

THE WAY OF FAITH, PART 13: THRIVING ON THE VINE

John 15:1-11 (NASB)

David Bruce Linn

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The church in the West is showing the telltale signs of a failure to thrive. Europe and Great Britain are a foregone conclusion. A Church of England congregation in Oxford at which I worshiped once was first built in about the year 1100. Saint Cross Church had been in use almost the whole time, with various changes in affiliation and with structural improvements over the years. Realize that Oxford University is so tightly packed with people that you can barely walk down the street. There were only a few people in communion there at the time, and now it has officially become a museum.

By contrast, I stumbled upon a Methodist church where I worshiped in Cambridge which was still vibrant with spiritual life. It was neither fancy nor historic, there were some empty seats, but I could feel the pulsation of spiritual energy beneath the superficial appearance. Of course, Cambridge is just as full of mostly-empty historic churches as Oxford. More Muslims attend mosque each week in Great Britain than Christians who attend church.

The statistics in America are better but still declining. The majority of people who call themselves born-again never attend a church. Recently a Christian rapper produced a video that went viral on the internet with a smash against organized faith. It tapped into a very powerful current sentiment, that he loved Jesus but hated religion—hated the church. Of course church is difficult. It's full of recovering sinners, including you! Apart from the logical inconsistency of hating something of which you are a part, this is a remarkably easy way to make for yourself a spirituality where you do not have to do anything.

And so I return to the Methodists with the little thriving church amidst the spiritual torpor of modern Cambridge University. In the late 1700s the very term "Methodist" was a smash against John Wesley and his group who believed that the way of faith requires believers to do something—to persist in the practices which Christ and the Apostles commanded. How silly of them to think that the one who knows the word of God, for example, is the one who...wait for it: studies it diligently.

America has millions of evangelicals who say they are born again, but don't read their Bibles much, don't pray much, don't share their faith, and only come to worship in church on an irregular basis. Entire church growth methods have come to replace the practices of growth in grace to adapt to this trend. Perhaps these leaders think: *If people hate the church, then we'll just design a Christian fellowship around those feelings.* In other words, if people are not thriving in Christ, then we'll create a pattern of church where they can participate without thriving.

At this moment you should hear John and Charles Wesley screaming. There is a reason why England and America are dotted with more Methodist churches than you can count. These men and the Christians who launched Methodism with them had embraced straightforward Biblical practices which cause individual believers and believing bodies to thrive on the vine the way that Christ explained to his disciples in John's fifteenth chapter.

STAY CONNECTED WITH CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH

Jesus said: **"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned"** (John 15:1-6).

The core concept is that Jesus is the connection we need, and God is working to keep us all spiritually healthy. John Wesley took this message into many pulpits in the Church of England in the late eighteenth century. Then, as now, there were many people who were religious and yet were not connected to the life of Christ. This is the kind of religion that got smashed in the music video I mentioned earlier. Jesus himself condemned false religion—but not religion itself. There is such a thing as true religion, and the *sine qua non* of it is a connection to Christ through which we draw the life of God.

The first method of the first Methodists was to preach the gospel relentlessly and in every possible venue. At first Wesley limited his preaching to established pulpits, but then his friend, George Whitfield, began to tell him about his experiences in outdoor preaching. Surely this was a *kairos* moment in the life of Great Britain, for Whitfield was drawing hundreds, thousands, and eventually tens of thousands to listen to his preaching in open fields. At first Wesley rejected that venue as unseemly, but finally he tried it and concluded that if God was willing to bring professions of faith in the fields of the monarchy that he was willing to preach there. He established a schedule of circuit preaching there and later in America which was prodigious. He rode tirelessly and preached passionately. If this is a human method then it is also one used by Christ and his apostles!

And he preached the necessary connection of every person to both Christ and his church. Wesley had no interest in starting a new segment of Christianity. He did not provide the ordinances of the church in the fields. Rather, he sought, in his own words, "to spread Scriptural holiness over the land." By that he meant for people to come to Christ in true redemption, attend their own churches, and participate in personal and corporate sanctification. By this example of a "method" you can see that there are no quirky, tricky, secret procedures by which he promoted church growth. His methods were straightforwardly Biblical.

That is why it is so perplexing to me as a pastor when I cannot convince believers to use the obvious means of grace to maintain their connection to the flow of life from Christ. At least read your Bible, pray about your needs, and come to church! Yet there are many who claim the name of Christ and cannot even rise to that minimum standard. Jesus' words in John's gospel draw a set of stark realities for people in that condition. If we do not display the indispensable mark of spiritual life by bearing spiritual fruit—proving that we are connected to the vine—we are considered spiritually dead by God himself.

Christ gives a frightening picture following this metaphor to its logical conclusion. There is an omnipotent heavenly Vine Dresser walking the lines of grape vines. He is pruning the living branches

so they will bear more fruit. He takes note of branches with no fruit, snips them off, throws them on the ground, gathers them up, and burns them. We may worry that he is stealing from some people the opportunity for life. No. We may see the destruction of these branches as a great tragedy. No again. The tragedy of spiritual death has already occurred. The time to weep for dead branches came much sooner, when it became clear that they had no intention of staying connected to the only source of spiritual life. The Vine Dresser is simply taking note of it and dealing with it accordingly.

BE ALIGNED WITH THE LIFE DIRECTION OF CHRIST

What practices display the difference between the live and dead branches? Among the foremost of these is becoming aligned with the life direction of God, as Christ explained: "**If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you**" (John 15:7). At first glance this is an encouragement to prayer. What a great opportunity Christ gives us! Pagans throw prayers up into a mute sky, offer their worldly goods, sacrifice their sons and daughters—and get nothing but silence and anguish.

By contrast, those who are abide in the vine have the promise of prayers answered by a loving God who is their Father. But observe carefully the dynamic of prayer. It is not enough simply to believe that we should pray and that we need answers from God. The prayers of the person who is thriving on the vine are shaped by the words of Christ. And this is much more than an intellectual matter. Our entire beings become shaped by the truth in a dynamic way as we take it into our souls.

The alternative is a pattern of prayer that will flame out eventually. God is not interested in anything which does not align with his purposes, so we can pray for these things but they will never happen. If we keep praying for things which don't happen we will eventually quit. The promise here is that as we become shaped by the truth of Christ's word, we then begin to live and pray in alignment with the great purposes of God. Prayers from the place of alignment with God are always answered in the positive, because our wishes have become his wishes.

This leads to two obvious methods which are always lacking in declining populations of Christians: devotional Bible study and personal prayer. These were the kinds of practices which got the early Methodists their name as a supposed insult. But who was doing the insulting—Christians who had no desire for Bible study and prayer? Jesus had a word for such: "**Follow Me, and allow the dead to bury their own dead**" (Matthew 8:22). Jesus Christ was a man of the word and prayer. Whose example are you going to follow? Study and prayer bring alignment with the life purposes of God.

EMBRACE TRANSFORMATION BY THE LIFE OF GOD

Jesus then hits us with another non-negotiable of spiritual life: "**My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples**" (John 15:8). God is glorified and our authenticity as Christ's disciples is confirmed by our bearing of spiritual fruit.

And what you do about this non-negotiable of spiritual vitality is based on understanding the definition of fruit-bearing. The most general explanation for fruit is any outward evidence of the life of God in our lives. We learn about the spiritual fruit of the Holy Spirit as aspects of Christian character, as Paul wrote to the Galatians: "**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law**" (Galatians 5:22-23). The method of fruit bearing in this respect is that we embrace the transforming work of God on our

inner selves. This is hard work. Change can only come by the power of God, but we must show up for the effort.

C. S Lewis wrote: "I remember Christian teachers telling me long ago that I must hate a bad man's actions but not hate the bad man: or, as they would say, hate the sin but not the sinner. ...I used to think this a silly, straw-splitting distinction: how could you hate what a man did and not hate the man? But years later it occurred to me that there was one man to whom I had been doing this all my life -- namely myself. However much I might dislike my own cowardice or conceit or greed, I went on loving myself. There had never been the slightest difficulty about it. In fact the very reason why I hated the things was that I loved the man. Just because I loved myself, I was sorry to find that I was the sort of man who did those things." Transformation begins with hating our sins and embracing change.

Then there is the fruit related to spiritual gifts. Our method is to take the empowerment, truth, and desires of the Lord and do something with them. Furthermore, there is the fruit which is reckoned in souls saved. As we share Christ personally we become a lighthouse shining in the darkness by which people can find their way home to God.

Fruit is proof of life. So bear fruit—do something! You will glorify God and prove the reality of your faith.

DO EVERYTHING IN AND BY DIVINE LOVE

In words so profound that they strain our capacity of understanding, Christ then pointed to the central motive of the believer: "**Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love**" (John 15:9). The Holy Trinity begins the sequence of love permeating the kingdom of God as the Father loves the Son. Christ then loves us with an everlasting love which beggars words.

Our action in response to that point is to open up and receive the love of God. Do not imagine that everyone automatically does this, or that you have done it fully! I cannot tell you how sad it makes me as a pastor when I realize that someone with a Christian testimony lets me know, usually by unspoken behaviors, that they are not going to receive love from me. That experience for me is just a small taste of what it must be like for the Father who is love itself. So do something—receive it! God loves you.

And then abide in it, stick with it, stay in it. Immense things are at stake. The validity of everything we do for Christ is on the line. It will do no good to follow the Bible in ministry if we are not motivated by the central motivation of God. Paul wrote: "**...If I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing**" (1 Corinthians 13:3). Abiding in the vine means that we do everything in and by divine love.

This was central to the launch of Methodism under John Wesley, who wrote: "A Methodist is one who has the love of God shed abroad in his heart." And having received such love, does something with it: loves others. Thriving on the vine looks like love. A key part of early Methodism was the expression of practical love by coming to the aid of the poor and sick. It was a relentless part of Wesley's teaching: If you don't show up to help those in need, you really aren't loving.

PERSEVERE IN FAITH AND PRACTICE

Also central to the practices of early Methodism was perseverance in faith and practice together. Jesus put it this way: **"If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love"** (John 15:10). Abiding in Christ's love has an emotional component, to be sure. But here Christ wants us all to know just how practical this needs to be. Faith believes in the commandments of the Lord and puts them into practice in the spirit of love for him. The New Age movement falls into this error. Unitarianism does as well. It is useless to say that you love God but you will not listen to what he says or follow it.

This conviction powerfully shaped the Methodist movement. As powerful as the mass evangelism was, sober historians are now convinced that most of the solid life change came through the societies and bands organized by the Wesley brothers. It was in these contexts of closer fellowship that regular Bible study took place, intensive prayer occurred, and works of mercy were organized. It was in the many small groups that lay people were released to exercise their gifts. It was a new opportunity for many women to express their gifts in concrete ministries. This is where growth in holy living found fertile soil. Many people were led to Christ in these small groups.

That's why they ended up being called the Methodists. The critique should rather be toward those Christians who were taken aback by a bunch of people believing straightforward Bible teaching and putting it into practice.

And so I ask: Are you a methodist—small "m"? Are you the kind of Christian who says: "I can't just sit here, I have to do something?" If you are, I advise you to do the straightforward practices found in God's word. If the church today ends up as a cautionary tale of decline, it will not be because we failed to employ every clever idea under the sun.

The way of faith is passed by the practices of faith—methods! This is like saying that babies thrive by the method of nursing. Many who claim the name of Christ today say that they do not need to nurse, rest in their cribs, or snuggle in the arms of God. If the church of our time declines into disaster, it will be because we abandoned the main things.

RECEIVE THE JOY OF THE LORD AND PASS IT ON

The final method in all this is found in verse 11, as Christ said: **"These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full"** (John 15:11). This is the *magna carta* of joy, the divine permission to seek rejoicing as a way of life. If your Christian faith is dull and saddens your heart, it's your own fault! Dump that error and go for the joy of the Lord! And then your joy moves outward from you and touches everyone in your path. Now that's a method that everyone will approve!

The way of faith teaches us that we thrive personally and as churches only on the vine. And when we do that, fruit we much! Do an honest review of your methods. If they stink, ask God for help to find something better. He is eager to see his life pulsing through you and producing the fullness of joy. Don't let anyone or anything stop you from it.

[Much of the above information about Methodism was taken from an unpublished paper by Lacey Warner at Duke Divinity School, "Spreading Scriptural Holiness: Theology and Practices of Early Methodism for the Contemporary Church", <http://divinity.duke.edu/oxford/docs/2007papers/2007-7Warner.pdf>]