

# GOD'S WORD IS OUR GREAT HERITAGE

## JOHN 8:31-36

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GOD'S WORD IS OUR GREAT HERITAGE!

1. *The Word of God is the truth that frees.*

John 8:31-32 Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; 32 And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

The Reformation is about the return to the primacy and centrality of the Word of God in the church. Over the centuries leading up to the time of Luther, God's Word had been crowded out of its proper place by tradition, reason, mysticism, etc. The Bible was still used in the church, but it was filtered so that its message was not being rightly believed, taught, and confessed. The church fell into dangerous and soul destroying errors. Luther rediscovered that it is the Bible that is the judge of all other books, teachers, institutions, etc., and not vice versa. This biblical, Lutheran view of the authority of Scriptures is stated succinctly in the Formula of Concord:

“The sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with [all] teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone... Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them... In this way the distinction between the Holy Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament and all other writings is preserved, and the Holy Scriptures alone remain the only judge, rule, and standard, according to which, as the only test-stone, all dogmas shall and must be discerned and judged, as to whether they are good or evil, right or wrong.”

This is what Jesus teaches us in the Gospel for today. “If ye continue in my word, *then* are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

The Word of God is the truth that makes us free. In Jesus' high priestly prayer later in the fourth Gospel we find these words in Jesus' prayer for all believers:

John 17:17 Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

Therefore, if we want to believe and know the truth that makes free, we must go to the source: The Word of God. It was through his study of the Scriptures that Luther discovered and corrected the errors and abuses that had crept into the church, and as he proclaimed and taught the Word of God, the Reformation was the result. Through His Word, God was clearing away the cobwebs and restoring His pure, clear, saving Word to His Church.

Psalm 12:6 The words of the LORD *are* pure words: *as* silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times.

Proverbs 30:5 Every word of God *is* pure: he *is* a shield unto them that put their trust in him.

The three chief opponents that Luther faced as he taught and wrote were the papalists, the sacramentarians, and the fanatics. The papalists, those who adhered to the papacy and its teachings, believed that tradition was equal to Holy Scripture. In this way they were like the Pharisees and Scribes of Jesus' day, setting God's Word aside for the sake of their traditions. They also taught that the Bible was an obscure and dark book and couldn't be rightly understood by the average Christian. Therefore, they taught that only the pope or the magisterium of the church could rightly understand and interpret the Bible in the light of tradition. In short, they claimed that, “the Bible means whatever we say it means.”

Luther responded that God's Word is supreme. It is the only judge, rule, and standard by which all popes, teachers, churches, councils, and writings are to be judged. Whatever is taught and believed, that is not in accord with the Word of God is a lie. Luther also pointed out that the Bible is not an obscure and

dark book, but is clear and illuminating. Any Christian may read and understand it, and indeed, a seven year old child armed with God's Word is mightier than all popes and bishops armed with the traditions of men.

The sacramentarians were so named because initially, the chief bone of contention between them and Luther was over the Sacrament of Holy Communion. They rejected the teaching of the Bible and of Luther that the bread and wine of the Sacrament are the true Body and Blood of Christ! Why? Because they believed that it was not in accord with reason to believe that the finite (bread) could contain the infinite (the Body of Christ). You see, they believed that one had to interpret the Bible in accordance with human reason. They made reason a judge over God's Word rather than vice versa. Who were they? The most notable of the sacramentarians was Ulrich Zwingli. He gathered a large following to himself, and these people, whom Luther dubbed 'sacramentarians' were an early sect of Protestants. Later, they were joined by John Calvin and others, and became known as the Reformed branch of Protestantism. Today's Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Reformed, and Baptist churches are the descendents of the sacramentarians.

Luther considered the sacramentarians to be as dangerous as the papacy, and he opposed them vigorously in many of his most important books. He accused them of making a magisterial use of reason in their approach to Scripture rather than a ministerial use of reason. Luther believed, in accord with Scripture, that reason is a good gift of God, but that it is tainted by sin. Therefore, reason is good when used in temporal matters, but in matters pertaining to God and His Word, reason must bow to the Scriptures and submit to them. If God's Word says one thing, and reason says another, we must take reason captive to the Word of God. When reason is judge over God's Word error is the result, but when God's Word is judge over reason, and reason submits to the Word as a servant, God's truth is maintained.

The third group that Luther had to contend with were the fanatics or enthusiasts. Thomas Muntzer, the Zwickau Prophets, and the Anabaptists were the early leaders of this movement. They believed that God's Spirit worked not only through the Word and Sacraments (mediately), but also immediately or directly upon persons apart from God's Word. They believed that visions, dreams, and revelations were still given apart from God's Word and that these new revelations were as important as, or even more important than, the Scriptures. They mocked Luther's insistence on the Word alone by saying, "Bible, Babble, Bubble!"

See how Luther rejects fanaticism and urges us to abide with the outward Word and the means through which the Holy Ghost works. The following quote is from the *Smalcald Articles*, Part 3, Article 8:

"We must firmly hold that God grants His Spirit or grace to no one, except through or with the preceding outward Word, in order that we may be protected against the enthusiasts, *i.e.*, spirits who boast that they have the Spirit without and before the Word, and accordingly judge Scripture or the spoken Word, and explain and stretch it at their pleasure, as Muenzer did, and many still do at the present day, who wish to be acute judges between the Spirit and the letter, and yet know not what they say or declare... All this is the old devil and old serpent, who also converted Adam and Eve into enthusiasts, and led them from the outward Word of God to spiritualizing and self-conceit, and nevertheless he accomplished this through other outward words. Just as also our enthusiasts condemn the outward Word, and nevertheless they themselves are not silent, but they fill the world with their pratings and writings, as though, indeed, the Spirit could not come through the writings and spoken word of the apostles, but through their writings and words he must come.<sup>1</sup>

"In a word, enthusiasm inheres in Adam and his children from the beginning to the end of the world, having been implanted and infused into them by the old dragon, and is the origin, power, and strength of all heresy, especially of that of the Papacy and Mahomet. Therefore we ought and must constantly maintain this point, that God does not wish to deal with us otherwise than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments. It is the devil himself whatsoever is extolled as Spirit without the Word and Sacraments."<sup>2</sup>

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1 Lutheran Church. Missouri Synod. (1997). *Concordia Triglotta - English : The symbolic books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Includes Historical Introductions by F. Bente and indexes of subjects. (electronic ed.) (Page 495). Milwaukee WI: Northwestern Publishing House.

2 Lutheran Church. Missouri Synod. (1997). *Concordia Triglotta - English : The symbolic books of the*

It is the outward Word through which we receive the Spirit and His gifts, and not through our inner 'spiritual' experiences and imaginings.

We still have the descendents of these errorists in our midst today in various forms. Lutheran Christians are continually tempted to leave the green grass of the pure doctrine of the saving Word for the outwardly impressive, but inwardly barren pastures of those who put something else beside or above God's Word. Whether it is the authoritarian traditionalism of the papacy, the 'reasonable' approach of the mass of today's protestant sects, or the hyper-spiritual ravings of the pentecostals, charismatics, and other enthusiasts, they all in one way or another frustrate a Christian's endeavor to know the truth of the Word that makes us free.

## 2. Freedom in the truth of God's Word.

John 8:33-36 They answered him, We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free? 34 Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. 35 And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but the Son abideth ever. 36 If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

Much is made in our country about freedom, and rightly so. The freedoms we enjoy as Americans wonderful gifts, worth fighting and dying for. Yet we must remember that our political freedoms must not be equated with true or spiritual freedom. Our American liberty has to do with the things of this world and this life. They do not grant us spiritual liberty, which comes only to those who believe in Jesus Christ. One of the ways in which we can see that our political freedom is not the same thing as spiritual freedom is this: as our culture distances itself further and further from Christianity and God's Word, our liberty tends more and more to appear as license to engage in immoral and ungodly attitudes and behavior.

No. Despite our treasured and often abused political liberties, we, along with all others born according to the course of nature, are born in spiritual bondage to sin, death, and the devil. This spiritual bondage is a far more serious thing than any earthly bondage, for it separates us from God, and it places us firmly on the road to eternal damnation. Therefore, more than any temporal liberation, we desperately need spiritual liberation. And this is what Jesus came into the world to win for us.

The Jews of Jesus' day were offended by Christ's claim that they would be free by continuing in the truth of His Word. They countered His assertion with two false claims. First they claimed that just being Abraham's descendents made them free already. But this mere outward connection to the great Patriarch meant little. It is like modern people thinking that they are saved simply by being a member of a Christian congregation, despite the fact that they have no true faith. John the Baptist had warned the Pharisees that they shouldn't boast about their Abrahamic descent, because God could turn the stones on the ground into children of Abraham if He so desired. Jesus taught them that if they were children of Abraham they would do the works of Abraham and believe on the Messiah rather than trying to kill Him (John 8:39-40). Merely being a descendent of Abraham was insufficient to claim spiritual liberty without also having the faith of Abraham. Because they remained in unbelief regarding Christ, they remained in spiritual bondage to sin, death, and the devil.

The second false claim was also false. They claimed that they had never been in bondage to anyone. This is simply untrue. The Israelites of old had been slaves in Egypt for hundreds of years before God delivered them through Moses. They had spent 70 years in captivity in Babylon as a punishment for their sins. And even in Jesus' day, the Jews were not free, but were under the domination of the Roman Empire, with Roman fortresses dotting their land, and Roman soldiers patrolling their streets. Despite the fact that they chafed under this foreign domination, they were nevertheless stuck with it.

People hate to hear that the only true freedom is spiritual freedom. They deeply resent the claim of Jesus that only through Him is a person free from sin, death, and the devil. They consider the preaching of the Gospel to be exclusive and intolerant. They will grasp at any straw, and believe in any foolishness in order to avoid coming to grips with their true need and the only God given answer to it. But God's Word remains true nevertheless.

*Evangelical Lutheran Church.* Includes Historical Introductions by F. Bente and indexes of subjects. (electronic ed.) (Page 497). Milwaukee WI: Northwestern Publishing House.

Jesus replied to their false claims by telling the truth of God's Word concerning sin and salvation. First, He said, "Whoever commits sin is the slave of sin". We don't become sinners by sinning; we commit sins because we are sinners. We are conceived and born in sin as children of Adam. This is original sin. It is because we are born sinners that we commit actual sins. The many individual sins we commit are the manifestations of our sinful condition. Therefore our continued sinning shows that we are slaves of sin. We can't get out of this unfortunate condition by any works that we do. Two good works don't cancel out one sin. The balancing act fails because our problem is much deeper than the individual sins committed. We have a sinful nature, and that we can't get rid of. Our only hope is if we are set free from this slavery, and that can only be done by the Son of God.

Jesus went on to say, "the slave does not remain in the house forever; but the Son remains forever." The slave is a slave and not a permanent member of the family. The slave may be sold. The Son, however, is free, and is a permanent member of the family. Jesus, the Son of God, is appointed heir of all things. Therefore, freedom for the slave can only come as a gift from the one who is able to bestow it. God sent His Son into the world to be such a Savior, who sets people free by dealing once for all with their sins. The only way to deal with sin is to have it forgiven. And that is what we receive through the Son.

Jesus then said, "If the Son, therefore shall make you free, you shall be free indeed." God's Word teaches us very clearly how it is that Jesus makes us free. He placed Himself under God's Law in our place and kept the Law perfectly both outwardly and inwardly on our behalf. He endured temptation in our place and did not sin. He suffered innocently in our place, enduring the wrath and punishment of God against sin and giving Himself as a ransom and a sacrifice for sins. With His suffering and death on the cross He made the once for all atonement for all sins, and effected reconciliation between a holy God and sinful people. The Gospel is the divine message of this work of Christ for our liberation and salvation. Through faith in Christ and His Word, we receive the forgiveness of sins, and freedom from death and the devil. We are declared righteous by God's grace through faith and freed from the sentence of eternal damnation. And we are snatched by Christ out of the devil's realm and placed safely into the kingdom of grace. We are free indeed.

### 3. Continue in God's Word.

Jesus urges those who would be His true disciples to continue in His Word. Through it we know the truth that frees, and remain in it. God gave us His holy Word to make us wise unto salvation through faith in Christ. He also gave it to train us in holy living. Therefore, we should not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it. This means that we should read and study Scripture, listen attentively when it is read and taught, and believe it in simple faith.

But Christians live in a world of many distractions. So many things compete for our attention and loyalty. We easily fall into the trap of letting other things that we love or enjoy crowd out the Word from its rightful place in our lives. Instead of single minded devotion to the Word of God, we become double minded. We want God's Word, but we want what we want as well, and often we fail to choose the better part. For example, our weekly attendance could easily be 20-30 percent higher. The reason it isn't is not because of sickness, necessary travel, or other cases of need, but because people are easily distracted and simply absent themselves for no good reason.

Another hindrance to single minded devotion to God and His Word is satiety. Satiety is when you are full and have no hunger for the Word. Think of how we feel after a big Thanksgiving dinner. We couldn't eat another bite, and if someone offers us another slice of pie we shudder. So it is with God's Word. We can never get enough of the Word. Jesus said, "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." But it often happens that after one sermon, a few chapters of the Bible, or a cursory glance through the Catechism, and we've had enough. This comes from the mistaken notion that we are already full without these things, and so we are easily bored with God's Word and sacraments set them aside.

Satiety is one of the causes of the modern craving for entertainment in worship. Christians are bored and satiated. They want no sermons, hymns, readings, or prayers. They've heard it all before. What they want is to be entertained and titillated, and so they flock to churches where the service is more like a variety show than divine worship. A pop combo replaces the organ, a brief self-help, self-esteem pep talk

replaces the exposition of God's Word, and smarmy, emotional ditties replace real hymns. It seems to me that the big entertainment rich mega-churches (who grow large not by winning converts but by stealing members from smaller churches) are the last stop on the line that leads to apostasy. People who no longer hunger for God's Word and sacraments proceed to churches that titillate their flesh, and after growing bored with that, they stop bothering with church altogether.

A third hindrance to hearing and learning God's Word is simple laziness. Let's face it: The Bible is not an easy book to read for people who are not used to serious reading. Even when we use easier modern translations, the Bible is serious reading. It takes time to get accustomed to reading the Bible, and many people are simply not willing to make the effort. The result is that any Bible reading that gets done is fitful and sporadic, bearing little fruit. It's so much easier to watch TV and surf the web.

How do we overcome these hindrances to continuing in Christ's Word? It is important to keep in mind that the Gospel is the chief means of grace. That is, it is the instrument through which God the Holy Ghost calls and gathers us into the faith, and through which He enlightens, sanctifies, and preserves us in the true faith to the end of our lives. The Word of God is what gives Baptism and the Lord's Supper their efficacy; they are God's Word connected to visible elements – water, bread, wine. Through the Word, God keeps us Christ centered, and grace centered. Through His Word we are continually assured of, and given the forgiveness of our sins. Therefore, all spiritual life and growth comes from God through His Word. As we use God's Word, He continues to enlighten us so that we gradually understand more and more. We grow in the wisdom and knowledge of God.

Understanding these spiritual blessings that God works through His Word should move us to a regular, increasingly fruitful use of the Word. St. Peter urges us, “As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the Word that ye may grow thereby.” Through the public administration of the Word and sacraments in church, and our private use of the Scriptures God is doing what is necessary to keep us in the true faith of Christ. God's Word is our great heritage. It is our life line and our strength.