

## REFLECTIONS

John 15:1-17 poses challenging questions to the contemporary Christian community about its self-identity. What does it mean for the church to live as the branches of Christ the vine? What would "church" look like if it embraced this model for its corporate life?

1. First, the image of community that emerges from John 15:1-17 is one of interrelationship, mutuality, and indwelling. To get the full sense of this interrelationship, it is helpful to visualize what the branches of a vine actually look like. In a vine, branches are almost completely indistinguishable from one another; it is impossible to determine where one branch stops and another branch starts. All run together as they grow out of the central vine. What this vine image suggests about community, then, is that there are no free-standing individuals in community, but branches who encircle one another completely. The fruitfulness of each individual branch depends on its relationship to the vine, nothing else. What matters for John is that each individual is rooted in Jesus and hence gives up individual status to become one of many encircling branches.

The communal life envisioned in the vine metaphor raises a strong challenge to contemporary Western models of individual autonomy and privatism. At the heart of the Johannine model is social interrelationship and corporate accountability. The vine and branches metaphor exhorts the community to steadfastness in its relationship to Jesus, a steadfastness that is measured by the community's fruits (vv. 4-5). To bear fruit—that is, to act in love—is a decidedly corporate act. It is "rooted" in Jesus' love for the community (v. 9) and issues in the community's embrace of that love as the central commandment of its own life (vv. 10, 12, 17). To live as the branches of the vine is to belong to an organic unity shaped by the love of Jesus. The individual branch is subsumed into the communal work of bearing fruit, of living in love and so revealing itself to be one of Jesus' disciples (vv. 8, 16). To live according to this model, then, the church would be a community in which members are known for the acts of love that they do in common with all other members. It would not be a community built around individual accomplishments, choices, or rights, but around the corporate accountability to the abiding presence of Jesus and corporate enactment of the love of God and Jesus.

3. Third, this metaphor is stark in its anonymity. That is, the visual image of the branches lacks any and all distinctions in appearance, character, or gifts. The anonymity of this image is brought into sharp relief when compared with another NT ecclesial metaphor, the Pauline metaphor of the church as the body of Christ. First Corinthians 12 is irresistible in the anatomical fantasy it puts before the Corinthians: talking feet and ears, entire bodies composed exclusively of ears or eyes or noses. Unlike the Johannine metaphor, the Pauline image does not remove the differences among the various members of the body, but actually points to those differences as definitional of what it means to be a body. Each member is able to see the place that his or her individual gifts occupies in the corporate body (1 Cor 12:12-13, 27-30). Paul holds together the oneness of Christ and the diversity of gifts and members in the body metaphor.

The Johannine metaphor undercuts any celebration of individual gifts, and this, too, challenges contemporary Western understandings of personality, individualism, and self-expression. Were the church to live as the branches of Christ, individual distinctiveness would give way to the common embodiment of love. The distinctiveness of the community would derive solely from its relationship to God and Jesus, not the characteristics or even gifts of its members. The mark of the faithful community is how it loves, not who are its members. There is only one gift, to bear fruit, and any branch can do that if it remains with Jesus.