

Reformation Sunday

A HEART REFORMED

Jeremiah 31:31-34

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Analysis by Paul Jaster

31The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 32It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. 33But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

DIAGNOSIS: Heart Failure

Step 1: Initial diagnosis (External Problem) : *Damning Written Laws*

Written laws (like the Ten Commandments, US Constitution, marriage contracts, Hammurabi’s Code, Torah, traffic laws) are a great blessing. They keep societies “civil.” But they are also a great curse. For they damn and condemn us (even before we keep them or not) by the very fact that they exist and are needed. Add to this how fragile these laws are. Think, for example, of

the recent economic crisis: Volumes of well-intended regulations and deregulations (to stimulate the economy and enable citizens to own their own home) overseen by the Congress, Treasury, Federal Reserve and Security Exchange Commission did not stop gravely irresponsible borrowing or lending. Hardly were the Ten Commandments inscribed into slabs of Sinai's granite by God's own hand as a lasting sign of God's covenantal love, then God's marriage partner, Israel, broke them. "Laws were made to be broken," the saying goes. Oh, no! Laws were made because we are broken. This is the "theological use" of the law; or better, the "kerygmatic use"—for the "civil use" of the law is also theological and God's use, too. (This is the way "law" is used in Gospel preaching. The Reformation's *lex semper accusat*. The law always accuses.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : A Petrified Heart

In Mark 10:5, Jesus links the mere "issuance" of written laws to the hardness of the human heart. What Jesus says about divorce applies to all laws. Even when people "keep the law" and divorce "lawfully," it still exposes the hardness of the human heart, separation from God, and a God-displeasing rift in relationship to others by the very fact that laws are necessary in the first place. "Yes," Jesus says, "divorce is legal. But divorce laws still condemn ALL of you (those divorcing or not, including those of you not married) by the fact that such legislation is required. 'For what God has joined together let no one separate.'" Just by their existence, laws testify to a hard heart in everyone and a great divorce and separation from God.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : A Fatal Failure

A hard and calcified heart leads to a death of an "eternal" kind, which consists not only of the failing of a vital organ but in a permanent separation from God. Not just "physical" death, but also "theological" death. Death apart from God. The

experience Israel had in exile shows that God “remembers sin” and holds people to account for their iniquity. God can reverse the Exodus and march people right back into the bondage from which they came. At some point the mortgage comes due, debts must be repaid, accounts settled, those who are bankrupted must crash. And even the full faith and credit of the United States Government is not enough to bail us out. As the verse immediately before this lesson says, “All shall die for their own sins” (Jer. 31:30). Others also share the blame. Sin is communal. But that does not get us off the hook. Each of us will be held to account individually for our contribution to this “national” debt. Isn’t that enough to make your heart stop!

PROGNOSIS: Heart Re-formed

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *A Transplant and an Implant*

The logical prognosis for such an ailing patient is “terminal.” However, with the proclamation of Christ’s death and resurrection that is subsequently received by faith there is a heart “transplant” and an “implant.” The Gospel preaching of Christ crucified and raised is the very radical cardio-pulmonary operation that Doctor God saw so urgently necessary when God said through God’s medical assistant Jeremiah that the days are surely coming when “I will make a new covenant” and “put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” What was needed were not more or better laws, but a different way. A God-initiated and God-executed bailout or rescue plan. The whole story of God’s covenant with hard-hearted people is that the God of Jesus Christ loves to “build and plant” much more than this God desires to “pluck up and destroy.” God is more fond of salvage operations than God is of demolition. There is a bailout. God does not fix the blame on us. God fixes the blame upon his Christ, even though this approach costs God a bundle. God writes-off debt. God forgives iniquity and remembers sin no

more. Christ's heart is poured out for us and it becomes our own in a great exchange. Christ gives it to us much like an organ donor might upon her or his own death. And then Christ follows it up with a generous flow of oxygen or "Spirit."

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *An Animated Heart*

With all due respect to political campaigns, God does not "reform" the human heart by reforming laws and legislation (or reforming Congress or reforming Wall Street). Martin Luther legislated few reforms in the early days of his reformation after his return from Wartburg; instead he preached profusely to let the Holy Spirit lead and take effect. God reforms the human heart by inscribing on it the Gospel of Christ with the stylus of the cross—animating and stimulating and regulating it with the electrifying impulses of God's own holy-ing Spirit. People truly in love with one another hardly spend much time laying down the law and quoting provisions from their prenuptial agreements. They breathlessly share their sorrows and their joys, delight in each other's company, and heartily thank the God who was good enough to bring the two of them together—them and Christ. And they take courage and comfort in the fact that what joins together (us and Christ) nothing can separate—even death.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *An Undeniable Living Witness*

Unlike the Babylonian gods (see John Walton's *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, pp. 256-259), who wrote their cryptic messages onto animal entrails to be opaquely read by trained, professional diviners in an autopsy (this almost sounds like the Fed or Treasury these dark days), the God of Jeremiah and of Jesus writes his message into the hearts of living human beings. From this perspective the God of Israel is the writer and "Israel" is the "sacrificial animal" whose heart

is being read. To those of the new covenant, the name "Israel" is transcribed by gospel preaching to include the new Israel, those who "believe and are baptized." The lovers and followers of God's Messiah Jesus are the one's who publicly reveal this loving God's heart. No trained mediating specialists are needed because anyone can clearly read this message, expert or not. Nor, do we need to wait for an autopsy. Faith active in love is a living witness, not a dead one. This is another way of saying that "Israel" (the Church "re-formed" in baptism, the bride of Christ, the lover of Jesus) is God's "light to the nations." God's model people. God's message and communication. Or as Jesus says to the baptized, "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." The emphasis of Jeremiah 31 is not on the "internalization" of God's will but rather on the transparent "external revelation" of it by Jesus-loving, promise-trusting, faithful behavior. Faith active in love. And as Jesus said, and Luther learned, much of that has to do with what we do with money. Imagine money generously and freely given for human needs and Gospel mission even in the midst of deep and severe economic uncertainty, anxiety, and the emotional depression of the current moment one week before Election Day. What a witness that might be. Laws written in books or on stone can be (and often are) dismissed. The covenantal love of God's crucified written on the human heart produces a people who model the Gospel of Jesus so effectively that it cannot be ignored. That is the course of a real reformation. A heart reformed.