

# Re-Imagining Covenant: A Conceptual Vision of Indigenous Bible Study Bridging Lakota Values and Virtues to the Fruits of the Spirit

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## Abstract

The church and Indigenous people can move forward in hopeful relationship through Bible studies based on the conceptual foundation of Indigenous values and virtues by bridging them to the fruits of the spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Vine Deloria Jr.'s<sup>2</sup> chapter two "Laws and Treaties" provides analysis from the Pickering Treaty of 1794 to the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 as an overview of intentional acts to assign Indians as *incompetent* specifically to nullify the Indian voice in churches, government, and in everyday life which resulted in a contentious relationship between the two peoples.

Next, Borrows<sup>3</sup> connects Anishinaabe values to new interpretations of the law and Indigenous ethics. Marshall III<sup>4</sup> uses storytelling and Lakota values and virtues to allow for a non-Native to achieve a deeper understanding of Lakota culture. The essay moves to Twiss<sup>5</sup> and his thoughts about creating cross-contextualized inroads to benefit Indigenous and white culture through worship and theology.

Finally, imagine a (sample) bible study filmed on location(s) where places of defilement exist, hosted by Indigenous people who will invite Christians to comprehend what the Word of God instructs us to do for healing the church.

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<sup>1</sup> Gal 5:22. *Spirit-Filled Woman's Devotional Bible*. Thomas Nelson Bibles, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Deloria Jr., Vine. *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*. University of Oklahoma Press with new preface, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Borrows, John. *Law's Indigenous Ethics*. University of Toronto Press, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Marshall III, Joseph M. *Returning to the Lakota Way: Old Values to Save a Modern World*. Carlsbad: Hay House, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Twiss, Richard. *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys: A Native American Expression of the Jesus Way*. Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2015.

***Keywords: asset-based, Lakota values and virtues, healing, treaty, and new covenant.***

## **Introduction**

One radical and even outrageous movement could be ways in which settlers and Indigenous people find commonalities about each other rather than focus on the differences which are truthful but continue to conquer and divide any or all efforts to walk together in our journey on this land. This suggestion may seem unacceptable to some readers and listeners and that is understandable but what is biblical? As Indigenous Christians what is our responsibility toward peaceful relationship with the ones who continue to dismiss our value, even in present day? Concepts like love and forgiveness can seem insurmountable when they are without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which all people receive who call Jesus into the fabric of their wounded and broken hearts. In the study of Kubler-Ross and Kessler's<sup>6</sup> five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, anger can produce reactions from which a person wants to strike out against those who stand in front of them rather than reflect on responses to help promote opportunities to begin healing. Underneath anger often lurks pain, hurt, and fear. Indigenous people have compounded grief lasting generations from atrocities committed against us. The task is to acknowledge and heal from those detrimental acts committed against us by those living the way of the colonizer even in our present day. Undeniably, it is not something Indigenous people can recover from alone, yet neither can the colonized church know healing. The unshakeable presence of Creator is necessary with the teachings of the values and virtues. Joseph Marshall III, in *The Lakota Way: Stories and Lessons*

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<sup>6</sup> "A Message from David Kessler." *Grief.com*. <https://grief.com/the-five-stages-of-grief/>. See also Kessler, David. *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*. Simon and Schuster, Scribner imprint, 2020.

*for Living*, identifies them as: “humility, perseverance, respect, honor, love, sacrifice, truth, compassion, bravery, fortitude, generosity, and wisdom.”<sup>7</sup>

And what of the colonizer? Who could commit such inhumane acts against fellow humans created by God and what is the justification for the gnarled roots of pride and greed to take a stronghold which allows for a willful and deliberate denial of what makes such thought and behavior permissible in any way? One can follow the unending trail of Doctrine of Discovery that led the way to egregious methods of removal still practiced in our present day but handed down from the generations before as Charles elucidates in *Unsettling Truths*.<sup>8</sup> The authors trace back in history the precursors to the Doctrine of Discovery beginning in AD 312 and move readers through present day nationalism and exceptionalism which bind the heart of some Christian denominations and individual churches.

As any Christian would or should know, without the power of the Holy Spirit one is left to their own devices and that is where the troubles begin and are sustained. There is a way out. There are several ways out of the quagmire, and they are called: “love, joy, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, gratefulness, and self-control—against such there is no law. And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another. (Gal 5:22-25, NKJV):<sup>9</sup> Biblically, Christians have clear instructions of what to turn away from to live a good life:

Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murder, drunkenness, revelries, and the like of which I tell

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<sup>7</sup> Marshall III, Joseph M. *The Lakota Way: Stories and Lessons for Living*. New York: Penguin Compass, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah. *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discover*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press. 2019.

<sup>9</sup> *Spirit-Filled Women’s Devotional Bible*. New King James Version. Thomas Nelson, Inc. 2003.

you beforehand, just as I also told you in times past, that these who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal 5:19-21, KNJV).<sup>10</sup>

In re-imagining covenant, perhaps this time each of us and all of us can become intentional or more intentional to follow the way of the spirit because the commonalities of Lakota values and virtues and the fruits of the spirit are striking. Imagine a new covenant breathed into us by the Holy Spirit as it has always been offered to us but has not been nurtured with the time and care necessary. The desire has been in us all along, but the way has been clouded by brokenness and woundedness. Instinctively, some of us have returned to these original teachings and have emerged more whole because of it. What makes it difficult is the process of becoming, which can often be our lifework. This means it is not a once and done event but only happens through our own spiritual growth. Often, the values and virtues and fruits of the Spirit overlap or work together, and this exists to teach us about relationship and unity. Today, it is enough to focus on love. Historically, this is what human beings grapple with the most. It is the thing Christians are commanded to do that transcends all relationships and is transformative. It is the way of a covenant.

The way to a new covenant with each other means more than a proclamation on vellum or an apology, which often seems more harmful if the depth of sorrow is suspected as shallow or given in a cursory and meaningless way. One glaring example of agreements without covenant are the treaties between the government and the Lakota plus many other Indigenous nations. One must look to Vine Deloria Jr's exposition of treaties.

Deloria Jr.'s acuity of the treaties expounds on the transactional nature of them as the U.S. government viewed and [dis]honored them. It is sufficient to discuss the concept of the word government because this meant something different to the Indigenous nations existing view

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<sup>10</sup> *Spirit-Filled.*

of government and the purposes for it. Deloria Jr. elucidates in *Custer Died for Your Sins*, “American has yet to keep one Indian treaty or agreement despite the fact that the United States government signed over four hundred such treaties and agreements with Indian tribes.”<sup>11</sup> Deloria Jr. further states, as paraphrased, the Doctrine of Discovery was “endorsed by the will of God” and this was how Christian churches justified their complicity in land theft.

Deloria Jr. informs that later, with the unified forces of the Christian church and U.S. government, the language was slanted toward labeling Indians as *incompetent*. This is successful even in present day, stereotypes are embedded within the Christian church regarding Native Americans to fit the church’s need of utilizing short term mission trips to rescue any of the native nations they wish to proselytize. Not all individual churches or denominations engage in this practice but ask any Indigenous people of their experiences in Christian churches and listen to the stories of treatment that supports how the Indigenous are still deemed *incompetent*, but today’s church may be unaware of the *why*.

The problem with both church and government unifying is that it obscures the truth *enough* to justify broken treaties and normalize land theft. This provides an excellent case in which the character is revealed. How can the church extricate itself from a less than perfect union? Deloria clarifies:

The original import of the treaties was allegedly to guarantee peace on the frontier. And the tribes generally held to their promises, discontinued the fighting and accepted the protection of the United States over their remaining lands. Yet submission became merely the first step from freedom to classification as incompetents whose every move had to be approved by government bureaucrats.

Incompetency was a doctrine devised to explain the distinction between people who held their land free from trust restrictions and those who still had their land in trust. But it soon mushroomed out of proportion. Eventually any decision made by an Indian was usually overlooked because the Indian was, by definition, incompetent.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Deloria, Vine, Jr. *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*. Norman, OK: 1988.

<sup>12</sup> Deloria. *Custer Died for Your Sins*.