become a life-giving humanity to the world.⁹

Affirming his Father to be '*the husbandman*,' He excludes *none* from his Father's husbandry--not even, as Chrysostom will have it, Himself, the vine, any more than his disciples, the vine-branches. He too learned obedience by the things which He suffered. All the trial and temptation of his walk upon earth, all 'the contradiction of sinners' which was allowed to come upon Him, all in which it pleased the Father to bruise Him and put Him to grief (Isai. liii. 10), all the awaking of the sword against Him, Jehovah's fellow (Zech. xiii. 7), this was throughout the discipline of his Father's love; to which He was submitted the first, that He might so become a pattern to all those who came after. 'Wonder not,' He would implicitly say to his disciples, 'at the sufferings which are coming upon Me; they are part of my Father's husbandry; still less wonder at your own; for "if these things be done in the green tree, what shall be done in the dry?"' --all being 'dry trees' when brought into comparison with Him. That suffering which to flesh and blood is always so unwelcome He sets here in how comforting a light. It is an evidence of the watchful care with which the heavenly Husbandman tended first the vine, and now is tending the branches of the vine.

'*Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit He taketh away.*' There are then branches *in Him*, which are unfruitful, and which therefore are removed. Christ here anticipates the future condition of his Church; He contemplates a Church in which men shall find themselves *in Him*; as all infants baptized into Christ are in Him; planted together in the likeness of his death; but for whom it remains themselves to determine whether by believing and obeying, they shall make the potential blessings of this position actually their own; whether that fellowship with Christ, which has been so freely given to them in baptism, shall unfold itself into the new creation, into the whole Christian life; whether faith shall keep open the channels through which the power and grace and strength of Christ may flow into the soul, or unbelief shall stop them. The branches which shall have through unbelief doomed themselves to unfruitfulness '*He taketh away.*' In the natural world branches of the vine, which are not good for that to which they were specially ordained, namely for the bearing of fruit, are good for nothing.

7 [Omitted.]

8 Augustine: Denique cum de Patre tanquam de agricolâ dixisset, quod infructuosos palmites tollat, fructuosos autem purget, ut plus afferant fructum; continuo etiam seipsum mundatorem palmitum ostendens, Jam vos, inquit, mundi estis propter sermonem quem locutus sum vobis. Ecce et ipse mundator est palmitum, quod est agricolæ, non vitis, officium.

9 Augustine: Quamvis autem Christus vitis non esset, nisi homo esset, tamen istam gratiam palmitibus non præberet, nisi etiam Deus esset.

There are trees which may be turned to secondary uses, if they fail to fulfil their primary. Not so the vine. As timber it is utterly valueless (Ezek. xv. 2-4). It is with it exactly as with the saltless salt, which, having lost its savour, is fit only to be cast out of doors (Matt. v. 13); both of them being meet emblems of the spiritual man who is not spiritual, who is good neither for the work of this world nor of a higher. But on this '*He taketh away*' what further might be fitly said may be better reserved for ver. 6, where the doom of the barren branches is more in detail set forth.

'*And every branch that beareth fruit, He purgeth*¹⁰ *it, that it may bring forth more fruit.*'¹¹ They assuredly are right who refuse to recognize in this '*he purgeth*' any direct, but only a secondary, allusion to temptations and afflictions, as the means by which this cleansing is effected. It is the whole process of sanctification, the circumcision of the Spirit, by whatever discipline brought about, of which Christ is speaking, and to which He pledges his Father here. At the same time, seeing that afflictions play so large, so necessary a part in this process of sanctification, it is in a secondary sense most true that there is here a reference to these. Regarded as a means of this purifying, as an evidence of the intention of the heavenly husbandman that the fruit-bearing branches shall be more fruitful still, these may be welcomed, may be contemplated in some sort as rewards of obedience. St. James bids the faithful to welcome them, for the blessing they bring with them (i. 2-4, 12), and compare Heb. xii. 11; Rom. v. 3-5. To how many dealings of God with his own, mysterious, inscrutable, inexplicable otherwise, will this, kept properly in mind, furnish us with a key. Oftentimes the fine gold of some saint appears to us as if cleansed from all its dross; but the inexorable refiner, who sees with other eyes than ours, and detects remains of dross where we see nothing but gold, flings it again into the furnace, that so it may be purer yet. Augustine has a striking image in illustration. Many a time, he observes, a portrait seems perfect in the judgment of all eyes save those of the artist who drew it. Others would fain see him now to hold his hand; they count that he cannot improve it, perhaps may mar it; but he returns it to the easel, touches and retouches still. And why? Because, being this artist, there floats before his mind's eye an ideal perfection, to which hitherto his work has not attained; but to which he would fain see it approach more nearly yet.

'*Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you*'--'*clean*' and yet needing to be '*cleansed*.'¹² We have a hint here of the mystery of that double relation in which every believing man stands to God, of that double relation which is more fully and dogmatically stated in some of the Pauline epistles; but which is yet distinctly anticipated here, and at John xiii. 10. The faithful in Christ Jesus are '*clean*,' being by faith justified from all things, and having thus a standing-ground before God; which yet is in some sort an ideal one,--their actual state, although ever approximating to this, yet still failing to correspond to it,--they therefore

10 Αἶρει, καθαίρει: suavis rhythmus, as Bengel observes; but it is nothing more, for the words are not related to one another.

11 Pliny (*Hist. Nat.* xiv. 14): [Numa] ex imputatâ vite libari vina diis, nefas statuit; ratione excogitatâ ut putare cogereantur, alias aratores, et pigri circa pericula arbusti; cf. c. xxii. From whomsoever this remarkable prohibition came, it had, we may be quite sure, a much deeper meaning than that merely economical which the Roman naturalists (naturalist in both senses of this word) ascribes to it here; has its points of contact with Heb. xii. 5-11, its dim reachings-out after a symbolic setting forth of the truth which there is declared.

12 Καθαροί, and yet of those whom the husbandman καθαίρει (ver. 2). Here there is a real connexion between the words, which we would gladly have seen reproduced in our Version. [footnote shortened].

needing by the same faith to appropriate ever more and more of that sanctifying grace, those purifying influences, which continually stream forth from Him on all them that are his; and by aid of which He is bringing them to be all that, which for his sake his Father has been already willing to regard them,¹³ however the absolute identity of what they are and what they are counted to be, is reserved for another state of existence.

'Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in Me.' Our Lord does not say here, as He is so often taken to say, 'If you abide in Me, I will also abide in you.' The second clause in this sentence is not promise, any more than the first; they are precept both: 'Take heed that ye abide in Me, and that I abide in you.'¹⁴ The next verse, where the same words recur, and still more ver. 7, are decisive on this matter; see also vi. 56. It is of course only in a very restricted sense that the relations between Him and them are mutual. There is no correlation of forces. He is throughout and only a giver, they are throughout and only receivers.¹⁵ The mystical use of this word 'to abide,' representing as it does the innermost fellowship and communion of the faithful with their Lord, and of their Lord with them, and occasionally representing a higher mystery still (John xiv. 10; xv. 10), is peculiar to St. John, but is very frequent both in his Gospel and in his Epistles, in the language of his Lord, and in his own which he has learned from that Lord.¹⁶

'I am the vine, ye are the branches.' Our Lord willingly repeats great truths which He would deeply imprint on the minds of his disciples; thus see John iii. 3, 5; vi. 48, 51; but in those places, as in this, with a variation, with more fulness on the second occasion than on the first, or with some other modification, which sufficiently justifies the repetition. In the present instance He now for the first time explicitly calls the disciples *'the branches,'* however as much may have been involved in words which He has uttered already. So, too, while He had already declared the abiding in Him to be the one condition of all fruit-bearing, He adds a promise now, that he who abides in Him shall not only bear fruit, but shall bear it abundantly: *'He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit; for without Me ye can do nothing.'*

It is a poor and inadequate interpretation of these last words to make them to mean, 'Ye can do nothing *until* ye are in Me, and have my grace.' It is rather, *'After* ye are in Me, ye can even then accomplish nothing except as ye draw life and strength from Me; only through a putting forth of my power which is in you can ye commence, carry forward, or bring any work to a good effect. From first to last it is I that must work in and through you.' We have a warning here to the regenerate man that he never seek to do aught of himself; not a declaration that

13 [Omitted.]

14 We must not therefore complete *καὶ γὰρ ἐν ὑμῖν* with *μενῶ*, but with *μείνω*. Bengel gives it well: *Facite ut maneatis in me, et ut ego maneam in vobis*. Godet's words are worth quoting (*Comm. sur l'Evang. de S. Jean*): *En moi exprime l'état dans lequel le chrétien fait abstraction de tout ce qui est sa sagesse, sa force, son mérite propre, pour puiser tout en Christ, sous ces différents rapports, par l'intime aspiration de la foi. Et c'est là l'unique condition de l'activité de Christ en nous. Jésus le fait sentir en supprimant à dessein le verbe dans la proposition suivante, Et moi en vous. Par cette ellipse il enveloppe le second de ces deux faits dans le premier de telle sorte que là où le premier s'accomplit, le second ne peut manquer d'arriver. De cette manière l'action de Christ est mise hardiment sous l'empire de notre liberté, aussi bien que la nôtre propre.*

15 Augustine: *Ita in vite palmitibus sunt, ut viti non conferant, sed inde accipiant, unde vivunt; its vero vitis est in palmitibus, ut vitale alimentum subministret eis, non sumat ab eis.*

16 [Omitted.]

the unregenerate is unable to do aught. Christ does not mean, 'Out of and apart from Me ye are powerless for good;' but, 'Being in Me, only through putting forth of my power, suffering Me effectually to work in and through you, can you accomplish anything'--a truth which needs to be evermore repeated, for it is evermore in danger of being forgotten by us. The words are frequently appealed to by Augustine and others engaged in controversy with the Pelagians of old;¹⁷ even as in the formularies and symbolic books of the Reformed Churches they constantly appear as a *dictum probans* against all open or covert Pelagianism.

'If a man abide not in Me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered' (cf. Ezek. xvii. 24; Matt. iii. 10; vii. 19; xxi. 19; Mark xi. 20, 21; Luke xxiii. 31). Some will fain have it that in giving these words their spiritual significance we must reverse their order, urging that the branch, because withered, is therefore cast forth, and not, because cast forth, therefore withered. But it is not so, either in the natural world or the spiritual; and there is no sufficient reason for deserting the actual sequence of Christ's words, which only the strongest necessity should compel us to abandon. So far however from such necessity existing, the declaration, as it now stands, yields a lesson the most solemn, one which, changing the order of the words, we should in good part miss. An unfruitful branch is not '*withered*,' when broken off from its parent stock and stem; on the contrary, it retains a deceitful greenness and freshness for a little while; deceitful, because upon all this the sentence of death has irrevocably passed. Churches, which, through abandonment of the Catholic¹⁸ faith, individuals who, by unbelief and by the sins which spring from unbelief, have separated themselves off, and in the awful but secret judgments of God have been separated off, from Christ their Head, may keep for a while the show and semblance of life, may deceive others, may deceive even themselves--so long, that is, as any residue of that good thing which they have gotten from Christ remains. But little by little, sooner or later, they come to an end of all which they carried away with them. It fails and dies out, and, once wasted and gone, there is nothing to replace it; and thus death, moral and spiritual, steals over all; they are '*withered*,' this withering of theirs being not seldom evident to the eyes of all.

'And men gather them;' or better, '*And they gather them*,' bring them together into one bundle of death,¹⁹ leaving who the gatherers are in the awful obscurity which rests upon it in the original. Some words of Isaiah, when the boughs thereof are withered, they shall be broken off; the women come, and set them on fire (xxvii. 11), constitute an interesting parallel. The gatherers are the angels, the ministers of the divine anger, to whom the final execution of the divine judgments is everywhere committed (Matt. xiii. 41, 49; xxii. 13; xxiv. 31; Luke xix. 24; Rev. xix. 14). '*And cast them into the fire, and they are burned*;' or, in its simplicity more terrible still, '*and they burn*' (cf. Ezek. xv. 4). But all which is here expressed or implied, of 'the fire' (Matt. iii. 10), 'the flame' (Luke xvi. 24), 'the flaming fire' (2 Thess. i. 8), 'the furnace of fire' (Matt. xiii. 42, 50), 'the gehenna of fire' (Matt. v. 22; Mark ix. 43), 'the lake of fire' (Rev. xx. 15; xxi. 8), 'the everlasting fire' (Matt. xxv. 41; Jude 7), with all the secrets of anguish which words like these, if there be any truth in words, *must* involve, demands rather to be trembled at than needs to be expounded.

17 [Omitted.]

18 [The word "Catholic" is used here in the sense of *universal*. (KJM)]

19 *Συνάγουσι*: cf. *συνλέγουσι*, Matt. xiii. 41; and Isai. xxiv. 2.

We pause here. It is true that echoes and reminiscences of this allegory still recur through the chapter, very distinctly in the next three or four verses, where exhortations are clothed in imagery which it offers, promises linked with a fulfilling by disciples, of all which the fact of being branches in Him implies, means by which these shall abide in his love declared. But these reminiscences are ever growing weaker and weaker; the vine and the vine-branches more and more fade out of sight; so that after this verse there is nothing which of necessity links itself on to the allegory; or which would not be perfectly intelligible without any reference to it, and supposing that Christ had never uttered it. Here, therefore, is the fittest place to conclude.