

NEW WINE FROM THE VINE

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If you're a coffee aficionado, you are familiar with what are called "single-origin" beans—beans from a single region, or a single farm, or even a single field of a farm—an effort to isolate and capture a particular flavor.

Some vintners, who also believe that the *source* is equally as important as the *process*, try to cultivate a particular wine flavor by starting with "single-origin" vines.

Isn't that an interesting idea: the source is as important as the process?

Some people imagine that the "source" (where people come from, their family stock) is more important than any process of life. But "good stock" doesn't always turn out well. And "bad stock" doesn't always turn out poorly.

In the Kingdom of God on earth, the Church of Jesus Christ, origins are far less important than the process. "Go, and make disciples from all nations," is our mandate. Every origin is to be included. This Good News is for everyone, regardless of their genetic, ethnic, social, physiological, economic, political, or educational origin.

It's not about your earthly beginnings; it's all about the process—what we call discipleship, or spiritual growth. And the measure of spiritual growth is not always apparent (seen on the outside). How would you measure someone's life, or your own life—their progress as a person, their fruitfulness?

Some fruit may be seen outwardly, in terms of accomplishments, recognition, influence. But the greatest, most enduring fruit, is the inward variety, which is more difficult to measure, and, in a paradoxical manner, often most prolific when outward circumstance and appearance are at their worst.

Consider, for a moment, the political career of Abraham Lincoln. Measured from the outside, in terms of progress and achievements, one wonders how he made it.

- 1831 - Lost his job
- 1832 - Defeated in run for Illinois State Legislature
- 1833 - Failed in business
- 1834 - Elected to Illinois State Legislature
- 1835 - Sweetheart died

- 1836 - Had nervous breakdown
- 1838 - Defeated in run for Illinois House Speaker
- 1843 - Defeated in run for nomination for U.S. Congress
- 1846 - Elected to Congress
- 1848 - Lost re-nomination
- 1849 - Rejected for land officer position
- 1854 - Defeated in run for U.S. Senate
- 1856 - Defeated in run for nomination for Vice President
- 1858 - Again defeated in run for U.S. Senate
- 1860 - Elected President of the United States

Through many trials, setbacks, and stumbling, Lincoln persisted. Yet if we look just at his achievements, the progress is remarkable:

- Elected to State Legislature
- Elected to National Congress
- Elected as President

A question for you today: Would Lincoln's successes be as remarkable without the long string of losses and failures in between?

Are mountain peaks even conceivable without valleys?

I don't mean to suggest that a person's origin has *no* bearing on her future. It absolutely does. But we need to be sure that we're considering origin—beginning, genesis, creation.

We may be inclined to think of a person's birth family or birth condition as their origin. Was it a loving, nurturing family? Was he healthy, with all of his limbs and faculties?

The Bible suggests we look all the way back to the beginning—not just of one life, but of the race.

Genesis 1:26 NLT Then God said, "Let Us make human beings in Our image, to be like Us.

²⁷ So God created human beings in His own image. In the image of God He created them; male and female He created them.

This is why the Gospel (the Good News about Christ) is for everyone, because everyone was made to be like God—to be in relationship with God and have close fellowship with Him.

Then sin happened. Loss. Failure. Hardship. Lots of them.

But that's *process*. Part of God's formation of our souls. And even if it's difficult or unpleasant or not what we wish it would be, if we lean on the Lord—put our confidence in the *Processor*—He will build a life of significance.

No matter where you've come from, no matter what you've come through, no matter how much baggage you've accumulated along the way, the day you transfer your hope and trust to Jesus Christ, is the day you get a second *beginning*, a new birth, a new start. And God is able to make all things in your life—past, present, and future—contribute to His meaningful plan for your life.

Romans 8:28 NLT *We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.*

Christ has given you a new point of "origin." Our first point of origin was the image of God in each one of us. But sin has marred and obscured that likeness, so now Jesus gives us a "new birth," a new point of origin, restoring the image of God, which is Christ in us—Emmanuel.

And, by the way, once you have started your journey with Jesus Christ, no matter how many setbacks you encounter along the way, or failures on your part to keep in step with Him, you can *always* go back to the beginning—that is, you can always renew your relationship with Him and start again. He has ample mercy and forgiveness and grace for you to move forward again, starting right now.

Let me talk with you about moving forward with Christ. It doesn't happen automatically. You may have started well, but that doesn't guarantee you will end well. You must engage in the process of spiritual formation, you must become a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Coming to church is a part of that process, but it's not nearly enough to sustain or grow your faith.

Why would anyone want to remain a spiritual baby all their life? Who would want to eat nothing but milk and Pablum every day? That's fine for your spiritual infancy, but you must grow up. And to do that, you need to learn to use a fork and knife, and lift that fork to your mouth, and eat what's set before you.

Kingdom Life is a challenge that calls for courage and persistence.

God said through the prophet Jeremiah,

Jeremiah 12:5 NLT *"If you have raced on foot against men and they have worn you out, how will you be able to compete with horses? And if you feel secure only in safe and open country, how will you manage in the thick undergrowth along the Jordan River?"*

In other words, if your faith is knocked off course by ordinary trials, such as many people experience, how will you prevail in really difficult circumstances? You have to work at it, improve your spiritual skills, and develop your fellowship with others of like faith.

There are many ways to practice your faith and many aspects of its growth, but there is just one *essential* ingredient for your progress. To learn what it is, we must listen carefully to the words of Jesus in the fifteenth chapter of John.

John 15:1 NLT "I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. ³ You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. ⁴ Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me.

Because of your faith, you have been grafted to "the True Vine," Jesus Christ. That was your new birth—a new start, connecting you to the sinless, undamaged vine (Jesus).

But every vine, to be productive, needs a gardener. And that means a lot of cutting. Cutting *off* the fruitless branches, and cutting *back* the fruitful ones. Let's be clear: the aim of all of this cutting is greater fruitfulness of the vine.

Jesus is the Vine; we are the branches. For Jesus to achieve the purpose for which the Father sent Him—to seek and to save all who are lost, to establish His Kingdom, and build His Church—our lives (yours and mine) have to be reshaped (pruned) by the Word of God.

If we don't allow the Scriptures to shape the way we live, we will not bear the kind of fruit that God is looking for. If we don't let the teachings of Jesus adjust our thinking and mold our behavior, we will not "remain in Him"—we will not feel close to Him, we will lose our connection with the Church, we will lose our sense of Kingdom purpose, we will lose our way.

"Remain in me" is a command. "Unless you remain in me" underscores our responsibility to our Commander.

Is there a place for "remain in me" in your thinking? Does "remain in me" command attention in your life? Surely it will require engagement and effort. Can you feel the burn? Do you break a sweat? Does it feel like work? Then you're engaged. But if not... perhaps it's time to begin again.

John 15:4 NLT For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me.

And here's the rest of this passage:

⁵ “Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. ⁷ But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted! ⁸ When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father.

New wine requires a fruitful vine. A fruitful vine requires living branches that are vitally connected to the vine.

A statement of belief is not a vital—living, life-giving—connection to the vine.

Church membership—if it’s only a name on the books and not a growing engagement with others—is not a connection to the vine.

Ritual religion—even if the rituals are prescribed and appropriate—is not a vital connection to the vine.

To remain in Christ, in this vital sense, means to remain in submission to His leadership, to follow His lead, to stay in close conversation with Him, and to let His words influence the way you think and act.

Those thoughts, those actions—influenced by the words of Christ and led by the Spirit of Christ—are the true fruit of discipleship, of sonship. They are the marks of the Father in your life. They are the likeness of the Son in you. To the glory of God.

What decision do you need to make right now, in view of this truth?

Do you need to make a new start? Do you need to have a new birth? Do you need to be grafted into Jesus Christ by an act of faith today?

Perhaps you have lost your way and you need to return to your spiritual root in Christ. If you feel your fruitlessness, don’t wait for another pruning. Return to Him today. Choose to follow Him with a fresh commitment.

Draw near to Him, and He will draw near to you. God speaks to those who listen, and He listens to those who pray.