

“I am the Vine, and Ye are the Branches”

(John 15:1-11)

I have been told from one individual, who interpreted this passage as meaning a Christian “will bear fruit,” as the “orthodox” teaching. And due to its orthodoxy, the reason he holds to that interpretation. But does orthodoxy prove accuracy? For a long period of time before the Reformation Period, it was commonly held that baptism was a prerequisite for eternal life. Martin Luther, though admired for his works on rejecting the Catholic church, continued this belief set, even went as far as promoting the idea that

“the infant prior to baptism is possessed by the devil and a child of sin and wrath, while baptism delivers him from the devil, making him a child of God. Before the sacrament is administered the baptizer commands the unclean spirit to depart to make room for the Holy Spirit.”¹

¹ D. Patrick Ramsey, “Sola Fide Compromised? Martin Luther and the Doctrine of Baptism.” *Themelios: An International Journal for Students of Theological and Religious Studies* no. 2, vol 34, July 2009: 183.

So, while this was an orthodox teaching within the church, it is still found to be unbiblical teaching. This goes to show that interpretation is not necessarily correct, simply because it is orthodox. Therefore, orthodoxy does not indicate accuracy, but simply reveals what a commonly held view is...nothing more.

It is a fallacy to believe a word means the same thing each time it is used, regardless of how many ways it may be defined. This is a common reason for misinterpretation of many passages. In every language, context must determine interpretation of a statement or thought.

Suppose you found a letter, and as you were reading the author wrote “that was the largest *trunk* I’ve ever seen!” What image would you have in mind? Would you picture the trunk of a vehicle? A trunk that you store clothes or belongings inside? Maybe a tree trunk? How about an elephant’s trunk? You probably would have no idea what trunk was actually being referenced. You could make a guess, and remove the possibility of an elephant’s trunk, because it’s not every day one sees an elephant, at least not in America!

Now suppose that in the letter, you read that the author was explaining his trip to the zoo. Now you have a little more background as to what

possibly could have been referenced; but it still could be either of the four. Now suppose you read that the author was explaining his discussion with an elephant trainer, who was explaining the purpose, function, and anatomy of Bilbo the Elephant's trunk.

Now you could understand that the *trunk* being referenced in the letter is in relation to Bilbo's

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trunk. You were able to determine the proper meaning of the word because of the following context clues: 1) you determined all the possible meanings of the word *trunk*, and 2) you discovered the audience present within the letter, namely the elephant trainer. By determining the audience and the

topic of discussion, you are able to correctly determine the appropriate meaning of the word *trunk*, in this particular instance. Context clues are vitally important in understanding the correct interpretation of a homonym.

The above example is the same process necessary to appropriately exegete Scripture; however, many times one focuses on a single meaning of a word, regardless of the possible

range of meanings, and applies that meaning in all uses of the word throughout Scripture. One of the most common misuses of homonyms in Scripture is the word “fire.” It is commonly misinterpreted as always in reference to hell, or the lake of fire. But a studying the word “fire,” it can carry other meanings, apart from hell, such as: God’s physical, destruction/judgment (Philippians 1:19; Isaiah 33:12; Joel 2:3; 1 Corinthians 3:13), or His purification process (Isaiah 43:2; Jeremiah 6:29; 1 Peter 4:12).

Understanding the abovementioned principle of interpretation, let us examine John 15. The apostle John is the only one who records this account, so we have the full picture without having to reference another author. Let us paint the background of this scene: it is nighttime, after Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper (John 13), Judas Iscariot has departed to fulfill the sovereign work of God in betraying Jesus Christ (John 13:27-30), and then we see the conjunctive adverb “Therefore” (John 13:31). Once Judas departs, only the apostles (true believers) remain with Jesus Christ, Jesus remarks “Now is the Son of man glorified, and God is glorified in him” (John 13:31). There is no doubt as to who Jesus is speaking to at this moment as he calls them “little children” (John 13:33), a common reference to the children of God (John 1:12). Jesus’ conversation with the apostles, begins in John

13:31, but does not end until John 18:1, when they depart for the garden of Gethsemane.

John 15:1 Jesus uses the physical world to make a spiritual application, specifically a grape vine. Before going into the illustration, he explains two of his symbols: Jesus is the vine, and the Father is the Gardener. The common Lordship view on this passage is that those branches that do not abide in Jesus Christ, seeing as they are burned in the fire, a euphemism for hell, were not saved. This is interpreted as such due to Jesus' words in verse 6 that "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." Reasoning that Jesus is stating that an individual is cast into hell, i.e. "fire," should they not abide in the vine, proving themselves as "false professors" who were never "genuinely" saved. This Lordship view is coupled with verse 16, when Jesus said "I have chosen you, and ordained you that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and *that* your fruit should remain."

Lordship advocates teach that if a believer is "genuinely" saved, then he has no choice but to continue to abide and do good works, proclaiming *evidence of their salvation*. So, the assurance is yet again placed upon the necessity of performing works by abiding in Jesus Christ, as a

litmus test of true conversion through perseverance.

This cannot be the proper interpretation of Jesus' words for numerous reasons. As we have already identified, his audience is the apostles minus Judas Iscariot; he is speaking to believers. In verse 5, Jesus clearly points out that the branches he is speaking of in verse 6 are the apostles, "I am the vine, ye are the branches." Should one interpret this passage as a branch that does not abide in Jesus Christ is cast off into hell, would promote the doctrine that one can lose their salvation, which is found nowhere in Scripture.

What is the main point of this passage? Abiding in Jesus Christ; the word "abide" (Greek *menō*) is used 12 times in this passage (John 15:4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 16). Abiding brings the idea of dwelling with, fellowshiping, or communal relationship, and here Jesus is admonishing the apostles to dwell with, and maintain fellowship, and communal relationship with him. He explains that if they are obedient to his commandments, they will abide in his love (v10). And that if they abide in him, they will "bringeth forth much fruit" (v5a). Jesus even goes so far to say that if the apostles do not abide in him, they can do nothing (v5b). Finally, unbelievers are never mentioned as being able to abide in Jesus without first having a saving faith.

Unbelievers are unreconciled to God, and apart from His fellowship, standing as enemies (Romans 5:10; Colossians 1:21).

Two verses must be dealt with to maintain a true interpretation, verses 2, “Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away,” and the aforementioned verse 6. What is interesting about verse 2 are four letters, two words “*in me*,” [italics mine]. It was determined that the branches Jesus is referring to are the believing, saved, apostles (v5), and there in verse 2 he says that it is possible for a believing apostle to be taken away. What does he mean by the phrase “taketh away?” Many unfortunately believe this phrase speaks of an individual that does not bear fruit, is cast off into hell, either not being able to work for salvation, or not producing the fruit as evidence of salvation. But, if Jesus is speaking to the eleven apostles, and has assured them they are clean, then that interpretation does not hold theological water.

Another interpretation of “taketh away,” is actually to *prop up*; the Greek word used here, *airō*, means to “lift up, or elevate.” Dr. John Niemelä reveals this agricultural fact through written records of Pliny the Younger, who describes this common practice in the first centuries; that vine-dressers would prop up “unfruitful branches onto stones to hold them above ground, so they would

bear grapes the next year.”² Applying to believers, Jesus’ phrase was assurance to them that when they needed support, had doubts, trials, and persecutions, that they would be elevated, propped up, assisted by God to be able to bear the fruit they have been called to bear. During these troublesome times, this was God’s message of mercy, not judgment.

Finally, we arrive to verse 6, in reference to the branches being thrown “into the fire.” Going back to the illustration of the letter written about a visit to the zoo, we see that every word should be viewed through a contextual lens. For if we would argue that the fire is hell, and the branches being thrown there are people who have not borne fruit, then we wrestle with losing salvation, or maintaining our salvation by our works. However, when we see the other possible meanings for *fire*, we see that it may be in reference to God’s physical judgment upon an individual, or nation, not necessarily eternal. And in keeping with the viticulture illustration Jesus is using, it is reported that branches that have dried up, not able to remain in the vine, are taken down and cast into a fire, burned up because they were no longer useful.

² John Niemela, *Jesus Props Up Unfruitful Believers* (Grace in Focus Articles: March 2014), <https://faithalone.org/grace-in-focus-articles/unfruitful-believers/>.

In similar analogy, this fits neatly with Scripture where believers are admonished to “be careful to maintain good works” (Titus 3:8), to abide in the vine so as to be able to produce fruit, or good works (John 15:4-5), and that our fruit bearing is to glorify our God in heaven (John 15:8). However, should a Christian continually not abide in Jesus Christ, not remain in fellowship and communion, and become the prodigal, God issues stern warnings about the life ahead (Hebrews 10:26-27; 1 John 5:16-17).

So, this illustration has nothing to do with eternal life, or the perseverance of “genuine” faith, but everything to do with communion, fellowship with God (i.e. abiding). Jesus encourages the apostles, moments before his arrest in the garden of Gethsemane, of the way they can remain fruitful and joyful, in the midst of their upcoming persecution and loss. The principle of abiding brings peace to the Christian, that no matter what circumstance one is faced with, maintaining communion with Jesus Christ, will allow for joy and the process of fruit bearing; then people will be able to “see our good works and glorify our God in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

*this is an excerpt from “Investigating Lordship Salvation”
by Daniel Weierbach*