

## An Invitation to Spiritual Renewal

### The Need for Renewal

*Jim Elliot wrote, 'I think the devil has made it his business to monopolise on three elements: noise, hurry, crowds. If he can keep us hearing radios, gossip, conversation, or even sermons, he is happy. But he will not allow quietness.'*

The ingredients of the modern moment have blended a perfect cocktail for our spiritual distraction. Our schedules are bursting. Our phones are pinging. Our work is demanding. Our attention is divided. The buckets of our lives are smaller than all we want to fill them with. There is always something to fill the empty space in our lives.

Corrie Ten Boom said, 'If the devil cannot make you bad, he will make you busy.' Ancient Pharaoh worked his slaves to the bone, so they had no capacity to rebel. Our enemy must surely be content with the current state of affairs. At least Israel knew they were in slavery.

Our greatest danger isn't that we reject God but assume God. Poison is most fatal when the victim doesn't know they are dying. We know to look for dodgy doctrine, but the unseen poison in our churches is dodgy discipleship. We are fish swimming in the secular sea not realising the toxins we're drinking.

The wisdom of Corinth was worldly even though it sounded Christian (1 Cor 1-2). They would have belief in Christ with all the glory of the Graeco-Roman world. Without thought we can easily become modern Corinthians. Maintaining Christian identity, believing the gospel for salvation, and attending church (when we can)... but taking our cue for the trajectory and shape of our lives from the world around us.

The difficulty runs deep. Overwhelmed with the demands of life at large, but with a genuine desire for Christ, we try to cram as much 'Christian stuff' into our aforementioned life bucket. 'I'm busy but I can go to church here, listen to a podcast on my commute, and get to my Connect Group next week...'

When you're hungry on the road, drive-through is an amazing convenience. But if you lived solely on fast food? You'll be unhealthy at best. Living solely from the fruit of someone else's spiritual life is the same. We will eventually become spiritually malnourished.

Despite our best intentions we can create cultures of spiritual Christian consumerism. But outsourcing our discipleship to professionals, programs, and podcasts is the modern equivalent of selling our birthright for a bowl of stew. Full for a moment, but inevitably empty. Like a frog in a blender, we will become Laodicean lukewarm without even realising (Rev 3:14-22).

That might not be the introduction you were expecting to read! But spiritual renewal always begins with eyes wide open. However much the above personally resonates, this is the air we breathe.

And yet, God is not surprised by our cultural moment. He has given us everything we need to fully follow Jesus. God is stirring a collective longing among many modern Christians for

something more. He can and will do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine, if only we would seek Him!

We can counter the wisdom of Corinth with the foolishness of the cross (1 Cor 1:25). We can be transformed in the midst of this messy world (Rom 12:1-2). We can experience fullness of life in the here and now (John 10:10).

We can face life's difficulties with abundant peace and joy (Phil 4:4-13). We can live wholeheartedly after the infinite joy of Christ (Phil 3:7-14).

Hence, the Year of Spiritual Renewal. Renewal requires returning to the feet of Jesus and listening afresh to our Rabbi teaching us how to live as disciples in the world.

For our purposes we are going to focus on one of his most important teachings: the invitation to abide, and from there turn our attention to the ordinary spiritual practices that practically form a life of abiding.

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### The Priority of Abiding

*'I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.'* (John 15:5)

Jesus consistently turns to metaphor to reveal his Divine identity in John. 'I am the good shepherd, light of the world, gate, etc...' These are so much more than simple illustrations. How else do finite creatures wrap limited minds around the Word who became flesh? Jesus' final 'I am' as the vine, has many rich layers.

Disciples are dependent branches. Jesus is the vine of fullness. Connected intimately together: life, fruit and flourishing flows from vine to branch. Christ is the only source of life, and disciples can go nowhere else.

Sinful disciples are grafted into union with the perfect Christ. Where does the vine end and the branches begin? Metaphor upon mystery, John connects the eternal oneness of Son and Father with the oneness of Son and ordinary believer (see the beauty of his prayer for us in John 17).

The New Testament takes and expands this union with all sorts of imagery. We are... the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-31); the dwelling of God (Eph 2:11-21); the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16); the bride of Christ (Eph 5:21-33); all coming together in the central phrase 'in Christ' (more ahead).

Surely that blows your mind. That Jesus would come and make himself one with you and me! Well, Jesus is not just providing fuel for philosophers. We need to ask 'why' Jesus teaches about the vine.

John 14-17 depicts Jesus in the Upper Room with his disciples, mere hours from crucifixion. Despite facing death filled with inner distress, he turns in love to prepare his disciples for what lies ahead. Why? He tells us, 'if the world hates you, keep in mind it hated me first' (15:18). When Jesus ascends, the sort of opposition that led to his murder will fall on those who follow him.

Jesus is warning us. There are opponents and obstacles ahead. Discipleship is difficult, and followers can fall away. Branches face a very real danger of disconnection from the vine, where lifeless and withered they're thrown into the fire (John 15:6).

A quick scan of the New Testament reveals Jesus is right. Churches can abandon their first love (Rev 2:4). Christians can shipwreck their faith (1 Tim 1:19-20). Worldly and spiritual enemies both seek to sever us from Christ (Col 2:8-9). Read a few chapters of Acts and you'll quickly see the hate he was talking about.

Importantly though, Jesus is not cultivating fear but preparing us for faithfulness. With everything that lies before you there is a clear path of fruit and flourishing: we need to abide.

What does that mean?

*'Abide in me, as I abide in you' (John 15:4)*

The chapters of the New Testament are splattered with a mind-boggling reality: believers have been spiritually united with Jesus. We are 'in Christ'. Everything good in the gospel is only ours because we are 'in Christ': redemption, restoration, resurrection, exaltation, coronation, and so on and so forth. Where Jesus has gone, so have you:

Jesus rose to glorious life, and so did you. You're 'in Christ'.  
Jesus ascended to glory, and so did you. You're 'in Christ'.  
Jesus sits on the throne of heaven, and so do you. You're 'in Christ'.

Your truest reality is not what you can see with your eyes, but what is hidden in heaven with your Saviour Jesus.

We face trials and suffering. Life often isn't what we hoped it would be. Difficulty gives way to difficulty, and obstacle to obstacle. We don't just find strength because our problems are temporary, and we have future hope — even though that's entirely true! — we find strength because eternal life has started now 'in Christ'.

We Abide 'in Christ'

*'Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.'* (John 17:3)

The greatest treasure is not just that we are 'in Christ', but that Christ is 'in us'. We don't just have the benefits of Christ, we have Christ himself. Where we go he goes. We are never lost, never abandoned, never alone. Comfort and joy can be ours in the present closeness of Jesus for this moment right now.

But... all of this will only impact our present life if we allow it to. Jesus tells us to abide because it's possible not to. We can believe 'in Christ', but live 'in me'.

Most often we become distracted. We live reactively or on autopilot. The world in front of us becomes our reality and nothing more. The gospel is the background reality of future salvation while we get on with the present pressures of life. 'Us in Christ and Christ in us' is an untapped potential because we've been distracted from what matters most.

So to expand Jesus' words: 'come and abide in me as I am already abiding in you'. Jesus is inviting us to dwell in the spiritual oneness that is already ours and allow that to change our life.

But there is more.

We Abide 'in Love'

*'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.'* (John 15:9)

Jesus moves on to offer a different angle on abiding. Abiding in Christ is abiding in his love. This is breathtaking when we contemplate the love of Christ displayed in John.

The Divine descends to earth, taking on flesh. Stepping into darkness he offers his light. Coming to the spiritually dead he offers his life. Grace upon grace at incredible cost to himself.

Our first glimpse of Jesus we read, 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29). Living metaphor: this Lamb walks willingly to a cross on Passover to take that sin upon himself. Blood splattered on the doorpost of our life, we are saved. Love is captured in his final breath before he dies: 'it is finished' (John 19:30).

Christ walks into the dark cell of our slavery to sin and unlocks our chains. We can get up and walk free. And yet Christians often live in two ways:

1. We sit firmly in our cell even though the door is unlocked. We continue to live under the burden of sin. Guilt and shame are our consistent companions. We do not live as though 'it is finished' at all.
2. We enjoy our freedom and forget he who freed us. We receive the benefits of his love and forget the cost of his love. We enjoy the gift without the Giver. We leave love in the past tense. This is Christianity without abiding, and it is no Christianity at all.

Jesus would have neither option for us. We can walk free, and we can walk differently. Abiding in love is living like love has saved us and love has changed us:

- We no longer strive to win God's affection, 'it is finished'.
- We no longer fear the wrath of God, 'it is finished'.
- We live with certainty that nothing can separate us from God's love, 'it is finished'.
- We live with certainty that we are more than conquerors, 'it is finished'.

All of this sounds beautiful, but truly abiding in Christ's love can be a difficult thought. No more hanging your hat on your own achievements. No more clinging to past hurts. No more holding back forgiveness. No more pretending your perfection. No more hiding your brokenness

in the darkness. If we would be saved by grace, we must be saved by grace alone. If we would come into the light, we must leave the darkness behind.

Abiding in Christ's love is the greatest act of surrender. When we let go of self-reliance, and hand him what we hold, he will give us something immeasurably greater. If we hold nothing back, come entirely as we are, and surrender to his love? We will be utterly transformed. 'It is finished'.

### Abiding in Practice

So, pulling all of that together. Abiding is learning:

1. to live every part of this present life from 'in Christ' instead of 'in me', growing in spiritual resting not spiritual striving.
2. to surrender every part of ourselves to the 'it is finished' love of Christ, receiving in grace not trying in pride.

Hopefully you've received something helpful along the way. But now we get to the practical: how do we do it? Well, abiding is like sailing. (I'm not a sailor, but just roll with it).

Christ has built our ship, set our course, and equipped our every need. But we must check the compass, adjust our heading, and stop to refuel. Otherwise, we will find ourselves completely off course and stranded in the middle of nowhere.

Jesus doesn't describe abiding, he commands abiding. He will abide in you, but you need to abide in him. You have an essential part to play. The practical details of your life either help or hinder your abiding. Hence the beginning of this article. How we live our life matters!

Perhaps frustratingly, Jesus doesn't tell us 'how' to abide. He simply calls us to come and follow him. He invites us to take his yoke (Matt 11:28-30), a metaphor for disciples learning how to live under the law from their Rabbi. We learn to abide in Jesus by studying how Jesus abides in his Father.

What do we find in the example of Jesus? We see him finding strength in Scripture, continuously committed to prayer, practicing Sabbath, attending synagogue, relentlessly retreating into solitude. The foundation of how we live 'in Christ' and from relational oneness with him is through regular rhythms of spiritual practices.