

Who Spoke? John: 8:30-

33

by John H. Niemelä

INTRODUCTION

It's clear that in John 8, Jesus is speaking to a hostile audience. But then in vv 30-32, we find that some of the Jews believed in Him. Jesus speaks to them about abiding in Him. And then the tone changes once again. Beginning with the words "They said..." in v 33, we find hostility expressed. It seems as though the believers suddenly turn on Jesus. So questions are raised about whether the believers were true or false. But the more fundamental question is, who are "they"?

THREE VIEWS OF JOHN 8:30-33

There are three interpretations of the identity of the speakers in John 8:33.

One view is that the persons who are said to have believed in Jesus in vv 30-32 are the same people who then object to Him in v 33, and so are not true believers and hence are not born again.

A second view is that the new believers have *started believing*, but they need to persevere in their faith in order to obtain final salvation.

The third view is that the new believers mentioned in vv 30-32 are born again, and that it is actually the hostile crowd who speaks in v 33.

Here I would like to defend the third view.

JOHN 8:30-33 IS NOT CONTINUOUS

By *not continuous* I mean that the comment made in v 33 is not by the new believers mentioned in vv 30-32. The third person plural pronoun *they* in v 33 refers to the last people who spoke in John 8 (cf. John 8:22), the unbelieving larger crowd (as opposed to a small group that came to faith).

John first mentions these new believers in v30f. Thus, if they spoke in v 33, it would be their first speech in John. Note well: they would be *new speakers*, not *old ones*. So we must ask, does John introduce new speakers differently than old ones or non-speakers?

In fact, John's Gospel definitely prefers explicit *noun* designations for speakers (over implicit ones). For example, the seven times the Samaritan woman speaks (4:9, 11, 15, 17, 19, 25, and 28), *woman* is the subject. Not once does John have *she* as the subject. John strongly prefers noun subjects for speaking verbs (*especially* when introducing new speakers). Hence, his style of introducing speakers disproves the claim that John 8:30-33ff refers to a single group.

The fact that *apokrithēsan* (*they replied*) in John 8:33 lacks an explicit subject-word is significant. John introduces/re-introduces speakers 353 times. Only 79 of those lack an explicit subject-word. Virtually always, John uses this construction for re-introducing prior speakers. This stylistic issue alone would point to those who have heckled Jesus throughout the chapter as the speakers of 8:33.

In sum, this is an open and shut case. The new believers in v 30 are not identical to the hostile speakers in v 33.

Dr. John H. Niemelä is Professor of New Testament at Rocky Mountain Seminary, Englewood, CO. This article is excerpted from a message he gave at the 2013 GES Annual Conference.