**John 8:31** October 30, 2016

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*John 8:31 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.”*

Dear Friends In Christ,

So Jesus said, ***“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.”*** If you hold to my teaching…

**I. “Remain in my teaching” Is a Comfort**

This is something I don’t often do. I don’t like to criticize Bible translations because translating is *not* an exact science. It isn’t like converting Celsius to Fahrenheit: 32 degrees Fahrenheit is exactly 0 degrees Celsius. It will never change. One kilometer equals .621371192 miles. Always will. (No, that wasn’t off the top of my head. I looked it up on the internet.) But if you know two languages fluently, like some of our German speakers here, you know that translating isn’t like math. Translation is often not exact. And so I am not saying the NIV is wrong, I simply think it could be better.

What we have here as “If you *hold to* my teaching,” I would suggest would be better as “If you *remain* in my teaching.” ***[[1]](#footnote-1)*** Now there is a difference between *holding onto* (clenching fists) and *remaining in* (calmly flattened hands).

If Jesus said to us, ***“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples,”*** that really puts a lot of burden on us. Back in the old days one school had this death trap of a merry-go-round. The merry-go-round arms were about seven feet off the ground. Six chains hung down from the arms supporting a six-sided merry-go-round seat. Students were supposed to sit on the seats. It was strictly forbidden to hang on to the chains and let your body fly out as the merry-go-round went around. But kids are kids. If the teacher on duty ever had to go to the bathroom in the middle of recess, sure enough, kids jumped up, grabbed the chains, told the pushers to push, and how they flew! With the centrifugal force, you could fly almost straight out while holding onto a chain! And when you held on, you held on! Because if you let go you might smash into the monkey bars or fly into a schoolmate. You held on!

Is that what Jesus is saying, ***“If you hold to my teaching.”*** Better hold on tight! Well, that is not untrue. And it is the sort of language the Bible uses elsewhere. But here the better translation is ***“If you remain in my teaching.”*** Instead of stressing the danger and our effort, Jesus stresses our safety. We are already *in* Jesus’ teaching. To those who believe him, we are already on a smooth, safe place with Jesus. You have forgiveness and eternal life. Jesus is protecting you against danger. Jesus is promising that he will use *all* the events of our lives for our good. As believers in Jesus, we are safe. This is really what Jesus says when he tells us to ***“remain in my teaching.”*** It’s not like we are just barely hanging on for dear life, just hoping we don’t fly off to our destruction. Jesus assures us we already stand in God’s good graces.

But there is one danger, and that one danger is our own willfulness. That’s why he said, ***“remain in my teaching.”***

You have seen it in people. People who have a wonderful marriage, family and job, yet engage in self-destructive behaviors, things that ruin their marriage, their family, their job. It is almost like they don’t want to be happy, to be content, to be safe. And if you are looking at that person from the outside, you just shake your head. But if you are close to that person, perhaps a spouse, a child, a friend, you don’t shake your head, instead your heart aches for that person. And you wish and you pray that they could simply accept the good that they have and enjoy it. You pray that they could chase out whatever demons it is that make them discontented, chasing after lies.

And that is Jesus in our reading. Because as he looks at people who have begun to believe in him, and he knows that he is offering them everything that they need to stay right with God, if only they will not refuse it. As Jesus looks at them he tells them, ***“remain in my teaching… Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*** Don’t be fooled, don’t give in, stay with me. Keep me as the only Savior and the only Truth.

**II. “Remain in my teaching” Contradicts the Spirit of Our Age**

The problem is that we really don’t think like that anymore, do we?

Here’s a question a little off the subject: Do you like Italian? Italian food—do you like it? How about Japanese, Chinese, German, Thai, Mexican, Indian, Korean? Within 10 miles, you can eat food from probably a dozen different countries. One of the marks of modern life is the wide variety of foods and restaurant. Which is your favorite?

It wasn’t always that way. Growing up in a house 40 years ago or more, your parents were probably meat-and-potatoes kind of people. Spaghetti was exotic and radical. In our house we had one little bottle of Mexican hot sauce in the refrigerator. And it sat in there for years. It was this mysterious, exotic bit from another land, sitting right there in our refrigerator! Now foreign foods are part of life.

Music is sort of like that, especially for young people. Kids pride themselves on having an eclectic collection of music, music of many types. If you like country music, well and good, but you should also have rock and rap and alternative and even classical music in your collection. People who stick to only one type of music are kind of narrow minded.

In nearly every facet of life: food, music, clothing, just about everything, we have choices, lots of choices. And it is expected that the younger you are, the wider your tastes should be. This concept of “choice” goes hand-in-glove with the concept of “toleration”.

Now the concept of “toleration” has positives. On the positive side, “toleration” is behind enjoying food of many different ethnic backgrounds. “Toleration,” at its best, is behind the fact that our kids can have friends at school, and I really mean friends not just acquaintances, even though they have different skin colors and backgrounds, to a degree unknown in past generations. This is good! Whether we like it or not, this world is far more diverse in its food, music and people than it used to be. And we accept that.

But what about when it comes to truth? Are all philosophies just different versions of truth? Do I have to accept every religion as equally valid? If one person tells me that there is a Savior who graciously forgives my sin, and another person tells me that I have to personally make up for my sins—how can both be right? If one says that forgiveness is free through faith, and another one says that I have to pay money to be forgiven, and another says there is no such thing as sin and forgiveness—are all right? If one says that there is a special book that contains God’s revelation to humanity and another says that there is no such thing, must I allow both to be true? Are these differences as inconsequential as eating linguini for lunch and sweet-and-sour chicken for supper?

Jesus, the Savior of all people, didn’t think so. ***“If you remain in my teaching, you are really my disciples.”*** Jesus’ words are a comfort to the worried, just as much as they are a warning to the willful. Jesus here encourages the one who daily submits himself to God’s word, God’s word alone. This commitment to one source of truth over all others can earn the ridicule of others. “Be more broad minded. Stop being so hateful. Be more inclusive.” But there is Jesus telling us, ***“If you remain in my teaching, you are really my disciples.”***

Yet being on the only right path cannot be the source of proud boasting. Because Jesus tells us that we are sinners who need saving, we are sheep who need a shepherd, we are captives who need a ransom, we are sick and need a doctor, we are poor and need God’s assistance. How can such people be proud?

We cannot. And that is what makes the Christian witness to the world so sincere. It is people who faced a problem, and were *given* the solution. Not by our own thinking or choosing, but by God’s giving. Salvation given in a Savior from sin, and faith given by the Holy Spirit.

**III. “Remain in my teaching”: Scripture and Nothing Else**

And so in the face of the world that prides itself on a wide variety of cuisines, music, philosophies and religions, to that world Jesus says, “There is only one way to be saved, and my teaching teaches that one way.”

This “remaining in Jesus’ teaching” was crucial to Jesus. It is also what the Reformation was about. As a Catholic monk and university professor Martin Luther taught the Scriptures. Over years, Luther became more and more aware that his church was not, “remaining in Jesus’ teaching.”

There were all numbers of abuses. The most flagrant of which were the paper indulgences that prompted the event which many consider the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church, essentially the only denomination in western Europe, had decided that the Gospel of forgiveness through faith in Christ was letting people off too easy. Plus, it didn’t bring in enough money. So they invented the idea of purgatory. Purgatory, supposedly, was a place that even believers would have to suffer for thousands of years before going to heaven. The “Church” did this because they judged Jesus was letting sinners off too easy when he said, “He who believes in me shall live.” They did not like it that Jesus said to one criminal, “Today you shall be with me in paradise.” You can’t just let repentant criminals into heaven; they have to pay! The “Church” refused to believe that it is really as simple as when Jesus said to a young man, “Your sins are forgiven.” No, you can’t have that. If you just start to freely hand out forgiveness, people will get lazy.

But while the idea of purgatory could scare people, it still didn’t bring in the money. So they figured a way to get money out of people, and that was the promise that if you paid enough money to the church, you could get out of those years in purgatory. And for some more money you could get you deceased mother (Oh, how I hate to think of my mother in purgatory!) out of purgatory too. And so the racquet continued, without a shred of Christ’s teaching to support it.

And when Martin Luther looked at all that, he eventually realized that his church had not remained in Christ’s teaching. It had gone far astray. So he said, “Return to the Scriptures. Remain in Christ’s teaching!”

Today we hear the same sorts of whispering. Not only do we face a wide variety of foods and music, we have a wide variety of religious choices put in front of us which must be accepted as equal. And just like the person who eats only one kind of food is thought of as narrow minded, so too people who ***“remain in Jesus’ teaching”*** are mocked as narrow-minded, ignorant people.

Realize where this comes from. When you feel the pressure to adopt to new lifestyles, when people tell you that other religions are just as legitimate as our own, realize who is speaking. It is not Jesus. We must battle with the voices of the world that sound so reasonable, so tolerant, so concerned, and realize that they are lies.

Jesus’ unequivocal call in John 8 and elsewhere is the same as that of the Reformation. ***“Remain in my teaching.”*** Scripture alone is a revelation of God’s will. Scripture alone will govern our faith. Scripture alone is what makes us Christ’s disciples. Amen!

1. Without excessive detail, the same Greek vocabulary and structure is used in John 15:6-7 and translated “remain.” Of 117 instances of , the NIV translates it “hold to” only once, in John 8:31. Usually it is translated as “remain” or “stay.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)