

# Reformation Sunday

## REMEMBERING HISTORY TO ESCAPE FROM IT

John 8:31-36

Reformation Sunday

Analysis by James Squire

31Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him “If you continue in my word you are truly my disciples; 32and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.” 33They 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’?” 34Jesus answered them “Very truly I tell you everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. 35The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. 36So if the Son makes you free you will be free indeed.

*NOTES: A good Israelite would never be caught dead saying “we have never been slaves to anyone.” A good Israelite confesses that whatever happened to his ancestors happened also to him. It is his history as well. As the Israelites entered the promised land they were taught to share the history of those who had died during the trek even though they had not yet been born when their ancestors were enslaved in Egypt.*

*And yet Jesus doesn’t resort to that. He aims higher. At the same time it still suggests a disconnect for these Jews. They claim Abraham but not his history. Moreover they claim a better history. Boy does Jesus puncture their balloon.*

---

## DIAGNOSIS: On a Collision Course with the Truth

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Enslaved—So Says Jesus*

What a disturbing thing for a descendant of Abraham to hear or at least for these self-appointed spokesmen of all descendants of Abraham. Enslaved? No way! Never. The mere suggestion is insulting. Descendants of Abraham are proud but these representatives are proud of themselves not of their history. Like modern-day biblicists they seem to care more about their own loyalty to their history than any deep understanding of what that history means. That history is the story of enslavement and redemption not just from Egypt to Canaan but even after they arrived in the Promised Land. Moreover it wasn't simply the Egyptians or the Philistines or the Babylonians who enslaved them. Surely the stories we find in the book of Judges point to the deeper enslaver that Jesus names for them: sin. Jesus the perceptive Israelite realized this. But these spokesmen are too busy defending their own historical perspective.

Ironical is it not that some 1500 years later our Catholic brothers and sisters were playing the part of the Jews in this text and the Reformers were called to deliver the message of Jesus to them? In a way they were "Egypt" and we were the Israelites. Isn't it even more ironic that today we too have forgotten our heritage of slavery to sin and we too insist that we have always been free?

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** : *Oblivious—to Sin*

The very fact that they felt threatened by Jesus' assertion undermines their case. Not only are they wrong about their history they're wrong about the present. For some reason the Jews couldn't resist the compulsion to follow Jesus around according to John's gospel. They didn't necessarily like what they heard but they couldn't seem to ignore it. He was a

prophetic voice to them even as they found his message more and more disagreeable each time they heard him speak. He mostly exposed them because he was the Light shining in their Darkness. Not only can't the Darkness withstand the Light it can't even hide from it. Jesus had no fear of them or of anything. There was no cover under which they could shelter themselves from him; they had no means by which to shut him up.

Yes Luther exposed the Catholics and when they shut him up his prized student Philip Melanchthon led the public charge in his absence. Moreover when Philip faltered an Italian by the name of Matthias Flacius pinch-hit for him. The Light was relentless then too. Who is it who exposes us today? Maybe someone like the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. Maybe Ed Schroeder in his Thursday Theology postings. Then again we have become adept in our culture at silencing the truly devastating critique. We have plenty of shallow critique to fill up our airwaves and occupy our minds. But it still seems as if the truly devastating critique (Jesus the Light) is out there scaring the crap out of us.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Homeless—and Helpless***

The Jews in today's text are stuck with whatever shelter—call it “household”—they can make for themselves. Ironically enough they are still counting on it being in the bosom of Abraham with Yahweh but they are sadly mistaken at this point. They really have no permanent household waiting for them they only have their present home: the Temple which Jesus allegedly means to destroy. No wonder they keep pursuing him. Such is life as we seek to manage it on our own: a never-ending struggle against the Light that cannot be extinguished.

As true as it was then it is equally true today. America is filled with functioning millennialists (or pre-millennialists as

the case may be) operating under the illusion that this is The Promised Land and we are The Chosen People and that if we fight the good fight freedom will win the final victory. And the Light? It's still here figuratively burning our grand plans into cinders every chance it gets. We can ignore it for the most part but since we still think that the Light is on our side we can't escape it completely.

## **PROGNOSIS: Reborn in the Truth**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** : *Son-Home for the Homeless*

What the Jews completely missed was that this Jesus-Word made flesh-was making his home with them! He put his fate in their hands. And he was the one person who was guaranteed a permanent home with Yahweh. He traded that in for a home in the midst of out Darkness. On the surface Jesus was saying "I have a permanent home. Anyone who wants to join me in that permanent home follow me." How arrogant his listeners thought. But Jesus was not saying this from on high bathed in splendor surrounded by armies clothed in blinding glory. He said it as a mere human being standing alone in their midst. For him in that moment "permanent home" was purely an act of faith a promise for him to trust. As ensuing events showed he could be taken by force tried sentenced and executed for saying such a thing. And in John's gospel this is the very thing that defeats the Darkness: his faith vindicated in his resurrection. By putting him on trial the Jews unwittingly shepherded him to the finish line as he uttered the constant refrain "if you continue in my word ... the truth will make you free." This victory march is for our benefit it was not for his. He took our slavery upon himself and suffered its full effect culminating in the chains of arrest and the nails of execution. He emerged from death to bestow freedom upon his oppressors and invite them into his permanent home with the Father.

Luther was the prophetic voice of reform in his day and we have voices of reform in our day. But the only thing that truly matters is “my word”—where the “my” refers to Jesus. Luther’s abstinence oratorical prowess and creativity mean nothing. The only thing that ever mattered was if he himself was “continuing in [Jesus’] word.” And so it is today. If the truly devastating critique that we try to silence “continues in [Jesus’] word” then it will not be silenced and it will persist in its pursuit of us seeking to save us.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Son—Leader of True Disciples**

In John’s gospel Jesus’ ministry among people unleashes the Holy Spirit upon them so that after Jesus departs physically from their midst they may still “continue in [his] word.” For all who “believed in him” were no longer critics but followers. They pursued him all the way to the finish line as critics only to see him win the debate with his resurrection. Immediately he returned to them and for the first time called them “brothers and sisters.” They did not yet see their permanent place in heaven but they had a permanent place in his heart. He fed them his Holy Spirit and they acknowledged him as their Lord. True disciples were thus born.

Just as many people were turned off by Luther’s critique so also many were turned on by it. Even as they heard the condemnation of sin they heard the lifting up of the Cross for our salvation and they signed on even though it was a risky thing to do. But Luther did not ascribe this to his own doing. Instead he testified that it is only the Holy Spirit that gives us the ability to believe and “continue in [Jesus’] word.” And today the Holy Spirit is resourceful enough to use anyone hooked in to Jesus’ word to get through to those who remain critics. The Holy Spirit opens hearts puncturing the massive fog that clouds our world with the truth that will set us free.

## **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Set Free—So Says Jesus**

What we have in John's gospel perhaps more so than in the other gospels are newly born disciples turned loose—as critics. In John's gospel the woman at the well is met with cross-examination over her reported encounter. The man born blind becomes a witness against the Jewish authorities. It is not hard to imagine that Nicodemus became a thorn in the side of his fellow members of the Sanhedrin after a late-night talk with Jesus about being born again. In John's gospel believers are sent back out into a dark world to shine Christ's Light on evil. That they did so with such force, like the man born blind, is testament to the powerful transformation they experienced with Jesus. Like him they found all fear of earthly authorities had disappeared in the face of the sure promise of a permanent home with God. And they did not pursue their critique for the fun of telling off their "betters." They genuinely sought to set others free through the Truth.

And that is also the mark of a true disciple today: someone who seeks to set others free through the Truth rather than hammering them with condemnation for the sake of acting piously. What makes the difference between these two motivations? For starters true disciples see no need to distance themselves from their sordid past. They don't wallow in it, but they don't run from it either. When they critique the world or the church they include themselves in the critique. They identify with the ones they are shining the Light on. But, most importantly, along with the critique they offer the way past the critique to eternal freedom: Jesus, in whose word we all continue.