

## “Back To Our Instruction Set”

Dr. D. Jay Losher, Jr.

29 October 2017 + Gaithersburg Presbyterian Church  
Jeremiah 31:31-34 + Matthew 22:34-46 = Reformers

**M**ichael King is a revered medicine elder of the Lakota people. In an effort to preserve tribal wisdom anthropologists from several universities arranged to interview King and video record. As they were setting up, and before the camera was rolling, Michael King stopped them: “I know why you are here,” he said, “I cannot help you.”



“What?”

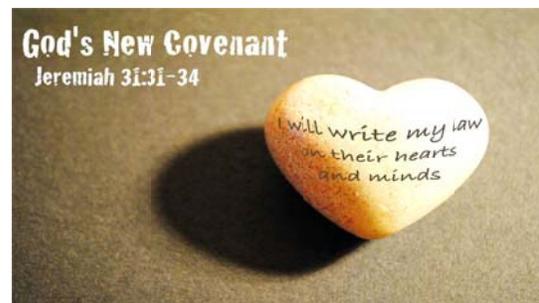
Noting their surprise, King repeated: “I cannot help you.”

The anthropologists had no idea how to take this, but fearing that he was saying the interview was over before it began, they rushed to ask him to explain. With great dignity, as if handling a precious and delicate heirloom, he said:

“I know why you are here. You have lost your instructions. The Creator Spirit gave instructions to all the peoples ~ each according to their needs. I cannot tell you yours. I can only tell you ours.”

**T**oday with great dignity we celebrate our roots, the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. These texts are ones the Reformers used to talk about restoration and recovery of God’s instructions:

- Jeremiah looking to a time when Israel would have their lost instructions written on their very hearts ~ when Israel would “No longer ... teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for [you will] all know me ... says the LORD.”
- And Jesus boiling down the whole of the Law of Moses into two simple instructions.





Reformers are those who call us back to our roots, who help us to recover our lost set of instructions. Martin Luther, John Calvin, Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, Gandhi, Desmond Tutu,

Clarence Jordan, Nelson Mandela, Jesus himself ~ they all harken back to a seminal moment when God gave us instructions, cutting through all the additions and accretions and corollaries and codicils which tend to attach like barnacles to God's words, weighing them down, obscuring them, burying them until we have indeed lost our instructions.

The Reformers' purpose is to help us recover our call from God ~ one like that extended to Moses at the burning bush: **"Let my people go."** On that same mountain years later God gave to Israel 10 Commandments, and a millennia later those 10 had grown to 613 commandments.<sup>1</sup>

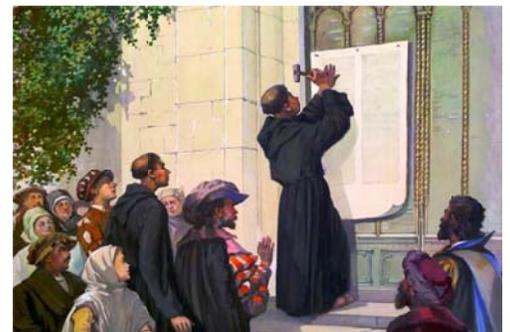


Jesus, true to form and with crystal clarity, says in essence: "You have heard it said there are 613 commandments, but I say to you there are but two:"

**"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ... And ... 'You shall love your neighbor**

**as yourself."**

Reformers call us back to our instruction set. Call it what you like, revitalization, contextualization, reformation, revival ~ it sure feels like we are in need of a new one of these, whatever we name it. It seems like every so often there has been an unraveling and then a re-weaving of the faith. What was once a compelling, brilliant, revolutionary idea has become institutionalized, stultified and barren. A new formulation of the faith consistent with the evolving times and new contexts takes off and the process begins yet again.<sup>2</sup>



It seems we may be in one of those times, in the middle of a new reformulation of the faith, repeating the process of the Great Reformation

now 500 years old having lived out a long and productive life. The adage *“reformed and always being reformed”* is absolutely true.

**O**n Reformation Day, many who talk of renewal are off target when they are saying that they want to restore the supposed golden age of Reformation, to take us back there. They may be wearing rose-colored glasses and forget that the Reformation was an age of high anxiety, chaotic times with the unravelling of economics, politics and societies, as well as religious faith.

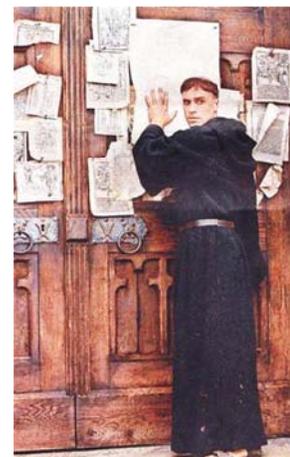
In other words, renewal can mean merely “having been Reformed” **but not** the second half, *“always to be reformed,”* that is, *remade*. Restoration of the old is not necessarily to build the new. Calls for renewal can actually camouflage resistance to anything new. Everything novel requires change, an openness to God and what God has in store for our future, not focusing on bringing back a supposed ideal past.

Far easier to revive the old, the traditional, the familiar than to give attention to where the Spirit is leading us ahead. Reformed is merely to reiterate. **But** *“always being reformed”* is emphatically different ~ a renewal, remaking, a continuous revolution.

**W**e do long for, hunger and thirst for clarity in transitional times such as these ~ in-between times. We hope like the Reformers of old for recovery of purpose, direction, even instructions from God.

Clarity comes in rediscovering what’s important, the things we should be focused on. That’s one of the important tasks for an interim time. Part of an interim’s job is to help the congregation recover real clarity about God’s direction, its instruction set.

**S**usan, my beloved, once had two temps at her job. Jess was a temp who could hear the general purpose of a project and she would get started on a task using her own good sense. Lilly on the other hand wanted a detailed road map and it sometimes became difficult, as in many projects Susan was often



figuring out the plan as they went along based on how things unfolded.

The Pharisees, Sadducees, priests and Levites were like Lilly. They thought it all hinged on the 613 individual commandments they counted in Scripture. The problem is that in keeping a whole set of rules, one can lose the sense that righteousness is a state of grace. Being lost in the details they thought they could trip Jesus up with what they supposed was a trick question: "What is the most important of these myriad commandments?"



Jesus is more like the temp Jess, looking instead to the overarching spirit, the general principles, the essence rather than the letter of the law. Jesus could see the forest for the trees. In the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther helped us see the forest for the trees, as did John Calvin and many others.

The great Reformers called us back to our instruction set. They did not create any new traditions nor any new teachings. They recovered instructions which had always been there but neglected, deemphasized and lost. They recovered the essential truth long neglected that God was grace-filled rather than full of wrath.

**A**s a preacher, my job is to help us see the forest for the trees. As a preacher my job is to help us recover our instruction set ~ to rediscover our first love, recover our direction, restore our idealism, regain the original passion which we once had in our journey with God.



An interim grows out of this purpose. We are on a journey together. In this journey we do not travel alone. Wherever we are on our path with God, we are never alone. We do this together.

It is a journey of recovering our instruction set. Some think that an interim's job is just to fill the pulpit and do a little pastoral care until the "real pastor" arrives. That's emphatically not me. This is a time of

rediscovery, of recovery, of rejuvenation, of revitalization: of rediscovery of our God purposed mission ~ of recovery of our original passion for the Gospel ~ of rejuvenation of our faith back to the source ~ of revitalization of our call from our LORD.

*“Always to be reformed.”* Indeed.

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<sup>1</sup> from the Talmud, *Tractate Makkot* 23b

<sup>2</sup> thesis of Phyllis Tickle in *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*