

# **Rules *for* Reformers**

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# **Rules *for* Reformers**

Douglas Wilson

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*For David Hoos,  
a good man  
who made a good suggestion  
at a good time*

*We need not debate about the mere words evolution or progress: personally I prefer to call it reform. For reform implies form. It implies that we are trying to shape the world in a particular image; to make it something that we see already in our minds. Evolution is a metaphor from mere automatic unrolling. Progress is a metaphor from merely walking along a road—very likely the wrong road. But reform is a metaphor for reasonable and determined men: it means that we see a certain thing out of shape and we mean to put it into shape. And we know what shape.*

—CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*

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# Introduction

**A** generation ago “community organizer” Saul Alinsky famously penned his *Rules for Radicals*, and it is my conviction that those interested in reformation should match his craft and self-awareness without trying to compete at all with the speed and depth of his revolutionary destructo-vision. And, incidentally, if you are interested in the grace of God transforming individuals, families, neighborhoods, churches, communities, cities, cultures, nations, and the world, then you are interested in reformation.

Some revolutionaries are patient and some are not. Gramsci argued for the “long march through the institutions” and Lenin wanted the massive meltdown all at once. Most revolutionaries have what Billington described as a “fire in the minds of men,” but some are willing to go for the slow burn. More than just simple patience is required to distinguish a revolutionary from a reformer.

So, what are the basic rules for reformers?

*1. Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever.*

Reformation of culture is either a species of salvation or sanctification, and you can't have either one of those without Jesus. Secular conservatism will sometimes buy you some time, but that is about all it can do—that and lure you into the complacent notion that it can do more than that. Secular conservatism is like trying to use your pocket handkerchief to slow you down after the main chute has failed. This is why individual heart transformation, not legislation, is fundamental to national reformation. The person and work of Jesus is not optional.

*2. Always remember the distinction between principles and methods.* Say that the principle is to win the war against the enemy—the methods would be navy, artillery, air force, ground troops, etc. Someone enamored of method would think that the war can be won by their branch of the service alone, without any help from the others. Those who latch on to the methods being employed, without any awareness of the principles being served, are either simple-minded or partisans. The simple need leadership; they can make great foot soldiers, but don't ever make them generals. The partisans need a peculiar kind of leadership, but you have to be careful—they are the ones who are already a tad too gung ho about your leadership. And they think you are as gummed up about particular methods as they are.

**3. Reformers are conservatives, which means they must prefer the concrete to the abstract.** The past is concrete, just like the future is going to be. The goal is to preserve and defend everything the Spirit has done in history in such a way as to carry it forward into what the Spirit is going to do. Given our time-bound nature, we must conserve some things, and we must progress toward certain things. But what do we conserve, and what do we seek to build? Our duties are always in the present, but we must read the past, as well as the future (albeit more dimly), and we must do so by the performance of concrete duties. Love your neighbor, not mankind. Build an actual school for your children, and do not love the notion of educational “great concepts” in some Euclidean eschaton.

**4. Reformers must cultivate a high sense of humor.** Reformation involves conflict, as we shall see in a moment, but how you fight makes all the difference. Should you fight like a cavalier, with swift sword play and witticisms, or like a thug with a club and a wart on your nose? The besetting sin of ostensible reformers is the sin of shrillness and officious forms of uplift. We need reformers, not another round of bossy-pantses. We also need someone who knows how to form the plural of bossy-pants.

**5. Reformers must be combative.** Christians are often uncomfortable with the language of conflict, but being neutral

is not an option: “He that is not with Me is against me, and he that gathers not with Me scatters abroad,” says Jesus (Mt. 12:30). There is no way to do any of this without involving yourself in the rough stuff. This means that courage is required. The adversary fights back, and they know how to fight back. Not only that, but because this is a battle between good and evil, and you are fighting for the good (right?), the other side gets to cheat, and you don’t get to. You have to fight, and you have to fight clean, and you have to fight fair. When you enlist in the army, you cannot feign surprise when you find yourself in battles.

**6. Reformers must play the long game.** We are not laboring for a convenience-store reformation, where you buy and consume your “item” before you pull out into traffic, depending on how troublesome the shrink wrap is. If we have Christ, we have all things future, and so we can leave the outcome of our present labors to Him. We don’t have to see the larger end to perform our part in that larger end. And our part is now.

**7. Reformers must remember always that religion shapes culture, and culture trumps politics.** The plug-in ought not to go straight from reformation in the church to legislation. Legislative battles are important in the meantime, but mostly as a defensive measure. The offense won’t happen until we make the connection between our faith and culture—the

kind of culture that forms apart from laws. Just as you can't fight a naval war without ships, or tank warfare without tanks, *you can't fight a culture war without a culture*. The reformation of the church must occur so that there is a reformation of our subculture, and then our subculture will affect the larger *polis*. Expecting our faith to affect the larger *polis* when it has not yet changed the average shelf at the local Christian book store is expecting something that is not going to happen. With the weird exception of baseball, where the ball is handled entirely by the defense, you can't score points until you have the ball. And reformers will not have the ball until they have a culture.

That'll do for the present.



## **A Tip of the Hat to Saul Alinsky**

**I**n some respects, this book has been an homage to Saul Alinsky, and in other respects it is an answer. Alinsky was a man of the left, as I am not, and he did not believe in God, as I most heartily do. But his influence was remarkable—he was the father of “community organizing” in Chicago, where a young Barack Obama followed in his footsteps a generation later. A young Hillary Clinton did her senior honors thesis at Wellesley College on Alinsky.

He was an ungodly man, but he was ungodly the same way King David’s commanding general Joab was. Joab was a thorough-going man of the world, out for number one, but he was extremely shrewd and he often saw the world more accurately than others who ought to have known better. David was a man after God’s own heart, but there were times when Joab would come in and school him properly. When it came to the question of whether to conduct a

census of Israel and Judah, Joab was right and David was wrong (2 Sam. 24:1-4). When it came to David's behavior after the death of Absalom, Joab was right and David was wrong (2 Sam. 19:5).

So it is necessary to learn from Alinsky, but it also necessary to remember that as we learn, we must make the necessary adjustments. Some things we must not learn from Joab. This book is part of an attempt to help us understand how to make the necessary distinctions.

Alinsky was confronted with young radicals who had “no illusions about the system, but plenty of illusions about the way to change the world” (*RFR*, p. xiii).<sup>\*</sup> How many Christians are in the same position? Ditch the illusions. A cultural reformation is no place for daydreaming. Reflecting on a Christian heritage by itself is worthless. A Christian heritage cannot be kept in a box. “Power is not static; it cannot be frozen and preserved like food; it must grow or die” (*RFR*, p. 149).

Alinsky knew that culture precedes politics. Revolution “must be preceded by reformation. To assume that a political revolution can survive without the supporting base of a popular reformation is to ask for the impossible in politics” (*RFR*, p. xxi). You can't fight a naval war without ships, and you can't fight a culture war without a culture.

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<sup>\*</sup> Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1989).

“Change means movement. Movement means friction” (*RFR*, p. 21). This means that reformers should expect resistance and conflict. A reformer does not walk onto the stage to polite applause. “The job of the organizer is to maneuver and bait the establishment so that it will publicly attack him as a ‘dangerous enemy’” (*RFR*, p. 100). When you are attacked by the powers that be, this is not a sign that something has gone dangerously wrong. There is no distinction to be made between working for reformation and picking a fight. “When those prominent in the status quo turn and label you an ‘agitator’ they are completely correct, for that is, in one word, your function—to agitate to the point of conflict” (*RFR*, p. 117). This is a prerequisite to another key truth. “*No one can negotiate without the power to compel negotiation*” (*RFR*, p. 119, emphasis his).

While Alinsky had no clue about the ground and foundation of humor (he thought humor and absolute truth to be inconsistent), he nevertheless knew all about its *tactical* value. “Humor is essential to a successful tactician, for the most potent weapons known to mankind are satire and ridicule” (*RFR*, p. 75).

Then there was his version of the KISS principle (Keep it Simple, Stupid). “Issues must be able to be communicated. It is essential that they can be communicated. It is essential that they be simple enough to be grasped as rallying

or battle cries” (RFR, p. 96). *National Review* illustrated this nicely years ago with a fine joke, and terrible rallying cry, when they settled on the T-shirt slogan, “Don’t let them immanentize the eschaton!”

Alinsky outlines thirteen basic rules of power tactics. I will simply list them here, and conclude with a brief comment that contextualizes it all for us.\*

1. *“Power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have.”*
2. *“Never go outside the experience of your people.”*
3. *“Whenever possible go outside the experience of the enemy.”*
4. *“Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules.”*
5. *“Ridicule is man’s most potent weapon. It is almost impossible to counterattack ridicule.”*
6. *“A good tactic is one that your people enjoy.”* Also, *“Organizations need action as an individual needs oxygen. People hunger for drama and adventure”* (RFR, p. 120).
7. *“A tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag.”*
8. *“Keep the pressure on.”*
9. *“The threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself.”*

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\* The thirteen rules are excerpted from RFR, pp. 127–130, emphasis Alinsky’s.

10. *“The major premise for tactics is the development of operations that will maintain a constant pressure upon the opposition.”*

11. *“If you push a negative hard and deep enough it will break through into its counterside.”*

12. *“The price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative.”*

13. *“Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it.”*

Here’s looking at you, Michael Moore!

Saul Alinsky was an ethical relativist, and so he was willing to resort to the ear-biting and eye-gouging right away. “In a fight almost anything goes. It almost reaches the point where you stop to apologize if a chance blow lands *above* the belt” (*RFR*, pp. 129–130). We are not in that unconstrained position, nor do we want to be. But answering to God, remembering the limits placed on us by Scripture, look over that list again. There is no principle there that we cannot use, and use more shrewdly and potently than a lost soul like Alinsky ever could. With this in mind, the following section of this book presents ten “principles of war” we reformers must master if we want to stop the other team from continually running circles around us.



Section 1  
**Principles First**



**P**inciples that govern every form of conflict are constant in all possible scenarios. The need for mobility, surprise, etc., will never fade away. But weapons and tactics are not constant—rocks, bows, guns, triremes, torpedoes, etc. vary from era to era, and war to war. Electronic countermeasures played no role whatever in the battle of Lepanto.

Those who are merely competent in the use of a particular weapon are followers. They may be very competent indeed, but that is not the issue. They are also essential to success of any campaign, but if they are promoted to the level where principled *strategic* thinking is necessary, they will also be essential to the failure of that campaign.

Those who comprehend the principles involved are effective leaders. I would go so far as to say that this is one of the fundamental characteristics of effective leadership. Who is competent to see the dividing line between leaders and would-be leaders? Both kinds of people think they are leaders, but only one truly knows.

In an egalitarian culture, however, true leadership is despised and precedence is frequently given to technicians, bureaucrats, and various kinds of intellectual ground-pounders.

This means things can get fearfully skewed—we have generals who do not see the principles involved, and sergeants who do. The distinction between principles and “methods” is an objective one. However, to the one who is not gifted enough to see the distinction, the whole thing will appear to be a Zen exercise.

When the distinctions are observed, the result is military “wisdom.” But principles do not fight by themselves. Principles are always incarnate in a particular method. There is therefore always something there to distract and confuse somebody who isn’t thinking.

This section provides an overview of the principles of war. They were developed on the field of battle, but they apply to any situation where conflict or competition is occurring. Reformers are concerned to win what have come to be called the “culture wars,” and unless we recover an understanding of these principles, and learn to apply them to the conflicts we are in, then such a win will be impossible.

The principles of war are:

1. *Objective*
2. *Offensive*
3. *Concentration*
4. *Mobility*
5. *Security*
6. *Surprise*
7. *Cooperation*
8. *Communication*
9. *Economy of Force*
10. *Pursuit*

I first learned these principles from a book my father wrote, entitled *Principles of War*.<sup>\*</sup> I commend that book highly, even though the emphasis there is different. In *Principles of War*, these principles are applied to thinking strategically about evangelism. Here our concern is the task of cultural reformation, which is of course related to evangelism, but not identical with it. But principles being what they are, remember that they apply whenever there is any kind of conflict or competition. These principles can be brought to bear in a shooting war, in a business competition, in political campaigns, in cultural politics, in a football game, and in evangelism.

They can also be neglected in any of these realms. Because they are principles that have to be enfolded in a particular method, we also have the prospect of the bad guys following these principles, and the good guys neglecting them. Principles do not apply themselves. They must be studied, understood, grasped, and applied.

The world being the messy kind of place that it is, it is also possible for someone to apply the right principle at the wrong time. The only difference between salad and garbage, the wise man once said, is timing. A man might pursue when he shouldn't pursue. A man might launch a surprise attack at a boneheaded time, and succeed in the surprise part, but fail in

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<sup>\*</sup> Jim Wilson, *Principles of War: A Handbook on Strategic Evangelism* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2009).

the attack part. A man might be really mobile in unproductive ways, as when Jeb Stuart rode around the battle of Gettysburg.

This means it is not enough to say that the second principle is to Maintain the Offensive, point to what you are doing as *being* offensive, and assume that the discussion is over. Everything has its time and place, including these principles. It is not for nothing that Sun Tzu's book was called *The Art of War*. The necessary artistry is never found by applying principles in a clunkity-clunkity way.

So failure to attend to these principles is deadly. Failure to apply them in wisdom is also deadly. And assuming that they will take care of themselves if only you have abundant resources is perhaps the deadliest of all.

For the rest of this first section of *Rules for Reformers*, I'll be giving some commentary on each of the ten principles of war, looking to show how they apply to the cultural struggle we are in. But before we get into that specific commentary, I'll begin with a discussion of the decisive point, because it is key to understanding the first principle, Establishing the Objective.



## THE DECISIVE POINT

One of the first things a reformer has got to get used to is the experience of being despised and unpopular. Societies

do awful things (that which needs to be reformed) because they *want* to, and the reformer is the one beckoning them to a state of affairs that they don't much want.

“You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice, nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit” (Ex. 23:2–3, ESV). Notice what this passage requires of us. There are times when the doing of evil is *popular*. Many want to do evil, and they summon you to join them. There are other times when you are being pressured to bear false witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, in order to pervert justice. And if you didn't trip over the next verse, you weren't paying attention. It prohibits every form of affirmative action, along with all its ugly cousins. The man of integrity decides according to the law, and not according to whether the plaintiff has had a hard life.

A reformer has to be the kind of man who can stand up to the clamor of the mob. This is the vertebrate mentality exhibited by Athanasius when he was informed that “the world” was against him. Well, then, he replied, let it be known that Athanasius is *contra mundum*, against the world. A true reformer gives the PR department fits.

The reformer marches to a different drummer, to not coin a phrase, but when he does this he elicits real hatred. There are two kinds of non-conformity, and only one of

them wears hipster glasses. The kind that does wear them is a very popular form of pretending to be out of the mainstream, in order to be the envy of it, and the other is a radical form of unpopularity, calculated to get you slandered and viciously attacked, on the way to changing the direction of the mainstream. One kind of non-conformity requires courage, while the other kind requires nothing more than vanity and a five dollar cup of fair trade coffee.

The reformer will be attacked by the establishment in the name of a previous generation of reformers. The men who killed the prophets have descendants, and those descendants identify themselves by building memorials to the prophets (Matt. 23:29–31). The men who lionize the prophets, Jesus teaches, are the kind of men who would have tied them to the nearest stake themselves. And the men who are charged with attacking the legacy of the prophets are the true sons of the prophets.

In short, the reformer cannot expect anything worthwhile to happen if all he hears is polite golf applause floating toward him from the establishment.

Jesus teaches us to expect slander, to expect misrepresentation. Further, He teaches us to believe that when this happens, it is a sign that we are gaining on it. In Luke 6:22–23, Jesus tells us to rejoice and leap for joy when we reviled, excluded, shunned, and held in contempt. In Lattimore's