

# "If you **Abide** in My Word"

John 8:31-36

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*based on a message by Pastor William Cwirla*

It's one of America's favorite holidays. We spend six billion dollars per year on it, surpassing Thanksgiving, Easter, Memorial Day, 4<sup>th</sup> of July, or Labor Day. It's second only to Christmas. Halloween. Where did this once obscure holiday, now wildly popular, come from?

"Halloween" comes from two words. "Holy" and "eve". What is this holy eve? It refers to the evening of "all hallowed day" or "All Saints Day", which is on November 1. All Saints Day is the day Christians traditionally remember believers of old who were especially good role models of faith - many of whom were persecuted, tortured, and/or died, rather than renounce Jesus. Hallowed evening, Halloween, is the beginning of All Saints' Day starting at sundown on October 31st.

499 years ago tomorrow, in 1517, a monk named Martin Luther honored the faithful saints of the past by choosing the eve of All Saints Day, hallowed eve, October 31<sup>st</sup>, as the day to post his 95 Theses on the door of the church at Wittenberg, Germany, challenging the corruption in the official church about the notion that salvation in Christ could be bought with money or works. We remember it as "*Reformation Day*," a fitting celebration of the restoration of the same biblical faith held by the saints throughout church history, all the way back to the book of Acts, which was about "The Advance of the Gospel".

Reformation is getting back to the Truth. Reformation, implies what? Re-formation, that we've become deformed. We've drifted away, become corrupted, and need to be restored. When you restore something, what do you do? You don't start from scratch. You do what? You conserve what you can, and you fix what you can't. Reformations tend to be conservative. It's like pruning a perennial or trimming a tree. You don't dig out the whole plant and put another in its place. Nor do you whack down the whole tree to the root. You prune - selectively, skillfully, carefully - to bring it back to a state of health.

Luther didn't intend to split an already fractured church. Nor did he intend to start a new church, as if such a thing were possible. This was not about shaking a defiant fist at the Pope, nor was it about breaking away from the big bad Catholic Church, nor was it, as the radical reformation believed, some pure church emerging from the impure Catholic. This was supposed to be, and always is, about reformation. Restoration. Correcting what is wrong, conserving what is right. Bringing a sick patient back to health. Restoring them to health.

And so it is today. The Church is always and ever being reformed. It's not simply a once and done deal. There is always error, always drift, always a little sideways current or wind that blows the Church slightly off course ... until it's in danger of losing its way. That's true for each of us as well, isn't it? You and I are ever in need of reformation. It's not about once and done, is it? It's a daily thing. Daily sinning and drifting away. Daily repenting and turning back to our Savior and rejoicing. Being renewed. Reformed.

Jesus spoke to the Jews who had believed in Him. The verse before spoke of many coming to believe in Him. Then we hear of those who fail to believe. What went wrong? Did God fail? Did the Word fail to do its faith creating work? No. They turned from the Word. And we're always free to do that.

"*Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, 'If you **abide** in my word ...'.*" What does it mean to abide? To abide is to remain with. Not leave. Stay with. Faith is born of the Word. Faith is fed by the Word. Faith is sustained by the Word. And without the Word, what happens to faith? The same thing that happens if we stop feeding, stop taking in nourishment. Without the Word, faith dies.

"*If you abide in my Word you are **truly** my disciples.*" Anyone can call themselves a "Christian." But to be a disciple is to abide in the Word of Jesus, that is, to be connected to Jesus by hearing His Word, and having His Word have its way with us, day in and day out. Daily nourishing our faith.

The same word "abide" is used in Jesus' saying of the vine and the branches. A branch abides in the vine and draws life from it. Cut off from the vine, what happens to the branch? It withers. It

becomes fruitless. And eventually, it dies. And what do you do with a dead branch? You cut it off and throw it into the fire. Cut off from the Word, that's what happens to our faith. It becomes fruitless and dies.

There is a promise though, for those who stay in the Word of Jesus, abide in Him. **"You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."** You see it now and then over university doorways. It's posted at the CIA headquarters. "The truth will set you free." But what is the truth? How are we to know the truth? Where do we get this truth? The truth spoken of in this phrase is not found in a university. It's not found in a philosophy or in the sciences. It's found in Jesus, which is what the Word of God is all about from beginning to end. (Lk 24:27)

*"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* Anyone here need to be set free from anything? Can't think of anything? Neither could the Jews who were talking with Jesus. *They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin."*

*In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.* (Judges 17:6) Sound familiar? Sounds so freeing! We tend to think what about sin? That it is the greatest of freedoms – to do whatever we want, whenever we want. What could be more freeing? To have no one telling us what to do, especially God.

*Everyone who practices sin is a **slave** to sin.* Us slaves? No way! Yes, slaves. Slaves who cannot do what we want to do. Because of the sin in us, that keeps erupting out of us in hurtful words, selfish deeds, shameful thoughts, and impure desires. And it's a slavery that is dangerous and deceitful because it masks itself as freedom. For you think you can do whatever you want, but what you want is what your slavery tells you to want. (Pastor Peasant)

That's what Luther first realized, the situation he was in - that he was a slave to sin. That all those things he was being told to do and told that he should do, and could do, if he just tried hard enough, he couldn't do. And the harder he tried, the worse it got. The more he looked at himself, the more he confessed, the more he saw his sin. He couldn't stop it, and he couldn't get around it. It was a tornado tossing him about that he couldn't get away from. It was a cancer growing within him that he couldn't cut out. They told him he was free, but he knew the truth was far different than that. He was in bondage, a slave to sin.

And so are you. And so am I. And the person next to you. That's why you sin. You're not a sinner because you do sins. You do sins because you're a sinner. That's why you sin, even though you don't want to. You want to do what's right, but don't. (James Douthwaite)

Contrary to popular opinion, in our natural born state, there is no such thing as "free will" when it comes to spiritual matters. As children of Adam and Eve, we don't have the freedom to choose God or reject Him. We all reject Him (Rom 1:18 ...). Luther called it *"the bondage of the will"*. Our wills have been bound, enslaved, to sin. As spiritual slaves, we are completely powerless and completely mastered by sin. He calls the shots. He's in charge of us.

The answer? We must be ... "born again." (John 3) And there's only ONE thing in the world powerful enough to free us from our slavery. What is that? (Rom 1:16) *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.* (John 6:44) "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." (Romans 10:17) *"Faith (in God, instead of in the tempter) comes through ... the Word of Christ."*

*"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"* from master sin. You know, we have a lot of problems. Our biggest problem? Not politics. Not the election. Not the candidates. Not the other party. Our biggest problem is our sin. Why did Jesus come down? Not to straighten out our politics. We've got bigger problems than that! Our biggest problem is not the election or the candidates, but our heart. And Jesus came to free us from our biggest problem - a heart that's enslaved to sin.

The Son came down to us. The Son joined us in our humanity. The Son stood side by side with the slave, to free us. To redeem us. To rescue us and buy us back ... to Himself. Jesus was the only one not enslaved by sin. He was LORD over sin, taking upon Himself our sin, and our death, and nailing it

all to Himself on the cross. The Son became the slave, so that the slave might become the son. And *if the Son sets you free, you are free, indeed!*

In Luther's day, it was all about merit. Your sins and your merits. Kind of like bad karma and good karma. Your merits had to outweigh your sins on the scales of God's justice, and Jesus was holding the scales. And if you fell short, well ten thousand years in purgatory for you. Unless, of course, you buy this indulgence letter. Or perhaps you can negotiate with the saints to give you some of their extra merits. Or better even, the blessed Virgin who has lots of extra merits. Or best of all, Christ Himself who is brimming over with merit. It was all about transaction. This for that. Merits for sins. Bookkeeping. The Law.

The good news that propelled the Reformation, the good news that the church was beginning to lose and got back to, is that God declares the unrighteous to be righteous. *"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."* (Luke 18:13) God justifies the ungodly, through Christ Jesus. In Jesus you are free. Free from enslavement to Sin. Free from the Law's condemnation. Free from Death. Free to live before God as a justified sinner. Free to serve your neighbor in love.

(1 Timothy 2:4) ... *who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.* The Son became a slave to make the slave a son. That is the reforming Word for a distracted church. That is the Word that calls us back to the core, to the cross. When we're distracted by everything that needs to be done, by everything that's going on in the world, this is the Word that tells us to be quiet before God, and hear what He has to say to us.

*"If you abide in my word, (reformation happens when we remain in the Word, in Jesus) you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* Justified - by grace alone, through faith alone, because of Christ alone. That's worth having a Reformation. Not just once, but every day.