

SUN OCT 29  
9AM & 11AM  
Commitment Sunday

Never Stop  
Improving

Building  
Blocks  
making the church better

Sunday, October 29, 2023  
“Never Stop Improving”  
Charlie Berthoud | Ephesians 2:8-10

### **Ephesians 2:8-10**

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Some of us are old enough to remember when it was OK for people to smoke on airplanes.

It sounds ludicrous now, but it was a thing. The back half of the plane was the smoking section. I remember as a kid dreading having to walk back to the restroom. And I always pitied the people right on the borderline, in the last row of the non-smoking seats.

Fortunately, we have learned. We’ve learned that smoking isn’t good for any of us. We’ve learned that second-hand smoke isn’t good for any of us, especially in a contained space like an airplane.

And we’ve found the collective courage to stand up to the tobacco industry and demand change.

Sometimes we pessimistically joke that nothing changes. But that’s just not true. Change can be slow, but change happens.

Think about our collective attitude toward same sex marriage. Twenty or thirty years



ago, plenty of us were ambiguous if not outright opposed to it, but as a society we have overwhelmingly—not completely—changed our minds.

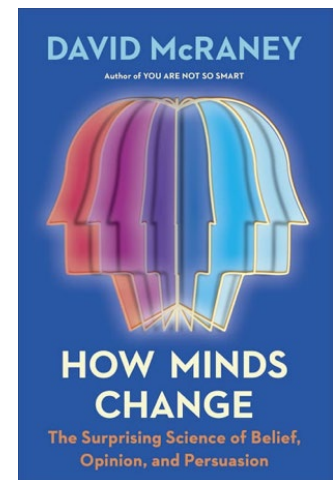
In 2012, then-candidate Barack Obama announced that he changed his mind on same sex marriage, saying “I’ve been going through an evolution on this issue.”

Then in 2013, George W Bush—who previously endorsed a constitutional amendment to ban same sex marriage—not only served as a witness at the marriage of two women, but according to the Boston Globe also offered to officiate at the wedding.

The discussion of smoking on airplanes and openness to same sex marriage are both cited in the fascinating book *How Minds Change: The Surprising Science of Belief, Opinion, and Persuasion*, by David McRaney.

It’s the UW “Go Big Read” book for this year, and it’s fascinating.

One of my big takeaways from the book is that change happens best in relationships, when we engage with each other, when we listen to each other.



He shares an example (p. 197) where people took a test with logic questions like this:

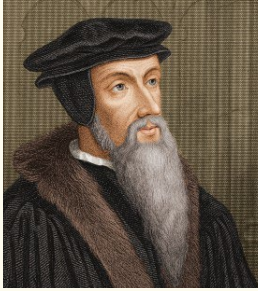
*If it takes 5 machines 5 minutes to make 5 widgets, how long would it take 100 machines to make 100 widgets?*

Individually, lots of people got this and similar questions wrong, but in groups of three, no one got them wrong. Discussion and collaboration led to change and truth. The answer is five minutes by the way.

We can learn and grow and change. New things are possible, especially when we work together.

The last Sunday in October is a good day to think about change, as it is Reformation Sunday for Presbyterians and other Reformed churches. We remember and celebrate the courage of people like Martin Luther and John Calvin and countless others who risked their lives to help the church get back on track.

## REFORMATION SUNDAY



John Calvin



Martin Luther



From the Reformation comes the phrase:

The church affirms *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*, that is, “The church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God” in the power of the Spirit.

This phrase is in our constitution, the *Book of Order*.

Now when we talk about Reformation, we need to remember that whatever change we discuss isn't just changing for the sake of change. It's changing because we sense God calling us to something new, or perhaps to recapture something that has been lost, because we're guided by God's word and spirit.

Romans 12, one of my favorite chapters in the Bible, opens with

“Be transformed by the renewing of your minds.”

Note that it doesn't say “transform yourself” but instead uses the passive voice, encouraging listeners to be transformed by God's word and Spirit.

This verse, like many others, teaches us to be careful and to be prayerful, so that we don't just go with the flow and do something because everyone else is doing it.

As Christians we're called to be alert and awake, so that we can follow the will of God. Sometimes this means change—for us, for the church, maybe even for the world.

Remember, the gospel opens with Jesus announcing the good news of the coming of God's kingdom, God's realm. Then he invites people to “repent.”

Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” (Mark 1:14-15)

Sadly, the word repent is often understood to feel badly about oneself, but the deeper meaning of repentance is about changing one’s mind, or changing one’s direction.


Change can happen in society. Change can happen in church. Change can happen in us.

We can learn, we can grow, we can do things differently. We can improve. We can do better and be better. This spirit of change is at the core of Reformation.

Change and reformation are in the spirit of the final “building block” in the list of 12 blocks that we’ve been pondering this month in our building block series. The *Book of Order* has a section called “The Ministry of Members” with twelve items, which we’ve been thinking about as building blocks for a healthy Christian life and a healthy church.

The Ministry of Members:

- proclaiming the good news in word and deed
- taking part in the common life and worship of a congregation
- lifting one another up in prayer, mutual concern, and active support
- studying Scripture and the issues of Christian faith and life
- supporting the ministry of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents
- demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church
- responding to God’s activity in the world through service to others



The Ministry of Members (continued)

- living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life,
- working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment
- caring for God’s creation
- participating in the governing responsibilities of the church
- reviewing and evaluating regularly the integrity of one’s membership and considering ways in which one’s participation in the worship and service of the church may be increased and made more meaningful.



Three weeks ago we read them all out loud. We’ve put them in the October newsletter, and they are available on the church prayer list as well.

I didn’t think we needed a 12-week series (!), so we had to be selective. Over the past three weeks, we’ve focused on:

- Supporting the ministry of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents
- Studying Scripture and the issues of Christian faith and life
- Lifting one another up in prayer, mutual concern, and active support

Today, on the final Sunday of the series, the final building block is all about

reformation and change. Let's read this one together:

reviewing and evaluating regularly the integrity of one's membership and considering ways in which one's participation in the worship and service of the church may be increased and made more meaningful.

This is like a reality check for our Christian life. Like an year-end performance review for a job. Like an annual physical with your doctor.

How are you doing as a Christian, as a part of a community?

How can your participation in church and in life itself be increased and become more meaningful?

I don't like guilt trips, and I don't like burdening already weary people. But being a Christian isn't just about soaking up God's love and eating donuts on Sundays.

Being a faithful follower of Jesus and being part of a Christian community entails some responsibility to participate and engage. It means living with a sense of purpose and staying on track.

The reading from Ephesians reminds of that call to live with purpose and intention. We are created for a life of good works. We get distracted, we wander away, and God continues to call us back, to change direction, to change our course, to change our minds.

"Never stop improving" is the slogan of a big box home improvement store. Upgrading your kitchen or improving your patio is great, but how about upgrading and improving your life? How about improving your Christian discipleship?

We expect our kids and grandkids to grow and learn in school. Shouldn't we expect adults to keep growing and learning?

This is why we've spent time with this list, to help us identify ways that God might be calling us to grow and learn.

I can't tell you what you need to do to grow. You've got to own that yourself.

But we can help each other to figure it out.

We just finished a round of small groups in our church. Several people participated in a group for the first time. One of them told me "I really wanted to connect and grow,

and I knew I couldn't do that on my own." I spoke with someone else taking an intensive class on the Old Testament here at Covenant, and they said they love learning in community, and the more they learn the more they realize they want to learn more.

Never stop improving. What building block do you need to shore up or reposition?

One potentially timely area for improvement for a lot of us is how we engage with family members as the holiday season approaches. We all have varying levels of strain with our relatives, and too many of us fall into the same patterns every time we see those relatives.

This year, maybe it's time for a new strategy.

Building blocks are good for us as individuals, and they are vital for us as a church. We are a church together, one body with many parts, and all of those parts are important.

The stronger your building blocks are, the stronger the church is.

Here at Covenant, we are blessed with lots of solid building blocks and I'm grateful for the ways we strive to keep improving.

- We've learned a lot about technology in the past few years, and that learning has helped us connect with a lot more people with worship videos, social media, email, and more. We're still learning.
- With our children and youth ministry, we've had major staffing transitions, and we're learning new ways to teach and encourage and engage our young people. We are exploring new options to help our young people connect with each other and grow in faith. We're still learning.
- With our mission work, we are exploring new ways of connecting with partners in Guatemala, and with the help of our Matthew 25 initiative, we're digging deeper into complex realities of structural racism and systemic poverty. We're still learning.
- We've improved the building a lot over the past several years, with a new roof including solar panels, new furniture, an expansion in the columbarium, a new HVAC system, and more. With these improvements, we've intentionally tried to make the building more of a community resource. And now we're learning about the challenges of juggling a busy schedule.

As individuals and as a church we need to be continually open to the spirit of

Reformation, the spirit of God helping us get back on track when we lose our way and leading us forward in our changing world.

I pray regularly for myself and for our church. Two of the things I pray for most regularly are **wisdom** and **strength**: wisdom to know at least something of God's will, God's desires, and then strength to take action and move forward.

Along with being Reformation Sunday, today is also Commitment Sunday. So, we think about pledges and financial commitments to support the ongoing mission of this congregation in 2024. That's absolutely part of Commitment Sunday.

But we can also rethink and renew our commitment to be actively engaged in the life of this congregation, to be a faithful Christian, to learning and living God's love.

*Dear God, we thank you that in Jesus Christ you have called us and claimed us a beloved children. If we've lost our way, reform us and get us back on track. If we are not doing something right, show us the way. If we're hurting and struggling, patch us up and give us healing, so that when the time is right we can move forward. Give us wisdom and strength. In Jesus' name, amen.*