

The Vine

GOD'S ECONOMY

by Ron Kanga

The Gospel of John is simply profound. It is simple in its language and profound in its revelation of the Triune God, the all-inclusive Christ, the pneumatic Christ, the redemption of Christ, the Spirit of reality, the eternal life, the divine dispensing of the Divine Trinity, the mingling of divinity and humanity, the fruit-bearing by the outflow of the divine life from within the believers, the shepherding of God's flock, and the opposition of religion to Christ, to eternal life, and to the vine as the organism of the Triune God in the divine administration. The revelation in John is expansive, beginning with the Triune God in eternity past (1:1; 17:5) and consummating with the corporate expression of the Triune God, which will continue into eternity future (1:51). Occupying a special place in God's revelation, the Gospel of John unveils the desire of God's heart to have an eternal, corporate expression of Himself and unfolds the processes through which God in Christ has passed in order to dispense Himself as life into His chosen, redeemed, and regenerated people to produce such a glorious expression through Christ, the only begotten Son, and the believers in Christ, the many children of God. John is therefore a book on the profound economy of God—God's plan to work Himself in Christ into His chosen people for the building of an eternal abode as a mutual dwelling place for Himself and His children, the many brothers of Christ. Central to this revelation is chapter fifteen, where we have the Lord's word concerning the true vine. This vine is a picture of God's economy, and it is the object of this article to consider this picture in some detail.

An Overview of the Divine Economy in the Gospel of John

Before we turn to John 15, it would be helpful to have an overview of the divine economy in the Gospel of John. God's economy involves the divine Being, the divine

work of creation and redemption, the divine dispensing, and the divine expression.

God, the self-existing, ever-existing divine Being, is eternally triune. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three temporary and successive modes of God's existence but three distinct (yet not separate) persons, or hypostases, within the eternal Godhead. Although the three of the Divine Trinity co-exist from eternity to eternity, the emphasis in John is less on the essential Trinity and more on the economical Trinity, the Triune God in the process of carrying out the divine economy. In brief, this Gospel reveals that God, who is immutable in His essence, has passed through a process in His economy in order to dispense Himself into His chosen and redeemed people. Through incarnation the eternal Word, who is God, became flesh (1:14), the Lamb of God for redemption (v. 29), and through death and resurrection this incarnate Word became the breath, the life-giving Spirit, for the impartation of life (7:37-39; 20:22).

God, the divine Being, accomplished the divine work of creation and redemption. "All things came into being through Him [the Word], and apart from Him not one thing came into being which has come into being" (1:3). At the center of God's creation is man with God's image to express Him (Gen. 1:26) and with a spirit to contact, receive, and contain Him (Zech. 12:1; John 3:6; 4:24). Since humankind fell and all human beings became children of the devil (8:44), the work of redemption was accomplished to solve the problem of sin and to open the way to God as the tree of life (Gen. 3:22-24; John 14:6). In His death on the cross for our redemption, Christ died as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world (1:29), as the bronze serpent to deal with the serpentine nature (3:14; Rom. 8:3), and as the grain of wheat to release the divine life for the divine propagation and

glorification (John 12:24). The death of Christ therefore had a dual aspect: the redemptive aspect signified by blood and the life-releasing aspect signified by water (19:34).

The life released by the Lord in His death is imparted by Him in His resurrection (20:22). This impartation is what we call the divine dispensing—God in Christ as the Spirit dispensing Himself into us as life and everything for our experience and enjoyment of Him. On our part, we simply receive this dispensing by breathing in the pneumatic Christ (20:22), drinking the Spirit as the living water (4:14; 7:37-39), and eating Christ as the bread of life, the true, living, heavenly bread of God (6:35, 32-33, 51).

The issue of the divine dispensing is the divine expression, not only in the individual Christ as the only begotten Son of God but also in the corporate Christ (1 Cor. 12:12), composed of Christ as the firstborn Son of God with believers as the many sons of God (Heb. 2:10). In chapter ten of the Gospel of John this corporate expression of the Triune God is the one flock, in chapter fourteen it is the Father's house, and in chapter fifteen it is the true vine, a marvelous, comprehensive picture of the divine economy.

The Significance of the Vine

Contrary to what is supposed by some, the vine in John 15 is not merely a parable or metaphor; this vine is a profound reality and the focal point of God's operation in the universe. As we will see, the vine is not simply related to God's economy—the vine is God's economy. Since the vine is God's economy, it is rich in spiritual significance, and this significance has a number of aspects.

Christ, the Center of God's Economy

If we would understand the significance of the vine in John 15, at the outset we must see that the vine is Christ Himself. The Lord Himself declared, "I am the vine" (v. 5a). In this vine, which is Christ the Son of God, the fullness of God dwells bodily (Col. 2:9). This means that the vine is the embodiment of the fullness of the God-head, the fullness of the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. The vine is the Son of God. "As the vine, the Son is the center of God's economy. God the Son is the center of God's business, of God's operation, of God's enterprise" (Lee, *Life-study of John* 398). Christ is the vine, and the vine is God's economy; therefore, Christ is God's economy.

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The Organism of the Triune God

The significance of the vine consists also in its being a great, corporate, universal organism—the organism of the Triune God in the divine economy. This organism is the focal point of the entire Bible, for it involves God's desire to grow and develop Himself within a body of people in such a way that He might be glorified, expressed, in them. The true vine, which is Christ the Son, with its

branches, which are the believers in the Son, is the organism of the Triune God in God's economy to grow with the Father's riches and express His life. For this reason, in John 15 the Triune God is revealed in relation to this vine: the Father is the husbandman, the Son is the vine, and the Spirit is both the One who testifies to the Son as the vine and the One who is the sap, the life juice, flowing within the vine. The vine, Christ, is the embodiment, expression, and manifestation of the Triune God (Col. 2:9), and God's economy is nothing other than to grow and cultivate this vine with its branches for the Father's glorification and satisfaction. "Here the Father is a husbandman, a farmer, cultivating the true vine, Christ, with its branches, the believers in Christ. To see this is to see God's economy, what God is doing in this universe" (Lee, *Life* 59). By tending this vine, cultivating and developing it, God is growing and developing Himself, not in Himself (which is impossible, since He is perfect and cannot grow or develop) but in the vine with the branches, causing this organism to grow with "the growth of God" (Col. 2:19).

A Divine-Human Incorporation

As a pneumatic organism, the vine is the enlarged, universal, divine-human incorporation, the issue of Christ being glorified in resurrection by the Father with the divine glory (John 17:1, 5). "God in His Divine Trinity is an incorporation (John 14:10-11). The three of the Divine Trinity are an incorporation both in what They are and in what They do" (Lee, *Issue of Christ* 24). The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are an incorporation both by coinhering mutually and by working together as one. God's desire in His economy is, on the basis of Christ's redemption and as the issue of Christ's glorification in His resurrection, to incorporate His chosen, redeemed, and regenerated people into this divine incorporation, thereby making it a divine-human incorporation. "God's intention is that all the believers of Christ would be incorporated into His incorporation to be an enlarged incorporation" (26). Christ the vine with the believers as the branches is this enlarged incorporation, the unique, divine-human incorporation as the center of God's economy.

At this juncture, it is necessary to explain further our understanding and use of the word *incorporation*. The two words *corporation* and *incorporation* are closely related, but there is nonetheless a significant difference between them. A corporation is a group of people combined or associated into one body, usually for the purpose of business or government. An incorporation is a matter of union and intimate mingling. To incorporate is to unite intimately, to blend, combine, or mingle thoroughly into a whole. *Incorporation* denotes both the act of incorporating and the state of being incorporated. With respect to the vine in John 15, an organism produced in Christ's glorification through resurrection (Luke 24:26; Acts 3:13-15; John 7:39), *incorporation* is a much better word than *corporation*. Whereas *union* concerns our oneness in life with the Lord and *mingling* is related to the divine and human natures, *incorporation* is a matter of persons in a relationship of coinherence, of mutual indwelling. "Humanly speaking, no person can be in another person. But in the divine and mystical realm, the consummated God and the regenerated believers, the persons, indwell one another. This is an incorporation. In this universal, divine-human incorporation, persons indwell one another, that is, they coinhere" (Lee, *Issue of Christ* 41). The coinherence that makes possible the universal, divine-human incorporation is revealed in John 14:20, 17 and experienced in 15:4—"Abide in Me and I in you." If we see this crucial matter of coinherence, we will realize why the word *incorporation* is used, which implies an intimate union and which, in our usage, can convey the idea of coinherence and the incorporation produced by it. "The Father, the Son, and the Spirit coinhere with the disciples mutually, indicating that the Triune God and the disciples are not only united but also mingled and incorporated into one" (Lee, *Crystallization* 117). The uniting, mingling, and incorporating of the processed and consummated Triune God with the redeemed and regenerated believers issue not only in the Father's house revealed in John 14 but also in the vine unveiled in John 15. This vine is an incorporation produced by the coinherence of the vine and the branches. It is divine because the processed and consummated Triune God is involved, and it is human because redeemed humanity is involved; hence, the vine in John 15 is a divine-human incorporation in which the believers and the Triune God coinhere, dwelling in one another (1 John 4:13, 15; 3:24) as a single organic entity, the true vine, the one Body (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12). This vine is God's economy, the goal of which is "the enlarged, universal, divine-human incorporation of the consummated God with the regenerated believers" (Lee, *Issue of Christ* 44).

The Father's House

As a divine-human incorporation, the vine in John 15 is actually the Father's house in John 14. In order to recognize this fact, we need to abandon the traditional notion



The Central Thought of God

John 15 is possibly the deepest chapter in the New Testament. If we are to properly and adequately understand the deeper meaning of this chapter, we must understand the central thought of God and the intention of the Holy Spirit in writing the Gospel of John. This Gospel reveals that the Lord Jesus is the expression of God, that He is the very God expressed in the form of man. He was expressed in this way that we might take Him as our life and our everything. His intention is to work Himself into us until He becomes our life and everything. Chapters three through eleven reveal that He can meet all of our needs by becoming our life. Chapter twelve shows us the issue and multiplication of His being life to us. Chapter thirteen indicates the way to maintain our fellowship in life. Then chapter fourteen unfolds to us that He can work Himself into us by His death and resurrection and by His being transfigured from the flesh into the Spirit. By the time of chapter fourteen He has wrought Himself into us through the Spirit of reality. Now He is our life and our essence. He is living within us, waiting for us to cooperate with Him that He might reveal and manifest Himself to us more and more. The Father also comes in with Him to visit us, stay with us and make His abode with us (14:23). In other words, the Father in Him and through the Spirit will be absolutely mingled with us. The Father in the Son and through the Spirit will be our abode, and we shall be the abode of the Triune God. In this way, the Triune God and we, we and the Triune God, will be built together, that is, God and man, man and God, will be built up together as one. This wonderful oneness is the central thought of God. The ultimate intention of God in the whole universe is that the Father in the Son as the Spirit might be wrought into us and mingled with us until the Triune God and humanity become a mutual abode....This is the background of chapter fifteen.

Witness Lee, *Life-study of John*. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1985, pp. 391-392.



that the Father's house in chapter fourteen refers to heaven, where, as it is supposed by many, the believers will live in individual "mansions." In this age the Father's house, a mutual abode for God and the believers, is the church, the Body of Christ, and eventually the Father's house will consummate in the New Jerusalem, the eternal, mutual abode for God and His redeemed people. Now we need to see that the vine, the organism of the Triune God, is the definition of the Father's house. "The Father's house is the vine, and the branches of this vine are the many abodes, the many rooms, of the Father's house" (Lee, *Fulfillment* 435). If we see this, we will realize that the Lord's word about mutual abiding in 15:4 continues the thought of mutual abiding found in chapter fourteen. To live in the Father's house is to abide in Christ as the true vine. To abide in Christ as the vine is to dwell in our abode in the Father's house, in the place prepared in God for us by the Lord through His death and resurrection.

The Body of Christ

The vine not only signifies the organism, the incorporation, and the house but also signifies the Body of Christ. In a very real sense, the vine is the Body. The abodes in the house are the branches in the vine, and the branches in the vine are the members of the Body (1 Cor. 12:12). Both as branches in the vine and as members of the Body, we are parts of Christ. The vine includes not only the trunk, or the stalk, but also its parts—the branches, and the Body includes not only the Head but also its parts—the members. We have become parts of Christ by being organically united with Him and constituted with His life and element to become an organism to express Him. "Christ Himself is the element, the factor, that makes us parts of Him. Therefore, in order to be parts of Christ, as members of His Body [and as branches in the vine], we must have Christ wrought into our being" (Lee, *Conclusion* 2268). Both the vine

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and the Body signify the corporate Christ, of which we are parts. The vine in which we are branches is the Body of which we are members.

A Sign of Christ's Universal Spreading

The vine also signifies the universal spreading of Christ through the believers of Christ as the branches abiding in Christ and bearing fruit for the glorification

of the Father. Whatever is in the vine is in the branches, and the branches are the spreading, the increase and enlargement, of the vine. On the one hand, the branches must abide in Christ as the vine because apart from Him they can do nothing (John 15:5). On the other hand, the branches are required to "go forth and bear fruit" (v. 16). The going forth of the abiding branches is the spreading of Christ as the vine throughout the earth (Acts 1:8). This indicates that as the vine Christ is growing. In Himself as the infinite God, Christ does not need to grow and cannot grow. But as the vine, a pneumatic organism, the enlarged divine-human incorporation, Christ can, and must, increase. Christ, therefore, does not grow, spread, and increase in Himself, but He does grow, spread, and increase in and through the vine, which is His Body. As the Husbandman tending the true vine, the Father earnestly desires the universal spreading of Christ as the vine. Before the end comes, the "gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole inhabited earth for a testimony to all the nations" (Matt. 24:14).

The preaching of the gospel of the kingdom by the branches in the vine is the spreading of the vine throughout the earth. It is the desire of the Father's heart to see the earth covered with Christ as the vine.

The Significance of Being a Branch

Having considered, at least in an introductory way, the significance of the vine in God's economy, we need to consider the significance of the believers of Christ being branches in the vine.

The Father's Economy

*"I am the true vine, and My Father
is the husbandman" (John 15:1).*

The Father as the husbandman is the source, the author, the planner, the planter, the life, the substance, the soil, the water, the air, the sunshine, and everything to the vine. The Son as the vine is the center of God's economy and the embodiment of all the riches of the Father. The Father, by cultivating the Son, works Himself with all His riches into the vine, and eventually the vine expresses the Father in a corporate way through its branches. This is the Father's economy in the universe.

Recovery Version, John 15:1, note 2

Christ Becoming Our Life

To be a branch means that Christ has become our life (Col. 3:4). By our natural life we are not qualified to be branches in the true vine, branches of Christ. Instead, in our natural life we are qualified only to be branches of Adam, and in our fallen nature we are even branches of the devil (John 8:44). In our natural life and fallen nature, we are parts of “the vine of the earth” (Rev.

14:18), a counterfeit of the true vine composed of Christ and His members. To be parts of another vine we need another life; to be branches in the true vine we need the true life, “that which is really life” (1 Tim. 6:19).

The life by which and in which we become branches of Christ is the eternal life, the divine, uncreated, indestructible life of God. This life is in the Son; thus, if we would have the life, we must have the Son (1 John 5:11-12). Not only is eternal life in the Son, but the Son Himself is this life (John 14:6). As a book on life, written that we might have life (20:31), the Gospel of John testifies that Christ came that we may have life and may have it abundantly (10:10). He, the good Shepherd, laid down His human life for us (v. 11), releasing the divine life, that the eternal life, which is in the Son and which is the Son, may also be in us.

We receive the eternal life simply by believing into Christ, the only begotten Son of God (3:16). “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that every one who believes into Him may have eternal life” (vv. 14-15). To have eternal life is not to have an unending existence in heaven; to have eternal life is to have the same life that God has, the divine, uncreated life. The moment one receives this life by believing into Christ is the moment one becomes a branch in the vine, possessing the life of the vine. To be a branch in the vine, therefore, is to have the life of the vine, the divine life in addition to the natural, created, human life. When the life of the vine became the life in us, we became branches in the vine.

Parts of Christ

To be a branch is to be part of Christ. All the branches in the vine are parts of the vine. Since the vine is Christ, the branches, being parts of the vine, are parts of Christ. Because the Lord Jesus regards His believers as parts of Himself, He could say to Saul of Tarsus, who was persecuting those who called on the name of the Lord, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 9:4). This

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Eternal life is not an unending existence in heaven; it is the same life that God has.

“Me” is corporate, including Christ and the believers. The “Me” in Acts 9:4 is the vine in John 15:4. The components of this corporate “Me” and the branches of the vine are all parts of Christ.

It is important for us to understand how Christ, the vine, has made us parts of Himself. The only way to become a part of Christ is to enter into an organic union with Him by believing into

Him. It is significant that, according to the original language, John 3:15 and 16 speak neither of believing Christ nor of believing in Christ but of believing *into* Christ. The preposition *into* implies union. To believe into Christ is to receive Him (1:12-13) and to be united to Him and thereby become organically one with Him. We do not become parts of Christ simply by believing certain truths concerning Christ. The crucial matter is that, being infused with faith as a gracious gift from the Lord Jesus, the Author of our faith (Heb. 12:2), we believe into Christ to have an organic union with Him. Concerning this, 1 Corinthians 6:17, perhaps the most important verse in the New Testament, says, “He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit.” The Lord is the Spirit, the life-giving Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17; 1 Cor. 15:45b); our God-created human spirit has been regenerated, born of the Spirit; and now these two spirits—the divine Spirit and the regenerated human spirit of the believers—have become one spirit. This spiritual, mystical, and organic union is a wonderful, amazing fact. We are one with Christ, we are in Christ, and we are parts of Christ. Because we have been joined to Christ as the vine and are now in Him, He can speak of “every branch in Me” (John 15:2). We, the branches, are parts of the vine, the corporate Me. Furthermore, since we are parts of the vine and the vine is God’s economy, we are parts of God’s economy. “This vine, including the branches, is God’s economy. This means that His economy includes us, for we are the branches of this vine” (Lee, *Life* 29).

Christ Wrought into Us

To be a branch in the vine is not only to have the life of the vine in us and to be parts of the vine by having an organic union with the vine; to be a branch also means that the Christ into whom we have believed is being wrought into us. As we will see, living in the vine involves coinherence, or mutual abiding (indwelling). As branches in the vine, we live in Christ, and He lives in us. The more we allow Him to make His home in us (Eph. 3:17) and to be formed in us (Gal. 4:19), the more we will be filled with Him and constituted with Him, and the more

He will be wrought into us, permeating and saturating every part of our inner being with His life, element, attributes, and virtues. Yes, we became branches the moment we believed into Christ, and we were joined to Him to become one spirit with Him. This made us branches in fact and in standing. Now we need to advance in our daily experience and enjoyment of Christ to become branches in reality and practicality, with the life of the vine flowing into us, through us, and out from us and with all the intrinsic features of the vine being constituted into us.

Implying Deification

Having Christ as our life, being parts of Christ by believing into Christ to be one with Him, and having Christ wrought into us in reality and practicality—all these imply the tremendous matter of deification. The branches of the vine are Christ's deified believers. For the believers in Christ to be deified means that, having been born of God to have the life and nature of God, we are the same as God in life and in nature but not in the Godhead. We have our Father's life, nature, and expression, but we do not share His fatherhood, we do not attain to the Godhead, and we do not become an object of worship. Witness Lee has spoken repeatedly and emphatically concerning this distinction:

When we say that we are one with God, we do not mean that we become the person of God. This is to make ourselves an object of worship and should be condemned as blasphemy. (*Experience* 218)

We have to know that although we are born of God and have God's life to become God's children, His house, and His household, we do not have a share in His sovereignty or His Person and cannot be worshipped as God. (*Deeper Study* 53)

Today, the Spirit of God and the human spirit are mingled as one within us so that we can live a God-man life, a life that is God yet man and man yet God. (*Union* 30)

To say that we are mingled with God, though, does not mean that we become God in His deity and that we are qualified to be the object of people's worship. This is a top blasphemy and is utterly heretical. (*Economy* 440)

Some of the church fathers have used the term "deification" to describe the fact that we have been mingled with God and that we are partakers of God's life and nature.

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When you use the word deified, though, if you mean that you have been made God in His Godhead to be an object of worship, this is heresy. On the other hand, if your denotation is that through regeneration you have received God's life and nature and that now you are a son of God, this is altogether safe and scriptural. (*Economy* 441)

In our spiritual breathing by the exercise of our spirit, we enjoy, receive, and absorb the divine substance with the divine essence, the divine element, and the divine expression. This will cause us to be deified, that is, to be constituted with the processed Triune God to be made God in life and in nature but not in the Godhead. In this sense we may speak of the deification of the believers, a process that will consummate in the New Jerusalem (*Job* 122)

Certain portions of the Gospel of John definitely indicate that the believers become God in life and in nature but not in the Godhead. John 1:12-13 speaks of those who are born of God to become children of God. God is our actual spiritual Father, and we have actually been born of Him to be His children possessing His life and nature. We have truly been begotten of God; therefore, in a very real sense we are God. That which is born of a dog is a dog; that which is born of a man is man; and that which is born of God is God. To say that the believers in Christ, the children of God, are God in life and in nature but not in the Godhead is to advance in our understanding of regeneration. It is to take seriously the fact that we have truly been born of God. "By our first birth we became man; by our second birth we become God" (Lee, *Union* 65). Because we have been born of God, we have the same life and nature as God; therefore, we are God in this limited sense. "What is begotten of man is man, and what is begotten of God must be God. We are born of God; hence, in this sense, we are God" (Lee, *Deeper Study* 53).

By regeneration, by being born in our spirit of the Divine Spirit, we have entered into the kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5) and simultaneously into the vine of God, the organism of the Triune God. Entering the kingdom of God through regeneration also implies that we become God in life and in nature but not in the Godhead. According to the revelation in the Gospel of John, the kingdom of God in chapter three is a realm not mainly of the divine dominion but primarily of the divine species. Entering into the kingdom of God as the realm of the divine species may be compared to becoming part of a human family by birth. Those born into a family become a part of the family not only as a social unit but also as a

life unit, an organic unit, a realm of shared human life. In like manner, to enter into the kingdom of God through regeneration is to become a part of this kingdom, entering the realm of the divine life to become the divine species, sharing the divine life and divine nature.

Another indication of deification is found in John 3:29-30, which speaks of the bride as the increase of Christ. The *increase* in verse 30

is the *bride* in verse 29. If we consider this in the context of the entire chapter, we will see that regeneration not only ushers us into the kingdom of God but also makes us part of the bride of Christ, His increase. How can the bride of Christ differ from Christ in life and in nature? This would be impossible. Moreover, it would violate a fundamental, God-ordained principle concerning marriage. When Adam beheld Eve, he could say, "Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23). When the bride is presented to Christ, He will surely respond in a similar way, recognizing in her the corporate reproduction of Himself. Christ cannot and will not marry something that does not match Him. The bride of Christ, like the Body of Christ, is Christ in another form; hence, the bride of Christ is the same as Christ in life and in nature but not in the Godhead.

Yet another sign of deification is found in John 12:24: "Truly, truly, I say to you, Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." This "much fruit" is Christ's increase in resurrection through the divine life released in His crucifixion. To be sure, these many grains brought forth in resurrection—grains that will eventually be formed into one loaf, signifying the mystical Body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:17)—are the same as the original grain in life and nature. The grain of wheat that fell into the ground and died was God who became a man, a God-man with divinity mingled with humanity; the many grains brought forth in Christ's resurrection are man becoming God, the God-men, with humanity mingled with divinity. The many grains are the same in life and nature as the original grain, but they do not share in the Godhead. The reproduction, the increase, of Christ is the same as Christ in life and nature but not in the Godhead and not as an object of worship.

The principle is the same with the vine and the branches. The vine is God becoming man, and the branches are man becoming God in life and nature. The vine is the infinite God who became a finite man, the God-man; the branches are finite men who are becoming God, not in His infinity but in His life and nature. In order for the

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branches to be parts of the vine, they must become the same as the vine in life and nature; that is, they must be deified. From this we see that the ultimate significance of being a branch in the vine is that we are deified, that we become God in the limited sense of being the same as God in life and nature but not in the Godhead. Our eyes need to be opened to see that Christ, the infinite God, is the vine and that we, His believers joined to Him in the or-

ganic union, are branches of the infinite God, branches of the Triune God in the Son. "We are the branches of the divine vine; we are part of the organism of the Triune God. In life, in nature, and in position we are the same as He" (Lee, *Life-study of John* 612).

The Relationship of the Branches to the Vine

As branches in the universal vine, it is not sufficient for us simply to know about the vine and to realize that the vine is God's economy; we also need to actually live as part of the vine day by day and even moment by moment. If we would have a daily Christian life as parts of the vine, we need to consider the relationship in life between the branches and the vine. Since we are branches, we need to understand ourselves and define ourselves according to our relationship with the vine. Apart from Christ as the vine, we have no spiritual existence, and there is no meaning to the Christian life.

Absolute Dependence

"As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me....Apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:4b, 5b). This points to a relationship of absolute and total dependence. The branches need the vine and cannot live apart from the vine. The branches are utterly dependent on the vine for their life, life supply, and everything. This is God's ordination for the branches. According to God's arrangement in His economy, the all-inclusive Christ, who is the vine as the embodiment of the fullness of the Godhead, is everything to us for our experience and enjoyment. To be something apart from Christ, to have something apart from Christ, to do something apart from Christ—this is contrary to God and God's economy. The only way to live as a branch is to depend on the vine for life and for everything. The branches have no life in themselves. The life in the branches is the life of the vine. The branches who realize this are not ashamed to confess that they need the vine, that they cannot live without the vine, and that they are continually dependent on the vine.

To be dependent on Christ as the vine is to be dependent on Christ as the tree of life, for the vine is the tree of life. Christ is life (John 14:6) and He is a tree (15:1); this gives us the ground to say that Christ is the tree of life. To be part of Christ as the vine is to be part of Him as the tree of life. In contrast to the principle of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which is independence, the principle of the tree of life is dependence. Sadly, all unbelievers and even the vast majority of believers in Christ live not by the principle of the tree of life—dependence—but by the principle of the tree of knowledge—independence—doing what is right and good in their own eyes instead of living by Christ as their life (6:57). We need to face the tragic fact that, as a whole, Christians today live in detachment from the vine simply because the element of independence has not been broken in them. As a result, there is little or no sense of need of the vine and the other branches. If we would live in the vine and as parts of the vine, we must live according to the basic principle of the vine-branch relationship—complete dependence on the vine for everything.

In order to live according to this principle, we need to know our nothingness, realizing that in ourselves we are nothing, that we have nothing, and that we can do nothing. Speaking of His dependence on the Father, the One who is the vine, said, “The Son can do nothing from Himself except what He sees the Father doing, for whatever that One does, these things the Son also does in like manner” (5:19). Shortly after speaking these words He went on to say, “I can do nothing from Myself” (v. 30a). This was the Son’s view of Himself in relation to the Father, and it should be our view of ourselves in relation to the Son as the vine. Andrew Murray held such a view of himself and prayed accordingly:

Lord, I gladly accept the arrangement: I nothing—Thou all. My nothingness is my highest blessing, because Thou art the Vine, that givest and workest all. So be it, Lord! I, nothing, ever waiting on Thy fullness. Lord, reveal to me the glory of this blessed life. (*Vine* 56-57)

As Murray well understood, dependence on the vine and the sense of humility and nothingness go together. Concerning the former he writes,

As God is the ever-living, ever-present, ever-acting One, who upholds all things by the word of His power, and in whom all things exist, the relation of the creature to God could only be one of unceasing, absolute, universal dependence. (*Humility* 11)

Concerning the latter he says, “Humility...is simply the sense of entire nothingness, which comes when we see how truly God is all, and in which we make way for God to be all” (13).

Dependence and the sense of nothingness in the creature open the way for the Creator to be all. In like manner, dependence and the sense of nothingness in the branches open the way for the vine to be life and everything to

Abiding in Him

- 1 Thou hast said Thou art the Vine, Lord,
And that I'm a branch in Thee,
But I do not know the reason
Why I should so barren be.
- 2 Bearing fruit is my deep longing,
More Thy life to manifest,
To Thy throne to bring more glory,
That Thy will may be expressed.
- 3 But I fail to understand, Lord,
What it means—“abide in me”
For the more I seek “abiding,”
More I feel I'm not in Thee.
- 4 How I feel I'm not abiding;
Though I pray and strongly will,
Yet from me Thou seemest distant
And my life is barren still.
- 5 Yet Thou art the Vine, Thou saidst it,
And I am a branch in Thee;
When I take Thee as my Savior,
Then this fact is wrought in me.
- 6 Now I'm in Thee and I need not
Seek into Thyself to come,
For I'm joined to Thee already,
With Thy flesh and bones I'm one.
- 7 Not to “go in” is the secret,
But that I'm “already in”!
That I ne'er may leave I'd ask Thee,
Not how I may get within.
- 8 I am in, already in Thee!
What a place to which I'm brought!
There's no need for prayer or struggling,
God Himself the work has wrought.
- 9 Since I'm in, why ask to enter;
O how ignorant I've been!
Now with praise and much rejoicing
For Thy Word, I dwell therein.
- 10 Now in Thee I rest completely,
With myself I gladly part;
Thou art life and Thou art power,
All in all to me Thou art.

(*Hymns* 513-514)

them. The more we depend on the vine and the more we realize that we are nothing apart from the vine, the more we will need the vine, live in the vine, and experience and enjoy the vine as our life, our life supply, and our everything.

Mutual Abiding— a Life of Coinherence

In John 15 abiding is a crucial matter. In verse 4 the Lord Jesus says, “Abide in Me and I in you,” and in the next verse He says, “He who abides in Me and I in him.” This is a mutual abiding: we abide in the Lord, and He abides in us. This mutual abiding is a life of coinherence; the vine and the branches coinhere. We use the word *coinhere* to point out that the vine and the branches not only co-exist but also exist within one another. We abide in the Lord, existing and living in Him, and He abides in us, existing and living in us. This is coinherence, the mutual indwelling of the vine and the branches as one entity, with the branches distinct from the vine but not separate from the vine.

The coinherence of the vine and the branches is an extension of the coinherence revealed in John 14:10, where the Lord Jesus says, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me?” As indicated above, this mutual indwelling, this coinherence, of the Father and the Son reveals that the Divine Trinity is a divine incorporation. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, and as the issue of the glorification of Christ, this divine incorporation has been enlarged to become a divine-human incorporation, signified not only by the Father’s house but also by the vine. Since the vine is such an incorporation, the relationship of the branches with the vine is a relationship of incorporation, of coinherence, of mutual indwelling and mutual abiding. God has put us into Christ (1 Cor. 1:30; Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27), and Christ is in us (Col. 1:27; Rom. 8:10; John 14:20). Therefore, the Christian life is a life of coinherence.

Abiding Depending on Vision

Earnest, seeking believers, those who love the Lord and desire to be one with Him, may be eager to know how to abide in Him. This brings us to a crucial and wonderful point, elegant in its simplicity: Our abiding in the vine depends on seeing the vision that we are branches in the vine. If we would abide in the vine, we simply need to realize that we are already branches of the universal vine cultivated by God the Father, and then we should exercise our God-given faith to believe the tremendous truth that we are in *Christ*. By believing into Christ and by being

To be cast out does not mean to lose our salvation; rather, it means to be cut off in our daily living from the experience and enjoyment of the riches of the Triune God in Christ as the vine.

baptized into Christ, we have entered into Christ. Even we have been grafted into Him (Rom. 11:17). The branches of the vine are “the believers of Christ, who... have been grafted...through their believing into Christ,” for the vine’s “grafted branches have been regenerated with the divine life, brought into the life-union with the crucified and resurrected Christ, and incorporated with the processed and consummated Triune God” (Lee, *Issue of Christ* 37).

Because we are grafted branches, we are already in the vine; now we simply need to abide, to remain, to stay, to dwell, where we are—in the vine—rejoicing in the fact that, by God’s abounding grace in His salvation, we have been grafted into Christ and have become parts, branches, of Him.

Unfortunately, the rejoicing of some may soon give way to worry aroused by a misunderstanding of the Lord’s word in John 15:6 and accompanied by the fear that, after enjoying the life of blessed coinherence, a believer may be cut off from the vine and suffer eternal perdition. “If one does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is dried up; and they gather them and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.” To be sure, this is a serious warning concerning the loss that results from not abiding in the vine to bear fruit for the Father’s glorification; however, this is not a word regarding the loss of our eternal salvation. To be cast out does not mean to lose our salvation; rather, it means to be cut off in our daily living from the experience and enjoyment of the riches of the Triune God in Christ as the vine; it is to be severed in present experience from the expression of the Son with the Father and from the fellowship of the branches. “The concept in this chapter is whether we shall enjoy the riches of the vine tree to bear fruit or miss the riches of the tree. To be cast out is not to lose our salvation; it is to be cut off from the enjoyment of the riches of the life of the vine tree” (Lee, *Life-study of John* 404-405). We should not understand verse 6 as teaching that we, the branches, can be cut off from Christ as the vine in the sense of losing our salvation. The security of salvation—a biblical truth—is not the issue here; the issue is whether or not in our actual, daily Christian spiritual experience we will abide in the vine, enjoy the life of the vine, and fulfill the function of the vine by bearing fruit.

Believers need to realize that not everything in the New Testament is focused on one’s personal salvation. Salvation is for God’s economy. The branches have been saved eternally and can never perish. Now, having the assurance of our salvation and seeing that God has put us into Christ, we need to abide in Him so that He may abide in us.

Christ and His Word Abiding in Us

When the Lord speaks of mutual abiding, it is significant that He first says, "Abide in Me," and then He says, "I in you" (v. 4). "He who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit" (v. 5a). This indicates that our abiding in Him is a condition of His abiding in us. If in our actual experience we do not abide in Christ, then in our actual experience He will not abide in us.

His abiding in us depends on our abiding in Him. In this matter we bear a weighty responsibility, and we cannot afford to be passive or indifferent. We must exercise our spirit in faith and with love to abide in the Lord, remaining in fellowship with Him and allowing the divine life to flow into us, through us, and out of us. The more we exercise in this way, the more we will sense (by the functions of fellowship and intuition in our regenerated spirit) that Christ is abiding in us.

For the Lord to abide in us means that we give Him the ground to occupy us, to spread in us, and to make His home in us. God's desire in His economy is to build up an eternal, mutual abode by building Himself in Christ into us and by building us in Christ into Himself. The Lord abides in us with the goal of gaining our entire inner being and thereby making His home in our hearts (Eph. 3:17) for the consummation of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 3:12), the eternal mutual dwelling place of God and His redeemed, regenerated, and transformed people in the new heaven and new earth (21:1-2). Since this is the desire of God's heart and the goal of Christ's abiding in us, if we want Christ to abide in us, we need to be willing to yield more ground to Him and, in love, to agree with His making His home in us for the New Jerusalem.

Speaking of the mutual abiding, the Lord goes on to say in John 15:7, "If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you." In our practical experience, the Lord abides in us through His words abiding in us. *Words* here refers to the Lord's instant words, to the instant speaking of the indwelling, pneumatic Christ in our fellowship with Him. Christ abides in us through His words. If we reject His words, we reject Him, and as a result the mutual abiding is temporarily interrupted. But if we abide in the Lord and allow His words, His commands, to abide in us, He and we will be one in actuality and practicality.

A Life of Oneness, Fellowship, Love, Joy, Prayer, and Fruit-bearing

The issue of this oneness is a life of fellowship, love, joy,

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prayer, and fruit-bearing. Romans 12:4 and 5 say, "For just as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we who are many are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." Although the members are many, the Body of Christ is uniquely one, with all the members living in this blessed oneness. The same thought is expressed in 1 Corinthians 12:12: "For even as the body is one and

has many members, yet all the members of the body, being many, are one body, so also is the Christ." Here we have a revelation of the corporate Christ, composed of Christ Himself as the Head and the Body, the church, with its many members. The principle is the same with Christ as the vine and His believers as the branches. Just as there is one Body with many members, there is one vine with many branches, which are one with the vine and with one another. Together, the vine and the branches are one entity, one organism.

The branches of the vine enjoy a life of fellowship in the vine. By fellowship we mean unhindered participation in the flowing of the life which is in the vine and in all the branches. The faithful God has called us into this fellowship, "the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1:9). This fellowship is the flow of the divine life in the Body of Christ, the circulation of the life of the vine in and through the branches. The inner life of all the branches is one, for all participate in the same life, the life of the vine. In the Body of Christ there is no such thing as a member life, with each member having a life of its own apart from the Body and the other members. In the same principle, in the true vine there is no such thing as a branch life, with each branch having a life of its own apart from the vine and the other branches. The life of the vine is continually circulating through all the branches; therefore, as branches we need to maintain the fellowship with the vine and all the branches.

This fellowship is maintained by love and in love, which is God Himself. The life in the vine, the organism of the Triune God, is a life of love and in love. "As the Father has loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; even as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love" (John 15:9-10). The love with which the Father loves the Son is in us, the branches of the Son as the vine. As we abide in the Lord, we abide in His love, living and having our being in the Triune God of love. In this love and with this love, we love the Lord—the vine—and all the believers—the branches in

the vine. As we dwell in this love, receiving and transmitting it, we gradually come to realize that the Body of Christ is in fact building up itself in love (Eph. 4:16).

The life in the vine is also a life of joy. "These things I have spoken to you that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be made full" (John 15:11). As human beings made in God's image, we have a God-created need for enjoyment, and the Lord also needs and desires enjoyment (Eph. 1:5, 9; Phil. 2:13). This mutual need of enjoyment is fulfilled by the vine and in the vine, where we and the Lord share full, mutual joy. We enjoy Him as the vine, and He enjoys us as the branches. The joy we experience in the vine is manifold: it is the joy of the Lord's presence (Psa. 16:11), the joy of salvation (51:12a; Isa. 12:2-3; Luke 19:6; 15:5, 7), the joy of the Lord's word being in our heart (Jer. 15:16), the joy of consecration (Psa. 43:4), the joy of doing God's will (40:8), the joy of answered prayer (John 16:24), the joy of fruit-bearing (John 15:8, 11), the joy of living the kingdom life (Rom. 14:17), the joy of seeing Christ in resurrection (John 16:20-22; 20:20; Psa. 118:24), the joy in suffering for the Lord's interests (Matt. 5:11-12; Acts 5:41), and the joy with the Lord in His kingdom (Matt. 25:23). It is no wonder that Peter, a branch in the vine, could declare, "Whom having not seen, you love; into whom though not seeing Him at present, yet believing, you exult with joy that is unspeakable and full of glory" (1 Pet. 1:8).

Since the unsearchable riches (Eph. 3:8) of the vine are appropriated by prayer and since the function of the vine to bear fruit depends on prayer, the life of the branches is a life of prayer. Oneness, fellowship, love, and joy—all these are realized and experienced by prayer. Although this is marvelous, the prayer of the branches is particularly for the fulfillment of God's economy through fruit-bearing. "You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and I set you that you should go forth and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name, He may give you" (John 15:16). This asking, this praying, is not for ourselves but for God's economy. The more we abide in the vine, the more we will learn to utter this kind of prayer.

"If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you" (v. 7). When we abide in the Lord and in His love, and when He and His words abide in us, we are truly one with Him. Then His desire becomes our desire, His will becomes our will, His purpose becomes our purpose, and His prayer becomes our prayer. Because of this oneness of the branches with the vine, the branches may ask whatever they will, whatever they wish, and it will be done for them. The Father fulfills His desire by fulfilling the desire of the branches expressed in their prayer, for His desire

has become their desire through their abiding in the vine and their oneness with the vine.

This kind of prayer is related to fruit-bearing, which is the organic function of the vine. Again and again, the Lord speaks of fruit (vv. 2, 4, 5), that is, of the propagation and spreading, the multiplication and reproduction, of the divine life in the vine through the branches. "In this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit" (v. 8). For the Father to be glorified means that He is expressed. Through the fruit-bearing of the branches, the riches of the Father's life in the vine are expressed through the branches. This is the glorification of the Father in the Son as the vine with the many branches. This is the glorification of the Father in and through the corporate Christ, the universal, divine-human incorporation. This is the revelation of the vine—God's economy. AC

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