

Hugo Bouter

I am the true Vine

"I am the Vine, you are the branches".

John 15:5

Branches without fruit

What is the meaning of abiding in the Vine, and taking away some branches and throwing them into the fire (John 15:2 and 6). Can a believer still be lost and cast into eternal fire? The Greek word "airoo" (take away) occurs often in the New Testament, but in John 15 in the parable of the Vine only in verse 2. The meaning is not to lift up or to bind up, but to *take away*. So it refers to nominal confessors, who have no true bond with the Vine (like Judas, who was among the twelve apostles). The connection with verse 6 also makes this clear, as do other passages (Matt. 3:10; 15:13). The taking away is followed by casting them out and throwing them into the fire to be burned. This can only refer to nominal confessors, whose end is in the lake of fire.

The difference with 1 Corinthians 3 is that there it only refers to *works* that burn in the fire, while the believer himself is saved. Our first question should be: What is the vine? First of all, that is Israel according to Isaiah 5. However, the people have been temporarily set aside and replaced by the true Israel, i.e. the Son of Man (cf. Ps. 80). Christ is the true Vine and His followers are the branches. The Father is the vinedresser. The issue in John 15 is the connection to Christ here on earth; that can be just an outward relationship such as a nominal Christian has. The end of that is eternal fire. The Lord speaks of this relatively often in the gospels. So the Vine is

seen here on earth, in connection with all the branches that belong to Him, all Christian professors.

However, the Lord immediately makes a sharp distinction between nominal confessors and true believers in John 15:2. Every nominal Christian is a branch that "bears no fruit". In principle, however, every true believer is a vine that "does bear fruit," for the life of Christ will always express itself in one way or another. So someone who is not clean, here someone who has *not* been born again, cannot bear fruit at all. Someone who is clean through the Word, who has received life from God, does bear fruit (John 15:3). John often speaks about fundamental contrasts; he does the same in his first letter. We must leave these black and white contrasts and not confuse them with practical growth in the life of faith.

Branches with fruit

After this, the pastoral points regarding our life of faith come before us, for all these fruit-bearing branches – i.e., true believers – are cleansed and pruned by the vinedresser, so that they "bear more fruit" (John 15:2b). Then in John 15:4-5 we find the point of our own responsibility to remain in the Vine, i.e. to live in practical fellowship with the Lord, to actually maintain and enjoy the fellowship with the Father and the Son. This leads to perfect joy (1 John 1:3-4). The wine is a picture of this perfect joy.

A true believer cannot be lost, but when it comes to our own responsibility, the ultimate consequence is always presented. So too here, although in John 15:6 we are ultimately talking only about people who do not have life in Christ, yet are a part of Christendom. They are people who are not "in Christ," natural people, who therefore cannot remain in Him. The parallel with Israel is important, because this people also consisted of nominal confessors and true believers. There is no apostasy of saints, but there is an apostasy of nominal Christians and people who have not been born again. These are the branches that do not bear fruit, and in principle cannot do so at all. This subject is not elaborated on by the Lord, but it is mentioned as stated in John 15:6 where it ends with these lifeless branches.

More fruit

The fruit-bearing branches, however, are all true believers who have been cleansed by the Word and thereby born again (John 15:3). In terms of position, they are "completely clean" (John 13:10). So they are clean and do bear fruit, but they need

the daily, pruning work of the vinedresser in order to bear even "more fruit" (John 15:2b). Everything that is of the flesh must be pruned away.

What exactly is bearing fruit? To bear fruit is to reveal the life of Christ, the life of the true Vine. This is actually the same as the ninefold fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5. For the Spirit glorifies the Person of Christ. There is "fruit," "more fruit", and even "much fruit" (John 15:2, 5, 8), just as in 1 John 2 there are also three stages in our spiritual growth: from little children to young men and to fathers in Christ.

