**Freedom in God’s Clear Word**

Based on [John 8:31-36](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Jn8.31)

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Reformation Sunday

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Almost 500 years ago, Martin Luther posted 95 Theses, topics for academic debate on the church door in Wittenberg. This was not an act of vandalism, the church door was supposed to be used for that purpose. The topics for debate were written by Luther in Latin, the churches language. But these Theses were taken down from the church door, copied and disseminated throughout Germany. Eventually, some friends of Luther translated the 95 into German for the common people to read. The newly invented printing press made it possible for mass reproduction and distribution of these Theses, which dealt with issues like "**What is true repentance**" and "**Does the Church truly have the right to sell God's grace as a means of raising funds for the church...as was happening?**" The common people read these theses and resonated to many of them. And thus began what we remember as Reformation Day on October 31st every year.

Maybe you've heard that story before, of Martin Luther pounding his paper on the church door. Maybe you've seen pictures of it. To remember the Reformation as beginning on that day, with that event--I think--is a mistake. Nailing posters to a door on public display, well it *looks* like an act of protest and defiance...**as if Martin Luther was a rebel, thumbing his nose at all authority because he wasn't going to let any church tell him what to do.** That is a mistake. **He was not a protestor, which is why the Lutheran Church doesn't rightly call itself "Protestant."** We don't *protest* authority, as Christians, we submit to all God-given human authority, the church, the government, parents, bosses, etc. The proper attitude of Christians is submission not protest, and so we submit in all things. The *only exception* is when that authority *commands us* to do something against God's Word. That is when we must obey God and not men. Even then we don’t protest, we confess and defend and debate.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Martin Luther was not standing outside the church like someone picketing outside of Parliament. That makes it look like Luther was trying to rally support for his cause "**outside of the system**" to start a revolution of the common people against the church. Luther wasn’t trying to gain votes through propaganda like our popular democracy does today. No, he wrote his 95 Theses in Latin, the language of the educated--**so that his colleagues and other theologians could debate them clearly and concisely without disorder and disruption**--by using Scripture and plain reason *so that*…Why? So they would come to a *consensus* and *agreement* on what Jesus taught his apostles and teaches his church until the end of the age.

**Martin Luther had, above all else, a profound and fundamental faith in the *clarity* of the words of Holy Scripture.** He believed that if the church would just sit down and read the bible on its own terms, not bringing in your own *personal philosophy*, or your *common sense* or "street smarts", or your “two bits” or your “***life experience***” to the table, but if *you just read the plain words of what the bible actually says*, there would be no disagreement on the main teachings of Jesus and his apostles...what we call the Gospel. Because the Gospel is the Truth and only ***it*** can set us free; only God's Word gives us knowledge of the truth.

And so, Ladies and Gentlemen, these few words of Jesus today are the basis for our whole message. Jesus says, to his disciples, "**You shall *know* the truth, and the truth shall make you free**." This is "***the***" main thesis of the Reformation. Jesus promises that **we will know**...that is understand, ascertain, unequivocally **g*rasp***..."know" the truth, and that "knowledge" is what will make you free. And so friends, here is what the Reformation was about, (at least to Luther, the man who unwittingly set it in motion): "**Is the bible a confusing and unclear book that could be rightly interpreted in many different ways, or is it clear in what it teaches? Is the Word of God, *clear*, so that if everyone sat down and read it without bringing their own ideas or speculations to the table, that they would all agree?"** Luther said yes, the Church of his day said no. Hence, the Reformation.

The church—by that I mean (in this context), the institutional hierarchy of priests, and bishops and cardinals all the way up to the pope, began their interpretation of God’s Word with the ***assumption*** that the bible is basically and unclear and mysterious book. That is why, they argued, the institutional church needs to have supreme and final authority over interpreting it. And so if Tom, Dick and Harry disagree about what the bible says, *who's to say who is right?* Well...the church legislates, that is, legally declares what the “right interpretation” is. And because you were first a member of the church, you were--in Luther's day--expected to submit your conscience to the final declarations of these men.

Now Luther agreed with the church back then that the Bible only has one interpretation…the one ***God meant*** when it was written. But whereas the church said the bible means what *we* say; Luther said, no the bible means what **it** says. The bible interprets itself, and doesn’t need the insights of men to ***enlighten*** it.

Martin Luther argued that the church may speak the truth, but it is not the truth *because* the church speaks it. So then, as Pilate said to Jesus just before he sent him to be crucified, "**What is Truth**?" The Reformation answer, "***Truth is what the bible says***." "How do we know what the bible says?" We *read* it, and take it at its plain words.

Jesus said at the beginning of today's Gospel, "**If you abide in my Word, you are truly my disciples.**" What sets us free is the truth, and the Truth is **Jesus' clear and brilliant Words**. So you see friends, we don't use our human understanding to shine light on the darkness of the bible. No, the bible shines light on our darkened understanding. **The problem is that we don't know the truth. The solution: the truth has to be *given* to us in Jesus' words**. For he is the word made flesh, the walking talking bible, and just as he spoke from his lips to his apostles, now the bible is his lips to us today.

Because of the hand of God and the boldness of Martin Luther, so many people were convinced of this principle that “**Scripture alone**” gives Truth. It's because of that that a Reformation happened. But then something else happened. Something foreseen and terrible. There was a movement from the darkness of “**church interprets scripture**” to the light of “**scripture interprets scripture**” back into the darkness, where today the individual Christian says “**Neither the church, nor the scripture interprets scripture, but *my own heart and my own reason* *interprets* scripture**.”

And so today, mass Christianity has been moving towards the chaos it now finds itself in; that there is no *accountability* in interpreting scripture outside of the individuals own heart. And that’s why there is so much disunity in Christianity…and we all should shed a few tears for that today. There's disunity, not because people disagree too much, but because, in the interest of peace and getting on with their lives, they “agree to disagree” until God’s word means anything and therefore means nothing. Let me give you an example of such interpretation…

Ladies, imagine your husband feels sick and sluggish and so he goes to the doctor. (Stranger things have happened, I'm sure). **Your husband goes to the doctor, and the doctor writes down his recommendations on a piece of paper and sends him home.** Ladies, you read that paper and the Doctor has written to your husband, "**Your cholesterol is too high, stay away from fatty foods because they are not good for your heart, and you are already at high risk of an attack**."

No sooner do are you finished reading the note when you turn and see your husband eating a double-grease burger and poutine with extra gravy and cheese curds. And you say to him, "**Honey, didn't you read what your doctor wrote?**" "Oh, sure I did" "**Well then, why are you eating fatty foods.**" “**Because dear, he wasn't being "literal**." When he said that I should stay away from fatty foods, and that my cholesterol is too high and my heart is in danger, **I interpreted him to mean that my life is filled with the cholesterol of stress, and it's bad for my ‘heart’--that is, the way I feel about myself. And so I should stay away from fatty foods, meaning “from those things that clog the arteries of my self-esteem.”**

And so you see, honey, it's actually *good* that I'm eating this fatty food. **I think the doctor would approve, because I like it, and eating it relieves my stress and makes me happy.** You don't want me to be unhappy...do you dear? Ladies, what would you say?...***after*** you smacked him up-side the head of course? You'd say..."**That's clearly not what the doctor *meant*, he meant your cholesterol is too high...that's why he *said it.***" And your husband says, "Well, that's just *you're* interpretation, and you shouldn't force your beliefs on me. I guess we'll just have to agree to disagree." Welcome to bible interpretation in the 21st century—the practice of driving a wedge between what God said, and what he actually meant.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the way that Satan ended up convincing Eve to disobey God's clear word, was by driving a wedge between what God actually said and what he meant. The serpent begins his temptation with **"Did God actually say...you shall not eat?"** And then, ultimately, "**God couldn't actually *mean* for you not to eat the fruit, for he knows that it will make you wise like Him…and of course he would want you to be wise."** You see, Satan never tempts you by saying "Don't listen to God." Instead he persuades us to think that **God's Word is not identical with his Will**, and we do the rest.

Beloved friends, if you surrender to Satan on that point--that God's Word is not identical with his will--then God's Word is forever dark, and we will look for other ways to find out what God wants us to do. **When Eve was deceived**-and that's what the bible says--she was tricked by the crafty devil, meaning that when she took the fruit and ate it and gave it to her husband—**she actually thought she was doing what God wanted**. Because Satan had duped her into thinking that **what God *wanted* is not to be found in the plain meaning of what he actually said**. And so she was lost...in the dark. Totally at a loss to decide what to do. She was lost without the Truth. And so she turned to a new authority. She didn't have God's word to guide her so she *turned to her own reasoning*. And I quote: "**So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate**." She had lost God's Word and insodoing lost God's will. And she was left then with no basis to make a decision except, ***her own desires and what seemed right in her own eyes***. Sound like the life philosophy of anyone you know?

Today we remember the Reformation for what it was supposed to be--not a protest against the authority of the church to forgive sins--Christ *gave her* *that* authority, but a return to the clear, unambiguous, unanimous, authority of the Word of God over all. And that clear word clearly speaks God's clear will...that there should be a visible church on earth, that God gives authority to different earthly offices and institutions, such as Pastors and Churches, Governments and their officials, Husbands, Mothers, Parents, Teachers and others. **God-given authority is good and ought to be submitted to, for He is a God of order, not of chaos**.

But no one has the authority to correct God's Word, or stand above it, or treat it like an ink blot that means whatever comes to your mind when you first encounter it. **There are probably, literally thousands upon thousands of ways to interpret God's word, but there's only one right way and that’s the way that God intended when he spoke it**. And though any of you may be passive aggressive, saying one thing but trying to communicate the exact opposite--God doesn't plays such manipulative games. He spoke the world into existence and the world didn't have trouble understanding. He told the wind and the waves to be silent, and they stopped. I don't think his words need *our* help with interpretation.

Could you imagine if you needed surgery? Would you go under the knife of a man who went to a medical school that allowed multiple interpretations of their textbooks? **Would you get on an airplane if you knew the pilot read his aviation materials with a different interpretation than most other pilots?** Would you go hiking with a trail guide who reads maps the way many Christians read the bible today...like it can say whatever your heart wants it to say? Could you imagine if your Pastor taught the bible the way? Because the stakes in that case are much higher...*eternal* even.

Friends, you need a clear word from God to hear and to believe, otherwise you are left to follow your own desires and do what *seems* right in your own eyes. You are a slave to your appetites without the clear Word of God. You have to be able to say to somebody who contradicts the clear meaning of the bible, "**Yeah that is your interpretation, and I'm afraid it's wrong**." The Church needs to know that God's word is not ambiguous but clear. The Church in Martin Luther's day said we get that clarity by church decree. Martin Luther said the authority of the church is not to add human interpretations to the word…only to preach it as it stands. And that's why, in the Lutheran Church, we have our **Book of Concord**, which is a collection of writings that give the correct interpretation of God's Word. The Lutheran Church didn't pass a law saying, "**everyone must submit to what we say, because we can't be wrong**." Instead, the Lutheran church wrote down what it believed to be the clear teaching of scripture, and anybody who agrees to that clear teaching subscribes to it by joining the church. And gives up on all other interpretations for the one we believe Christ had when he spoke.

And this truth from Christ's lips makes you free. For you don't have to wonder whether you are interpreting Jesus rightly or not. If Jesus' words are unclear and misleading he is a piss-poor savior. But if his words are clear, and it's the human will and the human heart that is misleading...then we can know that if we put our wills and our hearts aside in reading the bible, we will not be *teaching the bible what to say*, but teaching what the bible ***says***.

We are bound to our sin, to the desires of our heart and to doing what is right in our own eyes. That is our lot until Christ comes again. We are slaves to our appetites and desires. But what Jesus did was set us free from them. Not that we no longer have sinful thoughts and desires, but we can now recognize them and hate them, and see them for what they are and repent of them...and have forgiveness. Your worries and anxieties, bills to pay, schedules to keep...what are they compared to the relief of knowing that the Son has set you free and delivered you into the safety of his word? And you are free so long as you remain in his Word. Free from doubt, free from wondering if God is really for or against me. That is the freedom of the truth, to know our sinfulness and to know our Saviour, Jesus Christ who remains in his father's house forever, and prepares a room there for you, that when this old creation is finally burned away...we will be taken to his safe abode and given new bodies that will not fail us, and new hearts and minds that will not mislead us, for we will live with our king forever.