

What does it mean to abide?
A Series on Sanctification: Part 5 (E. Radmacher)

1. Study John 15:7. In contrast to the uselessness of the unabiding Christian who is "cast out" by the world, we are called to reach out; the abiding Christian receives a major benefit from Jesus, namely, answered prayer. He does this through another conditional sentence. He says here, "If you abide in Me, *and you may or may not*, and My words abide in you, *and they may or may not*, then you shall ask whatever you desire, and it shall be done for you." But what does "abiding" mean?

The term *menō* generally translated "to abide" or "to remain," has a broad range of meaning throughout the New Testament. In the upper room, Jesus uses the term fourteen times and there are two views on how *menō* should be interpreted: 1) **justification** or 2) **sanctification**.

In the **justification** perspective, commentators argue that John's use of "abiding" conveys the sense of union rather than communion. Abiding in Christ is equivalent to being "in" (*einai en*) and conveys a "stronger form" of the Pauline concept of "in Christ." (1) It reflects the condition of union associated with the possession of salvation resulting from the "divine indwelling" rather than the expression of a relationship. (2) "'Abide in Me and I in you', does not mean that those who have been cleansed by a similar command on His part must keep themselves in Him." Rather Jesus keeps them and they must simply "remain in continuous union with Him." (3)

In the **sanctification** perspective, Everett Harrison notes, "Abiding is not to be confused with position. Christ stated the fact of spiritual position before He inculcated the necessity of abiding" (John 14:20; 15:4). Abiding is an activity. It means communion with the person of Christ and submission to the will of Christ. (4) Charles Ryrie defines "abiding" on the basis of 1 John 3:24 as "habitual fellowship maintained by keeping His commandments." (5)

Jesus' use of third class conditional sentences in John 15:6, 7, and 10 to describe the believer's option of abiding or not abiding is very significant in understanding His use of the term. (6) It is clearly optional for the believer and therefore must be relational rather than metaphysical. This is evident also from His abiding in His Father's love through the relationship of obedience. When used figuratively, the term denotes the dynamics of relationship, interaction, and influence rather than the more static justification aspect of position in Christ or possession of life.

Cook explains the sanctification position well:

"*Abiding* in Christ is to be distinguished from *being* in Christ, although ideally there should be no practical difference between the two. We may observe the distinction by noting John 15:1-11, where the "in Me" branch of verse 2 is seen to be different from the "abide in Me" branch of verse 4. To be in Christ is to be born again, to be regenerated, to have had forgiveness of sins through Christ. Thus the disciples are in Christ (v. 2) because they have been cleansed of their sins (v. 3). To *abide* in Christ, however, is to be an obedient follower in fellowship with Christ the Savior and Lord (vv. 4-5, 9-11). An examination of 1 John 3:24 will reveal that obedience is the condition for abiding. Moreover, in John 15:10 our obeying Christ and thus abiding in Him is compared to the Son's obeying the Father by virtue of His sonship, but the Son *abided* in the Father by obeying Him. We see, then, that just as Christ's abiding in the Father was the maintenance of personal fellowship with the Father, so our abiding in Christ is the maintenance of personal fellowship with Christ... Furthermore, a study of John 15:4-11 will show that abiding is the condition for fruit-bearing (vv.4-5), that abiding brings the confidence of answered prayer (v. 7), and that abiding is commanded of Christians (v. 9). (7)

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In addition, since Paul does not use the term to describe the Christian's relationship with God and John does not use "in Christ" (though "in Me" does occur with John) the commonality of meaning is difficult to prove. Further, since the term is used in a theologically significant manner by Jesus in the Upper Room Discourse and then by John in his epistle, those significant uses should be allowed to "set the limits on the meaning communicated" by the term in its passages. (8)

2. How does this mutual abiding take place? What are the mechanics of it? How does this lead to answered prayer?

The Greek grammatical structure of John 15:7 requires that it be understood that those men, clearly believers, clearly disciples, be able not to abide in Him and it must be possible for His words not to abide in them. Thus answered prayer is conditioned on two things: the disciple abiding in Jesus and His words abiding in the disciple. This is another way of saying that the one in complete fellowship with Him can expect answered prayer.

When you read John 15:7 in context, John 15:10 reveals that Jesus defines "abiding" in terms of obedience to His commandment "to love one another;" John 15 is an elaboration of the commandment that Jesus gives in John 13:34-35.

Two things **must** be true if His commandment is to abide in us:

- 1) We must know it. This goes beyond mere head knowledge or cognitive input.
- 2) His words must influence us. God's words must affect our attitudes and decisions. Jesus' word abides in us to the extent that it changes our motives and calls for a response in us.

This is what being a Spirit-filled Christian is all about. The Holy Spirit uses God's word to influence us by affecting our will. He does not speak to us audibly, nor does He make us robots when we are "filled" with the Spirit. Rather, when we look at the parallel passages of Ephesians 5:18-20 and Colossians 3:16, we see that being filled with the Spirit is the same as letting Christ's word "richly indwell" us. The Spirit uses the Scriptures that He inspired (2 Pet 1:20-21 and 1 Cor 2:13) to influence us. Our attitudes, motives, discernment, and judgment are affected; the Word influences but is not controlling.

As we come into line with Christ's character through this process, we in turn ask for those things that reflect His desires and values. Then we are said to be asking in His name, according to His character, as a result of our fellowship with Him. Doing this, we can expect Him to answer precisely because we are asking for those things He already wants. As believers behold the glory of God in the Word of God, the Spirit of God transforms them into the likeness of Jesus Christ. This is the description of the gradual process of sanctification.

Mitchell also observes that when we abide in Him "His will becomes our will... Being in fellowship with Him, you will know His will. You will know what He wants done, and you will cooperate with God as a partner in revealing His character and His grace." (9) Thus, answered prayer comes as a result of abiding because the abiding believer's motives and thoughts are in line with Jesus' motives and thoughts which are expressed in His words and works and used by the Holy Spirit to effect our inner being as He indwells in us and we study Scripture (cf. 1 Cor 2:13). And, the focus of those answered prayers is likely expressed in what follows of Jesus' conversation, we are praying for fruit. And our prayer for fruit will be answered with fruitfulness. (10)

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References:

1. Hauck, TDNT, s.v. "μένω." Also seeing the term as equivalent to Paul's ἐν Χριστῷ are George (Classic Christianity, 204) and Vincent Taylor (Forgiveness and Reconciliation [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1956], 122).
2. Brown, The Epistles of John, 403, 447; Stott, The Letters of John, 146.
3. J. F. Strombeck, Shall Never Perish (Philadelphia: American Bible Conference Association, 1936), 215.
4. Everett F. Harrison, "A Key to the Understanding of First John," Bibliotheca Sacra 3 (1954): 44.
5. Charles C. Ryrie, "1 John" in The Wycliffe Bible Commentary, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), 1468.
6. His use of the first class conditional clause (εἰ plus the indicative) when describing the certainty of the world's hatred toward believers in verse eighteen is very significant in demonstrating the possibility of believers not abiding.
7. Cook, The Theology of John, 133-34 (italics his).
8. Elliot E. Johnson, Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 24.
9. Mitchell, An Everlasting Love, 291.
10. My wife, Ruth, and I have greatly appreciated the book by Anne J. Townsend, Prayer Without Pretending (London: Scripture Union, 1973), in the careful way that she handles this very important subject.

This article was adapted from The Disciplemaker: What Matters Most to Jesus by Gary Derickson and Earl Radmacher (Salem: Charis Press, ©2001) and used by permission from its authors. A theological benefit to this book is putting into balance the purpose stated by John in his epilogue, "that we might believe that Jesus is the Messiah and that believing we might have life in His name." The authors explain both of these aspects found in the book; John offers theology that brings people to belief in Christ and strengthens the faith of those who already believe.

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