

Who Objected? John 8:30-33

By John H. Niemelä

INTRODUCTION

It's clear that in John 8, Jesus is speaking to a hostile audience. Then, in vv 30-32, we find that some of the Jews believed in Him, and Jesus speaks to them about being His disciples. But in v 33 the tone suddenly changes. Beginning with the words "They said..." the hostile discussion resumes, and Jesus describes his interlocutors as *children of the devil*. Some Reformed interpreters think this verse shows that the new believers were actually false professors, because they did not persevere in their faith.

The question is, who are "they" who object to Jesus? Are they the new believers, or someone else?

THREE VIEWS OF JOHN 8:30-33

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

A second view is that vv 30-33 are not continuous. 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 vv 30-33 are not continuous and that the new believers mentioned are born again. The speakers in v 33 are not the believers, but the hostile crowd.

Here I would like to defend the third view.

TWO DIFFERENT GROUPS

According to the third view, vv 30-33 are not continuous. 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), i.e. the unbelieving larger crowd (as opposed to a small group that came to faith).

John first mentions these new believers in v 30*f*. 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 the question becomes, how does John introduce new speakers? Does he introduce them differently than old ones or non-speakers?

It may help to imagine a note in a proof-reader's copy of a children's book reading: "Pronouns never introduce new speakers as speakers." That's true here. 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 8:30-33^{ff} refers to a single group.

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

Why would John use a re-introduction formula to introduce a new group of speakers at the height of controversy? Judean hecklers were already attacking what Jesus said (at least since John 8:22). John re-introduces them as objecting to what Jesus taught some new believers: abiding in His word as disciples in His footsteps would free them.

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