

Reformation Sunday, Gospel Year B

Christ Cuts Out the Middlemen

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Reformation Sunday

Analysis by James Squire

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.

Author's Note: Corrine Carvalho, professor for University of St. Thomas, MN, in her commentary for Reformation Sunday 2018 at www.workingpreacher.org, points out that “The sins that Jeremiah 31 refers to include Israel’s own mistreatment of those within their covenant community through an economic system that maintained hegemonic authority among a small group of elites. Jeremiah’s prophecy pays special attention to those who benefitted from the monarchic system: kings, priests, court prophets, and elders.”



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DIAGNOSIS: Broken Covenant, Broken Community

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Covenant Broken by Leaders

Covenants with God are necessarily communal. When they are broken, the entire community suffers. God is aggrieved, but the neighbor is injured also. In this case, there is no fixing the current covenant to make things right.

The reformers tried desperately to make the same point: The sins of the church had real consequences for the community of believers. Consciences were being burdened rather than comforted (Apology IV). The church had broken its vow to serve God's people. Ironically, a new denomination emerged because efforts to reform the church were rebuffed by those who controlled it,

sometimes violently.

The same thing can happen in secular institutions, even those that govern nations, as we are likely seeing in the United States. The kind of decay we see in the church infects the world as well.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Peoples' Hearts Subverted

Carvalho also points out, "A covenant needs to be internalized to be effective." That is the trick, is it not? Covenants are mere lip-service if the heart is devoted to other gods (Jeremiah 2:23). Rather than leading the people in their covenantal relationship with God, the people sought political alliances (Jeremiah 2:17-19) to increase their own power. It was supposed to keep Israel from being conquered, of course, but to Jeremiah, it was a violation of their covenant with God.

When your primary concern is building more cathedrals or consolidating political power, the comforting of consciences is an inconvenient distraction. In the process, the church teaches devotion to the church, rather than devotion to God. It is no stretch to infer that governments share in this same dynamic, perhaps even taking cues from the church.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Cut off from God's Help

"Your wickedness will punish you, and your apostasies will convict you" (Jeremiah 2:19). The alliances we make benefit us rather than others. Survival of the fittest becomes the coin of the realm. The alliances that Israel made could only lead to harm, because in truth God was no longer their partner. They were vulnerable to exploitation and cut off from their God by their own actions.

The same danger existed at the time of the Reformation. The people were enslaved to the church and effectively cut off from the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16). They were stuck negotiating their fate with the church authorities, paying for the privilege of being forgiven.

The same danger lies before us today in the United States. Our politics threatens to cut us off from God's grace by making us fear destruction by those who crave power. Even for those who are yearning for political reformation, the situation seems hopeless and worthy of despair.



PROGNOSIS: Community Rejuvenated by Christ

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): God Reattaches to His People

But here, in this chapter, Jeremiah is offering hope. For indeed God will establish a new covenant with his people. The earthly powers that have subverted God's desires for his creation are put on notice. God bypasses such destructive interlopers and aims directly for our hearts. He will know us, and we will know him, no matter what our status is with our fellow humans (v. 34). All will have their sins forgiven, and God will remember their sin no more.

As painful as it was, Martin Luther made his stand because Jesus dared to make the same stand before all authority in heaven and

on earth. Best of all, God heard Christ and granted his request for all eternity. Sins are forgiven and remembered no more!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Peoples' Hearts Rescued

"I will put my law within them, and I will write in on their hearts" (v. 33). To write his law in our hearts, God enters our hearts through his Son to establish a new relationship with us. His law begins with "I will remember their sin no more." We naturally accept this welcoming message. How can we not? His law begins with an edict that burdens him rather than us! Frankly, it is strange for us to even call it "law." This law continues in us as a heart-to-heart meeting where we are filled with the presence of God through Christ and all that comes from being in relationship with him. Through Christ's love for us on the cross, we are reborn into a loving relationship with God, seeking to always please him out of gratitude rather than fear.

If the church is to remember anything, it is that Christ is on your side. God has forgotten. That is all that matters. Anything the church does that does not fit with this new covenant is null and void. Likewise, we are no longer enslaved to the world and its unstable or decaying governments. We have a Savior who cemented an eternal covenant with us on the cross. We have nothing to fear.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): New Covenant Subverts Power Moves

Of course, "I will remember their sins no more" becomes our mission and ministry, too. Covenants are communal, remember? Broken covenants break communities. Unbroken covenants mend communities. When God in Christ enters our hearts that love likewise flows from us to those around us. Through us, God in Christ mends the world around us, even going so far as to mend

the church of which we are a part.

Christ's ministry does not exist primarily to heal governments and societal systems, of course. Indeed, believers must navigate carefully between the body of Christ and civil society. But at the very least, we can seek to support government that upholds and supports society rather than resorting to tearing it all down in anger and frustration.