

Reformation Sunday

THE LINEAGE OF FREEDOM

John 8:31-36

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Analysis by Steven Kuhl

31 Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.' 33 They answered him, 'We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, "You will be made free"?' 34 Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. 35 The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. 36 So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.'

DIAGNOSIS: A Lineage of Slavery

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Defending what Freedom you have: "We are Descendants of Abraham"*

The "Jews" in our text (v. 31) are stand-ins for all people who are proud preservers of their lineage, of their ethnicity, of the legacy of their flesh. And what a proud lineage they have. They are objectively and genetically descendants of the sage Abraham-in the flesh!-and have carefully preserved that lineage. No wonder they are a little puzzled-if not peeved-when Jesus says they are not free. Freedom, for them, meant the ability and determination to preserve and claim their lineage: "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone" (v.

33), they retort. True, history has presented them with great temptations to forsake that lineage. The descendents of Abraham (in the flesh) have not often been the masters of their world. They remember well the bondage in Egypt, the exile in Babylon, and now the occupation by Rome. Who said maintaining freedom was easy? It takes resolve; it takes distancing yourself from other legacies of the flesh; it takes being true to yourself.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : “Slave to Sin”

As historically wonderful as their Jewish lineage or ethnicity may be—indeed, Jesus himself shares in it completely—that legacy of the flesh, so to speak, is not what distinguished the sage Abraham or made him free. Indeed, according to Jesus, these descendants of Abraham totally missed out on what was truly great about Abraham’s legacy: Not his flesh, not his ethnicity, but his “faith”—faith in God’s promise. (See Genesis 15: 6: “And [Abraham] believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it [his faith] as righteousness.) Curiously, these Jews did seem to have a glimpse of that at one time. After all, John does describe them as “Jews who had believed in him” (v. 31), namely, the Son, the object of God’s promise to Abraham. But with regard to that lineage of Abraham, they not only wavered, but lost it! Without Abraham’s faith, their flesh is now no different than any another flesh, their ethnicity, at root, is no different than any other ethnicity. They are “slave[s] to sin” (v. 34). Jews sin as much as Egyptians and Babylonians and Romans. True, every legacy of the flesh does have its own unique ethnic ways of sinning. To not become like the Romans or the Egyptians or the Babylonians, outwardly, that much freedom they may have in the flesh. But no flesh (whether that of a Jew or a Roman or an Egyptian or yours and mine, for that matter) is free from sin, regardless of its legacy, its ethnicity. The simple truth is as Jesus states it: “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (v. 34).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *“No Permanent Place in the Household”*

Make no mistake about it: lineage is everything with regard to God. That is, who you are related to determines everything. Ultimately, lineage determines whether you are in the household permanently, as a true descendant of Abraham (according to faith), or whether you will be eventually expelled from the household as a slave to sin (according to the flesh). After all, as Jesus says, again so simply, “the slave does not have a permanent place in the household” (v. 35). So, the question to these Jews-and all of us-is this: how do we, with our lineage of slavery to sin, become-and remain-true descendants of Abraham, that is, permanent members of God’s household?

PROGNOSIS: A Lineage of Freedom

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *“The Son Has a Place [in the Household] Forever”*

The answer to that question, of course, is related to what it means to be a “true” descendant of Abraham. A “true” descendant is one who is “permanently” a descendant, that is, one who is not a “slave to sin” and, thus, one who is not subject to expulsion from God’s household. Only One Person meets that criteria by virtue of “natural descent,” so to speak, and that is the only Son of God, Jesus Christ, the “Word made flesh” (cf. Jn 1:1-18). He entered our sinful flesh; he suffered the consequences of our legacy of sin; he became subject to our expulsion from the household by tasting death on the cross. But yet, he was shown forth as the “only begotten Son” by virtue of his resurrection from the dead. Hence, he is “the Son [who] has a place [in the household] forever” (v. 35). He, God the Son, is the One with whom God the Father is pleased to dwell-forever!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *“If the Son Makes You Free, You Are Free Indeed”*

Now you know the “Truth” (v. 32). The Son alone has a permanent place in the household forever. But that’s not yet the whole truth. For the Son has chosen not to dwell alone with the Father. He has chosen to share his divine, permanent, lineage with sinful humanity. That alone is the truth, then, that sets us free (v. 32). The Son’s free choice to make us permanent members of the household with him and the Father establishes a new lineage for us free for the believing and it is the same lineage Abraham acquired when he believed the promise and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Without faith in the promise, our lineage remains that of fallen humanity, of slavery to sin, of the legacy of all flesh. That was true of Abraham and it is true for us also. But with faith in the promise fulfilled by the Son, our lineage is transformed and our destiny becomes that of the Son. “If the Son makes you free, you are free indeed” (v. 36). Remember, lineage-that is, who we are related to- makes all the difference to God. Faith in Christ relates to the One who transforms us from slaves to full-fledged members of the household of God.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *“Continuing in [Jesus’] Word,” the Lineage of Faith*

What now characterizes those who possess the lineage of faith, that is, the true descendants of Abraham, is that they “continue in the Word of Christ,” the promise of freedom from sin, judgment and death. One consequence of this lineage is that it relativizes the many heritages of the flesh. Not by despising them, but by recognizing their limitations (their bondage to sin) and by including them in the lineage of faith (Christ’s kind of freedom from sin). The true descendants of Abraham are from all nations, all ethnic backgrounds, and all peoples. Whether Jew or gentile, slave or free, male or female, black or white, rich or poor, Asian or African or American or Middle Eastern makes no difference with regard to becoming partakers in

the lineage of faith. Through faith in the Son, all are brothers and sisters in Christ, all are permanent members of the household of God, even as they continue to live in the flesh. By virtue of their common lineage in faith, those who "continue in the word" gain freedoms they otherwise never dreamed of, freedoms even with regard to their heritage of the flesh. These true descendants of Abraham are free to modify their lineage of the flesh (especially where its enslavement to sin is most acute) and borrow from among the heritages of the flesh (especially, where that serves the common good). That, too, is all part of what it means to be "free indeed" (v. 36)!