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# Preaching John 8:31-36: Reforming Contexts Then and Now

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## *Texts in Context*

# Preaching John 8:31–36: Reforming Contexts Then and Now

KAROLINE M. LEWIS

**R**eformation Sunday is the only Sunday in the Revised Common Lectionary where a portion of chapter eight from the Gospel of John appears. With the exception of an alternate reading from John 7 (7:37–39) for Pentecost Sunday in Year A, chapters seven through eight never appear in the lectionary.

Of course, entire books are not included in the lectionary (Esther, for example), but whenever sections of texts are skipped or missing, we should always question why. The responsible preacher will not only investigate the absent verses but also ask the hard theological questions about what verses that have been deemed to cause discomfort. Difficult texts are not likely to appear in regular reading for the general public. Yet how one defines “difficult” is contextually determined. For example, contemporary preachers should think twice before allowing Mark 10:2–12 (Jesus’ teaching on divorce) to be read out loud in a congregation only then to preach on a different passage altogether. Lectionaries, for all of their benefits—and there are many—are also censoring tools. They predetermine theological thinking. They prescribe set relationships between texts. They choose the lenses through which we are invited to interpret texts. Yet when entire chapters are absent, that should be cause for significant question.

*The Gospel reading for Reformation Sunday is always John 8:31–36, yet preaching on this passage tends to overlook the critical contexts in which this pericope is located. Preaching John 8:31–36 on Reformation now will demand a careful analysis of the role of the passage in the Fourth Gospel, both as a means by which to respect its literary integrity as well as invitation to how it might shape a new hermeneutic for a new day.*

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 THE NARRATIVE CONTEXT OF JOHN 8:31–36<sup>1</sup>

Chapters seven and eight are justifiably omitted from the lectionary since there is little that is easy about this section of the Fourth Gospel. The setting is new, the Festival of Booths (7:2), one of the three Jewish pilgrimage festivals, and John is the only Gospel to mention it directly. The preacher then has to take into consideration what difference this particular festival makes as the setting for interpreting John 8:31–36. The Festival of Booths—also known as the Feast of Tabernacles or Sukkot—was the culminating festival of the year, a fall festival that celebrated the end of harvest, particularly the grape and olive harvest (Exod 23:14–19; 34:22–24; Lev 23:33–43; Num 29:12–38; Deut 16:16–17; 31:9–13). As its name intimates, part of the weeklong celebration included building temporary shelters—“tabernacles” or “booths”—in which to live during the festival, thereby recalling God’s presence and protection in the wilderness wanderings. That is, its essential celebratory focus is the presence of and provision from God in the wilderness. The two primary celebrations during the festival marked God’s provision of both water and light during the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites. It is against this backdrop that Jesus identifies himself as the source of water (7:37) and the light of the world (8:12). Understanding this religious setting is essential for making sense of and preaching the Reformation lection.

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Another challenge connected to these chapters is that there is no real “event” on which the dialogue hinges, no sign or miracle that has preceded or necessitated the conversation. The dialogue appears to lack a kind of grounding, which provides more homiletical challenge. When sections of text do not seem to have an identifiable purpose it becomes difficult to justify their usefulness for faith reflection. Therefore, rehearsing the functions of chapters seven and eight will go a long way toward assessing their worth in preaching and preaching them with integrity.

First, they bring another central festival of the Jews to the forefront of interpretational imagination when it comes to christological reflection. John weaves the entirety of who Jesus is revealed to be through the essential stories and festivals that marked God’s relationship with God’s people, a point of contact to discount any and all use of this Gospel as a means to justify anti-Semitism. While any categorization of the Gospels as more or less “Jewish” or more or less “Gentile” is a false dichotomy, there is everything to suggest how thoroughly Jewish the Gospel of John is. Moreover, the festivals are by definition acts to maintain relationship with God

<sup>1</sup>This section is largely adapted from Karoline M. Lewis, *John*, Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014) 118–119.

and remembrance of God's relational commitment. As a result, they underscore the important theme in the Gospel of John of this new relationship with Jesus and God made possible when the Word became flesh (John 1:14).

Second, within the overall narrative itself, chapters seven and eight bridge chapters six and nine in such a way as to link the two primary symbols of water from chapter six—"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (6:35)—and light in chapter nine—"As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (9:5). Beyond providing a simple bridge section between chapters six and nine, chapters seven and eight build on, inform, anticipate, and help interpret what precedes them and what follows them. As a result, preaching the Bread of Life discourse should draw on the development of Jesus as the source of living water (7:37) and preaching on the healing of the man blind from birth and its discourse should refer to Jesus' revelation as "the light of the world" in 8:12. Whenever preachers can see these larger literary and narrative connections between texts, they become better preachers and their congregations become better readers of the Bible.

Third, these chapters represent the converging and culminating conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders first intimated in chapter two with the temple incident (John 2:13–22). Critical to preaching any portion of chapters seven and eight in John is to recall the Gospel's intended audience. Most Johannine scholars agree that the community for which John writes represents a Jewish group that has been excommunicated from the dominant representative Judaism. Three times there is reference to *aposynagōgos*, "being put out of the synagogue" (9:22; 12:42; 16:2). The language of chapters seven and eight—and even the language of Jesus in these chapters—is consistent with a sectarian perspective that sets itself in opposition to the principal party, in part to build identity. The people of the Johannine community find themselves expelled from their larger community and thereby from virtually every communal aspect they have ever known. This includes friends, family, synagogue, social structures and, in the case of a gathering together (what synagogue means) for worship of God, separation from God.

Without this situational information, the language found in chapters seven and eight in the Gospel of John, and in particular what we hear from Jesus, will continue to be used, as has been its history, to justify anti-Semitism. Omitting these chapters from the lectionary does not erase this propensity nor will it solve an ongoing pastoral reality—that many of our congregational members would find themselves quite comfortable in the world of John's Gospel, asking the same questions as those of the Johannine community, "Why don't the Jews believe in Jesus?" Or, to put it another way, "Pastor, why doesn't so-and-so (a Jewish family member or friend) believe in Jesus?" It is still the case that the people in the pews do not know that the audience to which John was written were themselves Jews, not because these congregation members are obtuse but because they have been ill-advised and ill-informed by our preaching and by ecclesial decisions that eliminate

unpleasantries in the history of biblical interpretation. Granted, when a preacher stares down the week and tries to imagine how the sermon is going to get done, tackling the historical issues of first-century Judaism, Jewish-Christian debate, and anti-Semitism, not to mention the host of theological issues raised in all three topics, seems impossible and best avoided. At the same time, tending to the historical, narrative, and even pastoral contexts of John 7–8 opens up possibility for preaching the Reformation lection anew. The Reformation was an exercise in new theological thinking and eventually was forced to defend itself against the dominant representation of church.

Of course, a related point of challenge is how John 8:31–36 gets interpreted through the lenses of the other lectionary texts that surround it. How Paul interprets the Christ event is not the same as the author of John. How Paul means central theological terms and commitments is not the same as the Fourth Evangelist. To conflate its commitments and claims with other texts dedicated to this Sunday will overlook its unique contribution to what it means for a denomination to identify itself as a reforming church. Preaching on this passage on Reformation Sunday in this significant anniversary year will want to resituate or recontextualize this passage, not only for the sake of the Fourth Gospel and its unique witness to the person and ministry of Jesus, but also for the sake of how the Fourth Gospel might shed new light on translating the Reformation now.

### WHY JOHN 8:31–36?

“Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free’” (John 8:31–32). From the perspective of language alone, there are many reasons that this lection from John makes sense for Reformation Sunday. It seems to uphold primary tenets of the Reformation, and a Reformation anniversary—both yearly and the anticipated five hundred year celebration—elicits invitation to revisit the critical claims, arguments, and assertions of this significant event in church history. With terms included in this reading such as “word,” “truth,” “freedom,” and “sin,” this brief pericope from John appears to summarize the main theological issues around which the Reformation took shape. Yet, what and how these terms mean for John differs from how this vocabulary gained a life in Reformation imagination.

By way of introduction (8:31), Jesus directs his comments to the Jewish leaders who show belief in what he has said thus far. The preacher should imagine locating the listeners in the same position: What have the designated believers heard behind the words that Jesus articulates for them here? Bring the listeners up to speed. Put them in the place of those who have heard Jesus’ words up to this point. What is it that they need to hear that is revealed in what Jesus now has to say?

These opening verses (8:31–36) lead to the closing section of chapter 8, which is primarily a focused argument on claims of ancestry with Abraham. “If you con-

tinue in my word” as rendered by the NRSV is better translated, “if you abide in my word.” The verb *menō* used here is the same verb used throughout the Gospel that is variously translated as “remain, stay, and abide.” The condition is subjunctive, conditional. That is, this is a moment of crisis for these nascent believers. If you abide, where it is certainly questionable as to whether or not you will, is the nature of the subjunctive condition. “You will be set free” appears only this one time in the entire Gospel of John, which makes it all the more likely that preachers will yoke it with Rom 3.

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*Jesus does not stop talking in 8:36, and perhaps the preacher should not either when it comes to wrestling with concepts of God that are actually at the heart of the Reformation*

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The rebuttal to Jesus’ invitation refers to Abraham and ancestry, but Jesus means freedom that makes possible being children of God for the world. Contrary to their denial, Abraham’s ancestors *have* been slaves, namely, to Pharaoh. Verse 8:34 reiterates the concept of sin, the sin of unbelief when it comes to this Gospel. And 8:35 contrasts the position of a slave with that of a child, which is what Jesus promises. The glorious end of the lectionary pericope, “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (8:36), is not the end of this chapter. A Reformation preacher might imagine extending this pericope to explore the ways in which this Gospel actually might give witness to the struggles of the Reformation itself rather than simply its outcomes. Jesus does not stop talking in 8:36, and perhaps the preacher should not either when it comes to wrestling with concepts of God that are actually at the heart of the Reformation.

## WORD

*Sola scriptura* is central to the Reformation and for good reason. The emphasis on God’s word counteracted the contemporary church’s perceived corruption of supplementing God’s word with other forms of justification. *Sola scriptura* also reclaimed the word’s essential power in the lives of God’s people. Luther’s translation of the Bible into German is nothing short of incredible. This act alone made it possible to abide in God’s word in such a way that was never possible before. While the NRSV translates John 8:31 as “If you *continue* in my word,” the term is *menō*, to abide, as noted above. Used over forty times in the narrative, this is the primary term by which the Fourth Evangelist designates the relationship between Jesus and God, and subsequently, the relationship between God and the believer. While it is translated a number of different ways (abide, remain, stay, continue) it is always *menō*. This repetition not only reiterates this theme of abiding—that to abide in Jesus is what it means to believe in Jesus—it also keeps the reader, the listener, in the

text. The repetition creates the experience of abiding. Sermons on John will do the same.

To abide in the Gospel of John is to abide in God, in Jesus, as close as is intimated by 1:18 and 13:23. To abide in God's word is to be at the breast of God (*kolpos*). To abide in the word is fundamentally a relational claim, not necessarily an argument for the primacy of God's word—assumed as Scripture—that is the hallmark of the Reformation claim. Furthermore, the “word” in the Gospel of John is the Word made flesh. It is not written Scripture, but the incarnation of God in Jesus, the humanity of God in our midst. We might imagine that this itself could be a Reformation truth to claim. Luther's insistence on the elimination of a mediator between God and God's people finds its fullest expression in this radical intimacy that John portrays. Not only should there be no one, no thing, that stands between the believer and God, and in addition, the believer and God's word, but the revelation of God's word invites the kind of closeness for which Luther argued. Re-preaching this Reformation text might imagine a focus on this intimacy, a way to envision *sola scriptura* in a profoundly different way.

## TRUTH

The search for truth is at the core of the Reformation project. Of course, how truth is defined is the key issue. For Luther, it was a search for theological truth, or at least a truth on which he could rely. It was a truth grounded in knowledge, in apologetics, in biblical interpretation. It was a truth that sought the true identity of God. But the truth of which John speaks is Jesus as the true revelation of God. This is, in part, where the Reformation gets it right. God's revelation in Jesus is a truth claim that trumps other theological commitments. But where all movements, the Reformation included, can go astray is to insist on a definition of truth that might take Jesus' claim out of context. This is the danger of any denominational pull, of course. And while the Reformation did not have as its intent denominational distinction, that was its result. How “truth” has then been negotiated in religious expression leans far from how the “truth” is understood and expressed in John.

Later in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus will say to his disciples, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). As much as this verse has been favored to justify the absoluteness of salvation in Jesus Christ, this claim is not exclusionary on Jesus' part, as much as we would hope it to be or wish it to be. It is in response to Thomas's very honest and vulnerable question—“How can we know the way?”—when Jesus begins to tell his disciples of his departure. This “I AM” statement from Jesus is in the context of the Farewell Discourse—five chapters if we include the foot-washing, the meal, Jesus' prayer, and Jesus saying goodbye to his disciples. If we take seriously that the Johannine community was a community put out of the synagogue for their belief in Jesus, their definition of truth is very different than that of the Reformation, than that of our own.



## FREEDOM

Luther's interpretation of the Bible was through a very particular lens—his own need for personal freedom from the requirements of the law as he deemed them. The measurements of God's righteousness were perceived to be so beyond his reach that freedom was a pull that is hard to measure. And so, freedom rings strong from these verses and rightfully so. It is no small matter to realize the ways in which our bondage to sin needs release.

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Yet, to be set free in the context of the Gospel of John is not the same as Luther's angst vying for a way to escape the weight of his own decrepitude. To be set free according to Jesus and according to the Fourth Evangelist is to be free to see that, in Jesus, God is present, offering a relationship that is one of abiding, love, provision, sustenance, nurture, and protection; a relationship that is not bound to the restraints of past worship and sacrifice, because it cannot be; a relationship that is not restricted by limited perceptions of God, because God loves the world. And the only way one can preach this text as freedom from sin is to say that in Jesus lies the possibility of intimate relationship with God, not the liberation from your sinful nature. This has everything to do with the relationship found in Jesus' claim, "You will know the truth." To know the truth is synonymous with being in a relationship with Jesus.

Luther needed a specific freedom—and this is the crux of the issue. Freedom can never be universal or generalized. The power and potency of freedom depends on its specificity. Otherwise, general statements about freedom will ring like a clanging cymbal, unable to connect with the real-life circumstances out of which the cries for freedom originate. Luther needed theological freedom. Ecclesial freedom. Perhaps even personal freedom. Luther was searching for a freedom about God he never knew—and this is where he and John have something in common. The Johannine community needed a similar kind of freedom—a freedom to know and believe that the God in whom they believed was the God they could trust. When the God whom you trusted has now revealed God's self in a different way, freedom is essential. You have to think outside of the box and begin to trust that God knows what you do not.

## SIN

Sin is a complicated reality that we cannot define uniformly across the Bible. How sin is constructed and construed by each biblical author demands respect and



regard. For the Fourth Gospel, sin is not culpability for moral digressions. Sin is not a category of morality. For John, sin is fundamentally a lack of relationship with God. Sin represents the state of not believing, which itself is synonymous with not being in relationship with God. And maybe this is the key for Luther as well. Luther needed a relationship with God that he did not have, one which he had been denied and which he deeply desired.

The community for which the Fourth Gospel was written knew or suspected the same. Estranged from their community, put out of their synagogue, they were forced to know sin at its deepest core—separation from God. Sin is the absence of God. Not because God is absent, but because we think God is.

#### REFORMATION PREACHING OF JOHN 8:31–36 NOW

The irony should not be lost that the one passage found in the Revised Common Lectionary from chapters seven and eight is for Reformation Sunday, when Martin Luther's writings about and against the Jews are well-known. Keep on reading past 8:36 and you will hear, "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. I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father" (8:37–38). Even more troubling are Jesus' words in 8:44, "You are from your father the devil."

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Why not to preach John 8:31–36? Because these passages have been and continue to be proof to justify anti-Semitism. Left on their own, they fuel mistrust and misinterpretation, misunderstanding and misappropriation. At the same time, however, eliminating these chapters from worship and regular preaching only fans the fires of suspicion. At best, churchgoers will ask what their pastor is trying to protect them from. At worst, we perpetuate the notion that the relevancy of the Bible can still be a selective process.

Translating, preaching, teaching, and interpreting the tenets of the Reformation for the twenty-first century demand careful and concise exegesis of texts that capture the imagination of the Reformers but also have a life beyond them. We have to take seriously the ways in which texts are contextualized, both past and present. Losing sight of the context in which John wrote will overlook a fundamental resonance between Luther and John, for example. Here was a community marginalized and outcast, engaged in a "spiritual and theological battle" where "the Jewish religious authorities were dictating the shape of the Johannine Chris-

tians' faith lives."<sup>2</sup> And rightly so. This is the truth of the living word of God. When we archive or centralize key texts for the sake of preserving theological claims, we have ceased to maintain the very tenets on which the Reformation was grounded and in which we trust the fact that God's word is living. Texts in context of Reformation, therefore, mean a call to renewal. A call to recreation. A call to true reformation. Reformation hermeneutic is reformativistic hermeneutic. While this seems obvious, it is not always assumed and so has to be stated again when it comes to engaging the Bible. This requires a recommitment to constant reform when it comes to what the Bible says and means, in its past, present, and future contexts.

Where the Reformation and its commitment to reform go astray is when they forget their heart. Reformation, by definition, is a constant moving force—dynamic in its intention and open to theological surprise. When preaching the Reformation or preaching from the perspective of the Reformation is a static place and space, it is no longer able to be what it intended to be in the first place.

Furthermore, reformation preaching is preaching texts in contexts that are committed to reform, that are committed to the reforming reality of God. At its heart, as much as it tries desperately to deny it, reformation is constant re-creation. Reformation preaching looks for texts where reform is taking place—like what we see in John 8:31–36—not for the sake of betterment, competition, or judgment, but for the sake of confession of our God who is committed to an ongoing revelation of God's self. That is a hermeneutic worth our time and energy, a hermeneutic that stakes its truth not in God's word as defined only in a certain time and place, but believes in God's living word for the new contexts in which it takes on flesh once again. ⊕

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<sup>2</sup>Gail R. O'Day, John, in *the New Interpreter's Bible*, volume 9 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 649–650.