



TONY HORSHALL

Foreword by Steve Brady

A
FRUITFUL
LIFE

Abiding in Christ as seen in John 15



INTRODUCTION

In this opening decade of the 21st century, the church in Britain and other parts of the Western world appears to be going through a major transition. Perhaps later generations will look back on this period and see more clearly exactly how significant a turning point the start of the new millennium proved to be for the church. For those of us living through this time of change, however, the shape of things to come is not yet clear. We know what isn't working, but we are less sure about what should take its place.

Changes in society, and the movement away from the certainties of modernity into the relativism of the postmodern era, inevitably affect the church. It is hard for us to hold to moral absolutes when, for most people, truth has become personal and individualized. Pastoral issues have become more complicated, while ethical situations that were once straightforward are now increasingly confusing and complex. It is not easy for the church to navigate through the moral maze of today.

Furthermore, we are living now in what is called a 'post-Christian' society, where the church and Christian teaching do not have the place of influence they used to have. Indeed, the church is increasingly marginalized and seen as irrelevant to life today. To reach a post-Christian generation, which sees Christianity as having failed, is much more difficult than winning pre-Christian generations, for whom the gospel message was splendidly new and relevant.

In addition, our society is now definitely multi-faith, with most of the world religions firmly established and religious tolerance the accepted norm. In a pluralistic world, Christianity is seen as only one of several possible options. No wonder, then, that the materialistic and pleasure-seeking pagans of our day give little thought to the church and what it offers.

Numerical decline has affected all the mainstream denominations, with a disturbing exodus of young people. It is common to speak of the ‘greying’ of the church. Of course there are exceptions to this trend, especially among some of the black churches and a few potential suburban mega-churches, but these are the exceptions. For most congregations and church leaders, this is a time of struggle. There is a lack of confidence in the gospel, a confusion about how we apply Christian standards in a world that has none, and a weariness from working hard for little result.

All is not lost, however, for God has not abandoned his church—and will not do so. Even where there is death, new life is already emerging. New ways of doing church are springing up as bold pioneers recognize that we must change or die. It is common to speak of the ‘emerging’ church. Searching questions are being asked. What does it mean to be church in the 21st century? How do we repackage the unchanging gospel for a postmodern generation? What forms and structures will be effective to reach post-Christian Britain?

If we are to win new people for Christ and arrest the numerical decline and drift from our churches, it is obvious that something radical needs to happen. We cannot bury our heads in the sand. Change must take place, and fundamental change too, which gets right to the heart of the matter. We must look at how we do church, and somehow get back to the essence of what church is really all about.

I believe we also need to take a step further back, and ask an even more fundamental question. It is this: how do we live the Christian life? It is one thing to change the external forms and structures of church, but unless we rediscover what it actually means to live the Christian life, I fear that in another ten years our new forms of church will prove just as inadequate as the old ones. The real question is, ‘*What does it mean to be a Christian?*’

One of the most fundamental reasons why people leave church is because they have never understood how to live the Christian life. It seems too difficult, and it doesn’t seem to work. Organized religion,

with its structures and hierarchies, its buildings and its programmes, has somehow managed to strangle the life out of a living relationship with Jesus Christ. It has all become too complicated, and the simplicity of knowing Jesus has been lost. Burdened with rules and expectations, and weary from trying hard, we have nothing of vitality to offer to a lost world. If we are not thrilled with church, why should anyone else be? If we are not excited by our faith, how can we pass it on to others, especially in such a hostile and unsupportive environment?

The first believers also lived in a hostile world, but they had a contagious enthusiasm about their faith. ‘We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard’ was their testimony (Acts 4:20, KJV). They were not perfect, of course, and the New Testament epistles reflect many of the problems they encountered, but they did have life—and that is what we seem to be lacking.

This is why I believe we need to rediscover what it means to live the Christian life, and why, in this book, I want to examine again the teaching of Jesus in John 15. Here the Master is preparing his disciples for his departure, getting them ready for when they will face a hostile world on their own. He describes for them how they can be effective and fruitful in their witness and service. He tells them how to live the life he has planned for them. Just as his instructions revolutionized their lives, so a proper understanding of what he is saying can revolutionize our lives also.

The heart of his teaching is not difficult. Through the allegory of the vine and its branches, Jesus points his disciples to a life of union with himself. It is, in fact, impossible to live the Christian life apart from him. He is to be the source of our life, and just as a branch remains in the vine and receives its life from the vine, so we are to remain in him. This is no mystical, pietistic teaching, but something that lies at the heart of the gospel message. The only way we can live the Christian life is to allow Jesus to live his life in us and through us. If we can get back to this basic principle, we can discover again the excitement and joy of Christian living, which will not only rekindle our own enthusiasm but can make us effective

once again in reaching others. It can put new wine into the new wineskins (Mark 2:22) that are so desperately needed at the present time.

It is my desire, through these pages, to point you back to the simplicity of a life lived in relationship with Jesus Christ. A life of intimacy, of abiding in him, is the source and spring of all other activity and endeavour. The branch bears fruit because it abides in the vine. It is the natural outcome, an inevitable process of nature. We need not fear that by emphasizing intimacy we will become ineffective. True intimacy will always move us into God-initiated activity, and that is what produces fruit that lasts. Frenzied activity alone will not make a difference to our world. It is God-directed work that will prove effective, and that comes as we learn to spend time with him, abiding in Christ.



*We like rules:
You know where you are
With a good law.*

*We like to accuse:
To say: 'You stepped over
The drawn line.'*

*Relationship
Does not have rules—
Just intimacy:*

*Christ in me,
His life in mine.
Forget the rules,
Just live.*

BARBARA PARSONS

LIVING WITH A PURPOSE

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last (v. 16).

This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples (v. 8).

Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in California, has done more than anyone else in recent times to call believers to purposeful living. Through his books, *The Purpose Driven Church* and *The Purpose Driven Life*, he has reminded us that we are here on earth for a purpose, and that our lives only have meaning as we discover what that purpose is and begin to order our lives accordingly.¹

Warren leaves us in no doubt about what he considers to be the purpose of life. It is to glorify God. We were made by God, but also for God, and life is about letting God use us for his purpose. Many things can motivate us in life, but according to Warren the greatest purpose of all is to live to bring glory to God. This is what we were made for, and it is only in fulfilling this fundamental reason for our existence that we find meaning and satisfaction. A purpose-driven life, therefore, is a life that is guided, controlled and directed by God's purposes.

This seems to be exactly what Jesus has in mind as he speaks with his disciples towards the end of his earthly ministry. He is preparing them for the work he has called them to do, and reminds them first of all that he was the one who chose them. As he began his ministry, he carefully chose a small group of men to be with him and to learn from him. These were people whom he hand-picked,

and with whom he shared his life. He took the initiative by inviting them to become his disciples, calling them simply but radically to ‘follow me’ (see, for example, Mark 1:16–20).

To this invitation they had responded with enthusiasm, and they had spent almost three years with their master, listening to his teaching, watching him at work. They had seen his miracles and experienced his power at first hand. They had pondered his parables, and when they could not understand he had talked to them privately, explaining things more clearly. Sometimes he had rebuked them for their lack of faith, but gradually they had come to see that he really was the Son of God, and the impact of his message began to change their characters and transform their lives. Now he begins to unfold to them the purpose behind their apprenticeship: that they might go into the world and bear fruit for God.

Jesus had thought long and hard before he designated exactly who should be among his closest followers. Only after much prayer did he call to him the Twelve who would become the foundation of what he wanted to accomplish, and who, following his death, would be the basis on which the church would develop (see Mark 3:13–14). These are the ones he is now addressing, reminding them that he has chosen and prepared them for this very task, and that he is about to send them out to put into practice all that he has taught them. The whole thrust of his teaching here is to show them exactly how they will be able to make an impact in the world.

While these words were spoken and directed specifically to that original band of twelve, in a general sense they are spoken to any who consider themselves to be disciples of Jesus, for the pattern of discipleship now is exactly the same. The only reason that any of us comes to faith is that God breaks into our lives and, in his divine initiative, calls us to himself. We have also been chosen, and chosen for a reason—that our lives might glorify God.

The purpose too remains the same. We are sent into the world of the 21st century to make other disciples, to bear fruit for God in our own society and culture. He ‘appoints’ us (literally, ‘assigns’ or ‘allocates’ us) to specific tasks. The fact that he has called us is the

guarantee that he will enable us to fulfil his purpose. If he has called us to bear fruit, then he will show us how to bear fruit in our lives. We have a destiny, a divinely constructed purpose, and one of the most exciting things in the world is to begin to discover, and to live in, that destiny.

Of course it is possible for us to live for some other purpose. Because life only makes sense when we have a purpose, people usually find something to live for and to build their lives around. The sad thing is that they often choose to live for a small purpose, rather than the grand purpose for which God made us in the first place. So it is that many people (and believers can get caught in this trap as well) tend to live for themselves, often with the pursuit of happiness and material gain as their chief goals in life. God may be a welcome addition to their striving for contentment, a useful ally in a hostile world, and a kind of insurance policy against unhappiness; but basically they are living for their own purpose rather than for God's.

It is only when we begin to see the shallowness and emptiness of living for ourselves that we can begin to step out into the much bigger purpose that God has for us, and discover the destiny for which we were made. It is an amazing thought that the God who knows me intimately actually shaped and formed me with his purpose in mind, and that my greatest fulfilment in life comes as I embrace his will. It is then that I find my own true happiness, which lies in serving God and bringing his life to other people. In other words, it is my destiny to bear fruit.

What exactly do we mean by 'fruit'? My definition of fruit is simple: it is *the outward expression of the life of God within*. It can take many forms, as we shall see in the next chapter, but essentially we bear fruit for God when we allow Christ to express his life through us. We bear fruit when we allow our faith not only to work in us, but also to have an impact on the people around us in our homes and families, in our work settings and social relationships, in our local communities and in society at large. Such fruit is the result of God working in us and through us. It is not something we produce

by our own efforts or good intentions, but something that has its origin in God himself. This is why it is fruit that glorifies God, and also why it is fruit that lasts.

Some years ago, the church where I was pastor invited a team of young people from Sweden for a week of outreach. We reasoned that a team of blonde Scandinavians would have a big impact in our small mining town, and that this would present many good opportunities to share the gospel. They certainly had an impact, but not quite in the way we expected. Their evangelistic style was very aggressive, and as they went out into the town to witness they confronted people head-on with the claims of Christ. At the end of their time with us, they claimed to have led almost a hundred people to faith.

Sadly, we discovered as we followed up on the names and addresses they had given us that not one of these 'conversions' was genuine. Many had given false names and addresses. Some denied ever making such a decision; others said they were no longer interested. Not one person ever came to church as a result of that outreach. It had borne a kind of fruit, but not fruit that would last, largely I believe because it had been accomplished by human persuasion and not by the power of God.

Such a negative experience should not be allowed to dampen our enthusiasm or to lessen our expectation, however. It is God's intention that we bear much fruit, so we should expect a lot and not be satisfied with a little. A disciple is someone who takes the claims of Christ seriously and seeks to apply his teaching in their daily life. One of the ways we demonstrate the reality of our discipleship is by the fact that our lives do impact other people for good. If we are truly disciples of Christ, and if we truly abide in him, we shall indeed have the joy of seeing our lives make a difference.

When this happens, God is glorified, and that is the chief goal of any disciple. It glorifies God when ordinary believers allow God to take them in their weakness and inadequacy and work through them to the blessing of other people. 'We have this treasure in jars of clay,' says Paul, 'to show that this all-surpassing power is from

God and not from us' (2 Corinthians 4:7). The more we are aware of our inability to bear fruit by ourselves, the more we depend upon God, and the more it can be seen that any fruit comes from him, and not from us. The fact that God can take weak and sinful human beings and fulfil his purposes for the world through them is something that amazes both angels and demons, and brings glory to God. It is also wonderfully satisfying to be used by God to bless others, especially when we are aware of our own inadequacy.

Andrew Murray was a minister in South Africa over a century ago. He was a great devotional writer with a passion for those without Christ. In his little book on John 15 he makes an impassioned plea for his readers to grasp the fact that it is God's will that their lives should bear fruit, and much fruit at that. He urges them not to be the kind of disciples who are not interested in service, and whose lives produce little, but rather to be those who take the words 'much fruit' seriously and ask God that it may be so in their lives. 'The world is perishing, the church is failing, Christ's cause is suffering,' he says. 'Though you scarce see what it implies or how it is to come, say to Him that you are his branch to bear much fruit; that you are ready to be His disciple in His own meaning of the word.'²

We need this same passion in our hearts in our own day and generation. The need is just as great, probably even greater, for those who will take discipleship seriously and make themselves available for God to fulfil his purpose through their lives.



*Under a bed,
The child found a dainty comb:
Dull and dusty
Destined for the boot-sale.
She kept it
Because she liked it.*

*The expert,
Eyeglass in hand
Smiled with pleasure.
'This comb is old'
He said,
'And these pretty stones
Are diamonds.'*

*'It was made
For a royal queen
To be worn in her hair,
To be marvelled at
And envied.
Where did you say you found it?'*

*And you, child of God,
Were made for the King,
Chosen to bring Him glory,
For a royal destiny
And the highest calling,
Not to be lost
In the dust of small purposes.*

BARBARA PARSONS

A FRUITFUL LIFE

Abiding in Christ as seen in John 15

'The need of the hour is for Spirit-filled, Christ-centred, Father-glorifying, Bible-based, fruitful individuals and churches. This book can only help towards that goal'

FROM THE FOREWORD BY DR STEVE BRADY, MOORLANDS COLLEGE.

'It is my desire through these pages to point you back to the simplicity of a life lived out of relationship with Jesus Christ. A life of intimacy, of abiding in him, is the source and spring of all other activity and endeavour. The branch bears fruit because it abides in the vine.'

In *A Fruitful Life* we ponder the teaching of Jesus in John chapter 15, the famous 'vine' passage. He is preparing his disciples for his departure and describing how they can be effective witnesses in a hostile world. Just as his instructions revolutionized their lives, so a proper understanding of what he is saying can revolutionize our lives also. It is the heart of the gospel message: the only way to live the Christian life is to allow Jesus to live his life in us and through us.

This book includes material for individual reflection and also questions for group discussion.

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This book can also be used for group discussion and study



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