

Reformation Sunday

FREEDOM FROM SIN—INDEED

John 8:31-36

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

8:31 Then 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.”

[Note the continuing verse 37, “I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word.”]

DIAGNOSIS: Ungodly Presumptions

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Children of God? In-deed Not!*

The erstwhile “disciples of Jesus” (v. 31), claiming to be “descendants of Abraham” (v. 33), proved not to be “truly” so (vv. 32, 34) because, externally, they “look for an opportunity to kill me” (v. 37). They presumed, because they were “Jews” (v. 31) indelibly by birth, that they would inherit eternal life

regardless of any other truth. Yet by their actions in seeking to destroy Jesus they prove themselves unworthy of eternal life (see 6:68). Besides these poor deluded souls, the implication is that anyone who seeks to kill Jesus is not truly a disciple, not truly a descendant of Abraham, a Jew, a Christian, a child of God, or whatever status of godly privilege one wishes to confer on oneself. In this sense we are all Jews. Which is to say that we are all sinners; indeed, as Jesus says, we are “slaves to sin” (v. 34; the word “indeed,” inspired from v. 36, conveniently captures the *truth* of Jesus’ claim that we are slaves to sin by what we do in *deed*). The fact is that Jesus, the Word of God, was indeed killed by the Jews, that is, by us the erstwhile children of God.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Slaves to Sin*

If ever we “Jews” get to the truth about *killing* Jesus, that everything we do seeks to undermine God in order to live (Jesus being the prime example), we will discover the internal how and why of it all: “because there is no place in you for my word” (v. 37). We are enslaved to the prospect of keeping our own life, as if “life” was somehow our own and not a sustaining relationship to our Creator, or that that life was the best that God has to offer. We would rather trust our own word on that than Jesus’ word. We are caught in a vicious circle of self-delusion. We believe that we are privileged as children of God whether by birth or by affiliation, and are thereby free from the coming judgment; yet we seek to kill Jesus, the Son of God, at every opportunity. Without the word of Jesus, we cannot know that our life is enslaved to sin, excluding God at every turn; yet we freely exclude Jesus and his word because he tells the truth that we are sinners and thus unworthy to keep our life (see 16:7-11). We Jews are sinners through and through (v. 37 “you”); there is no further spiritual core or soul or spirit or inner-child beyond that “you” that is sinless. We sin because we

are sinners; and we are sinners because we believe that we are free from our Creator. That is what John and Paul mean by everyone being “slaves to sin” (v. 34; see Rom. 6:16). What kind of freedom is that? Who needs the kind of freedom that always looks for an opportunity to kill in order to live such an enslaved life? The commandment, “You shall not kill!” tells the truth about us, but Jesus drives it home.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Death*

Verses 35-36 form a little parable (extended in Ch. 8 contrasting Jesus’ Father with the satanic father of the Jews/us) that suggests that true life, the life that only the Son has in him due to his trusting and doing of his Father’s will, is eternal life. In this parable, the Son has a place in the (Father’s) household “forever” but the slave “does not have a permanent place.” Our slavery (to sin) is contrasted with Jesus’ sonship (in freedom). Therefore by extension, we slaves may be excluded at any time from the Father’s household. Because we are slaves to sin, our exclusion from the household (kingdom of God) means no-place-to-live (eternal death; see 1 Cor. 15:56). We “Jews” cannot presume on our relationship to Abraham or to the Church, as if that were the true meaning of sonship. From now on, Jesus says, eternal life means the kind of life that he, Jesus, lives with the Father. Failing that—which we all do in seeking to kill Jesus and in trusting our own words for continuity of life (even if that is a sinful life)—is death. And, since our life is always sinful life, death is not only the end of our sin but the end of life, period.

PROGNOSIS: Leaning on Jesus Is Freedom from Sin

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Life In-deed, or: Loving Us to Death*

Thankfully, astonishingly, that little parable in vv. 35-36 contains *in nuce* the Good News that our slavery to sin is coming

to an end. By Jesus' death and resurrection, we erstwhile "Jews" see the truth of all our deeds and false trusting (Steps 1-3) in contrast to Jesus' life-in-deed before the Father that is continued in us by the Holy Spirit who makes "freedom from sin" available in us (Steps 4-6). The same freedom that the Son enjoys is now available to us. The Son makes us free by his life-in-deed; that is, by his dying in our stead for our sin, and by his rising from the dead and sending the Spirit of God into our broken hearts to make room for his word (reversing v. 37). "We" are a new creation in Jesus' resurrected body, a new "we" individually and collectively; sinless (albeit alongside our dying, sin-soaked flesh of the old creation), formed and informed by the word of God that lives in us (20:19-23; see Rom 8:12-29), yet waiting for the fullness of time when, like Jesus, we will be fully clothed in glory. Thus we are truly Jesus' disciples, truly Jews, truly the children of Abraham, truly the sisters and brothers of Jesus of Nazareth, the Way, the Truth, the Life, the King of the Jews, the Son of God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Receiving Jesus' Word*

The Holy Spirit makes room in us for Jesus' word (v. 37), but not as a presumption. We trust in Jesus and believe his word—this is the meaning of faith in Jesus. Because faith is a creation of the Spirit, we do not possess faith; it possesses us. Faith cannot be earned or found (15:16); it is eternally gift. Although faith is always being received, it cannot be taken for granted. Faith is as much the Holy Spirit as it is the new us; and it is as much Jesus himself as it is Jesus' word. In truth, there is no room in us now for anything other than Jesus' word. Faith is wholly receptive to Jesus and leans on Jesus. In so doing, faith is free from sin and participates in eternal life.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Celebrating Jesus'*

Life In-deed

Faith-in-Jesus is never at rest; it lives, it “continues” (v. 31). Faith, like Jesus—because *it is Jesus*—is always loving another. It is life-in-deed. In John’s lexicon, faith is “love” towards God and towards one another. The “feed my sheep” narrative in Chapter 20 demonstrates how loving Jesus and following him and loving one another are inseparable. In distinction from what “the Jews” (v. 31) had relied upon, true discipleship is trusting in the Father and doing what Jesus does, even at the loss of one’s life (20:19). *True* discipleship, finally, is “witness” (21:24) to the *deeds* of Jesus among us. For, where there is love (in the fullness that John means), there is Jesus. Discipleship is celebrating Jesus himself and all who are gathered in his name, not wishfully but *indeed*.