

John 8:31-36  
Reformation Sunday  
October 30, 2022

Our Lutheran heritage is important to us. Annually we celebrate the Reformation with gratitude for the blessings God granted to us through it. Among those are a commitment to the authority of Scripture, its inspiration and inerrancy; our liturgical style of worship; and recognition of doctrines like the universal priesthood of believers. The key issue at stake was the doctrine of justification. Rightly has it been stated that church stands or falls by what it teaches in this matter. We are saved by God's grace, received through faith, was the message Luther emphasized. We rejoice that our church body still faithfully professes that truth.

Why is it so important? Souls are at stake, our own included. We cling to the Word and its truths because of the benefits the text identified.

#### GOD'S TRUTH GIVES US FREEDOM

Other alternatives exist as possibilities for us to hold onto besides the truth from God. The rest are lies, all enticements from Satan, who wants nothing more than to draw people away from Christ. Jesus encountered them as he was teaching. There were some of his hearers who believed in him. Others in the audience drew attention to their ancestry with pride when Jesus spoke about setting them free. Why, they were Abraham's children, members of the chosen race and had always been free, which ignored facts of history—what about their time of slavery in Egypt or all the years, including the present when they were a subject nation? God had revealed the truth to them through his prophets. They faithfully followed the Old Testament practices, bringing sacrifices, watching out for ceremonial defilement. Didn't that guarantee their status before God? Surely their righteousness made them his own. Some may have prided themselves on their work: see how busy I am for the Lord. Or there is one's own goodness: I do the right things. Others may point to the results: my life is going so well. Isn't that a sign that God approves of me?

At the Reformation time Luther dealt with a reliance on traditions. On October 31, 1517, he took a stand that those traditions were contrary to the Scriptures. That is the day he posted the 95 Theses, propositions he wished to debate. They dealt with matters of repentance and forgiveness, especially attacking the sale of indulgences, papers a person could buy that gave assurance that all of the penalty for sins was gone, not because Jesus had paid for them but because they had purchased the paper. The reaction from official quarters was to correct this upstart, erring monk, and it was attempted by an appeal to church traditions, councils and decrees of the Pope, not on the basis of the Bible. Luther refused to sacrifice the Scriptures to

human statements and continued to testify to what God says in his Word, the absolute, revealed truth. Finally he was excommunicated. Such a framework for action as was used by his opponents does not bring freedom.

Freedom and righteousness before God do not come from our flesh, ethnic descent, traditions, accomplishments, rules followed or social class. Yet our sinful nature at times leads us to follow that deception. Outward associations, the majority views of society or cherished traditions become the essence of our relationship with God. That can be true of Lutheran Christians as much as anybody else. It happens when we don't know what we stand for or why. The hospital patient who registered as Lutheran (back when pastors could access such information) because she knew she wasn't Catholic, but had never set foot in a Lutheran Church, is an extreme example. Let's not develop even a shade of similarity.

We need to hold on to God's truth, and that means to all the teaching of Scripture. Our faith is not a smorgasbord religion, where we can pick and choose which of the Bible's teachings we want to believe and which don't appeal to us. We must believe and confess the whole Word of God.

To hold to Jesus' teaching means to remain in it. To do so means we must be in that Word. Know it thoroughly from regular study. Your Bible is to be read, not merely placed on the table as a decoration or used to press leaves as some once did. Be familiar with its pages, not fumbling in bewilderment when you use it.

Holding to the Word means teaching according to it. That's what the Reformation was all about, seeking to return the church to the truth. Martin Luther wasn't seeking to establish a new church and certainly not one named after himself. He wanted the church to teach God's Word correctly. We face an equal danger today. The multiplicity of denominations existing reflects differences of teaching. Straying from the truth is frequent, also among Lutherans, the very people named for the Reformer. Sad to say, in many instances the name Lutheran is only an outward connection with his work. We need to be on our guard always, evaluating what is taught to us on the basis of God's revealed Word.

Holding to the truth also means living according to it. Put it into active practice. The First Petition of the Lord's Prayer comes to mind. There we pray, "Hallowed be thy name." Christians bear God's name. What we teach and how we live reflect on that precious name. As Luther relates in the catechism explanation, "God's name is kept holy when his Word is taught in its truth and purity, and we as children of God lead holy lives according to it." Don't give God a bad name by your behavior. Naturally, opponents of Christianity are quick to level the charge of hypocrisy against believers, so it is beneficial to think about it. Do guests in our

services, family members, co-workers and neighbors see Christian love in action in our lives as well as hearing about our orthodoxy? We need more than lip service to a correct body of doctrine.

The heart of the Scripture is God's message of righteousness by his grace, Christ's perfect righteousness imputed or credited to our account by faith. Even that faith is created by the Spirit's work, not our efforts. All is a gift of our marvelous Lord. Don't fall away from the teaching of God's grace and then lose it, as the Apostle Paul warned in the Second Lesson. God's grace became personal in Jesus, whom he sent as the sacrifice for us and for the world. That's the wonderful truth bringing freedom, conveying also the power to hold to the truth.

## II.

As you hold to the truth you will become personally acquainted with it and have blessed freedom. Don't settle for a mere description of it. Enjoy the freedom God's truth gives. You can look, but you won't find it elsewhere. Christians are sometimes taunted to loosen up and live a little. Indulge in some sinful behavior because that's where the freedom is. Non-believers view Christianity as restrictive and curtailing the freedom to truly be yourself. One man told the believer who had been sharing the Savior with him that he couldn't become a Christian because he would have to give up so many things he liked. Really the situation is the exact opposite. Sin brings guilt, a troubled conscience and oppression of the soul. Christ forgives that sin and removes the burden from our shoulders.

Remember the devil's original effort to convince humans to sin. He told Eve she and Adam would become like God. He still pictures sin as attractive, where the action is, the source of joy. Don't be duped. Only God's truth can equip you for every good work. It fits every age, marital status, sex, race or any other distinction.

Sin is actually where the slavery is. "Jesus replied, 'I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.'" The slavery is to a destructive lifestyle. You can't escape it. Satan won't let go. He keeps demanding more from his slaves. Jesus is the one who brings freedom, not just from the guilt but also from the power of sin. Instead he gives us the power to live in his ways by his Spirit. Draw on that power and slap the devil on the snout as Luther would phrase it. Like Jesus, use the Word to defeat him. We sang it earlier, "One little word can fell him." Experience the life-giving power of the Spirit. Remember that is almighty power so you can indeed overcome the devil. You have been set free. The Christian lifestyle will then give God glory and it also gives us happiness. Life does go better when it is lived God's way.

Martin Luther wrote the Small Catechism as a tool to train Christians in the truth so we could enjoy the blessings of this evangelical freedom. Each section notes that it was written for use by the head of the household to learn and to teach the family. That's how to continue the Reformation at home. Teach your family to live in and enjoy the freedom Christ has won for you and grants to you through the gospel.

God's freedom lasts forever. Jesus noted, "Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever." Slaves have duties for the family but they are not part of the family and do not have the rights of family members. A bond may exist but it can and will end.

Children have a secure place as part of the family. They will be heirs of the parents one day. We are God's children. His Word assures, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus." That's our Savior's promise and the text asserted, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." He has the authority. Therefore in him you have true freedom.

Only through that inner, personal connection of faith does it exist. Let me illustrate. Suppose when you were little your parents moved your crib into the church building so that you were raised here. Then your school desk was brought in and you received all your education in the church building. After graduation you established your office here and did all your work in the church. Finally you died and were buried right in front of the pulpit. None of those outward contacts could give you a claim on the freedom from sin and membership in God's eternal family. There is only one way. Repent of all sin and believe in Jesus. Then you are God's child, made free and able to enjoy his blessings of life and eternity. That brings the fulfillment of the Psalmist's prayer, "One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple."

The freedom which God gives is a tremendous blessing. Lives have been given in efforts to win political freedom for nations. That freedom can be temporary. As Christ's people you and I have a greater freedom, an eternal freedom. That is why we cherish our freedom, proclaim Christ crucified and risen, which purchased and announced that freedom. Our freedom is so great and is found nowhere else, so we want to share the marvelous news. We seek to bring more to faith through the gospel, God's saving and freeing truth. That is why the term "evangelical" is part of our church name, both of our synod and our congregation. It means we are centered on the gospel and dedicated to proclaiming the gospel. We preach the gospel in our homes and in our churches. That saving, freeing truth will keep the Reformation alive throughout the world.