

## **10<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**I Samuel 8:4-20; 11:14-15; Psalm 138; Mark 3:20-35; II Corinthians 4:13-5:1.**

**I Samuel 8:4-20; 11:14-15.** There is an old saying: “It was easier for God to take Israel out of Egypt than it was to take Egypt out of the Israelites.” The meaning of that saying is perfectly illustrated in the Old Testament lesson for the 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Around 1100 BCE, an extremely militant people from the Aegean Islands and Crete began an invasion of Canaan. The “Sea People” (whom the Israelites called “Philistines”) began a long-term, intensive war with the Israelite amphictyony. Through the use of hitherto secret weapons, highly creative fighting tactics, and the ability to wage a protracted war, the Philistines quickly began defeating the Israelites. The amphictyony seemed no match for the Sea People.

By 1050 BCE, the Israelites were in an extremely vulnerable position. The Philistines had waged almost constant war for fifty years, taking all of the plains and most of the hill country. Many key Israelite cities had fallen, and the Hebrews had been pressed back into the mountains. Meanwhile, Moab and Edom were seeking to administer the final blow to Israel by conquering all her possessions east of the Jordan River. Israel’s territory was only about one-third what it had been soon after Joshua’s conquest nearly two hundred years earlier.

Finally, in a battle against Israel, the Sea People attacked and destroyed Shiloh, the religious and judicial center of the amphictyony. They burned the tabernacle to the ground; the Sea People captured the Ark of the Covenant and the two tablets on which the Ten Commandments were engraved. The destruction of Shiloh symbolically signaled the end of the amphictyony and illustrated the inability of the Israelites to halt the Philistines in their eventual conquest of all Israel. The Sea People seemed unstoppable.

Just before the destruction of Shiloh, Samuel was elevated by God and the people from being Israel’s chief priest and its prophet to becoming its judge. Following the defeat of Shiloh, the elders of Israel met with Samuel (8:1-22). Recognizing that the amphictyonic form of government seemed incapable of coping with the Philistines, the elders demanded that Israel’s political life be reorganized under a monarchy. Samuel, in turn, took the elders’ demand before Yahweh.

In today’s Old Testament lesson, the scriptures record God’s response to the demand of the people. “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. Now then, listen to their voice only – you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them” (8:7-9).

The dilemma facing Israel was real. God and Samuel saw the amphictyonic form of government as being essential to the nation’s worship and service of Yahweh. The covenant had been built on the premise of an amphictyony. In an amphictyony, God was obviously the only ruler since no man had this distinction. The sanctuary was the focal point of the nation, not the capital city

of a king. For Israel to accept a monarchy would be a repudiation of Yahweh, simply because God could not be king if a human being were king (I Samuel 8:7).

However, the elders wanted to practice a *real politics* – not trust in God and thus depend upon God to protect the fate of their nation. To the Israelites, the amphictyonic form of government was demonstrably unable to cope with the Philistine threat. An amphictyony was simply incapable of maintaining the existence of Israel. The only alternative was a centralized government under a king.

But what would it mean for Israel to embrace monarchy as the politics and economics for its nation? To the frightened and intimidated Israelites, a king meant the centralizing of the military might of the nation so that they could fight and win a protracted war against Philistia. But to God and to Samuel, embracing monarchy would mean something entirely different.

“So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking for a king. He said, ‘These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you; he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day’” (8:10-18).

It was easier to take Israel out of Egypt than to take Egypt out of Israel! Even two hundred years after Israel’s decisive win over Egypt that proved that Yahweh had the power to liberate God’s people when and how God chose, the people could not trust in Yahweh! Instead, they could only place their trust in the chariots and horses and armies of the tribes of Israel, centralized under the command of a warrior-king! The priorities and commitments of Egypt still held sway over the hearts, wills and imaginations of Israel’s people – even after living for over two hundred years under the leadership of Yahweh.

That was why Samuel sought to redirect the attention of the elders and people of Israel away from their military commitment to have a king. Yes, a king would indeed centralize the control of the Israelite army and prosecute a protracted war against Philistia. And, yes, they might indeed win against their foe. But once Israel had a king who could mobilize them for such a protracted effort, what would then happen? That king would not voluntarily relinquish the power he had built as their monarch. Instead, he would inevitably become an Israelite “pharaoh” in a now triumphant Israelite nation. Like all “pharaohs” before him, this king would embrace and begin practicing the common Middle-Eastern understanding of monarchy. He would not just build an army to defeat the Philistines but would not allow that army to dissolve after its victory; instead, he would build it into a standing army, made up of the “brightest and best” of Israel’s young and funded by the continuing taxation the king would place upon the Israelites.

More than that, the king would embrace and begin practicing the primary premise of all Middle-Eastern nations of that day – that the king owned all the land over which he ruled, and that the people only held it temporarily at the behest of the king. Rather, the people were the serfs, the slaves of the king, raising their crops on which they might subsist, with the remainder going to the crown. The king would build a powerful and costly court (as all kings of the time did) and take each tribe's young men and women to serve that court as cooks, bakers, perfumers, soldiers, officers and courtiers. And Israel would soon find itself in the terrible position of having sacrificed their freedom in order to obtain security, with their own monarchy practicing a politics of unilateral power, an economics of greed and a religion of control that would lead to the oppression, exploitation and domination of the people! Israel would once again be back in Egypt – but this time, it would be their own Egypt that they had chosen, when they chose safety over Yahweh!

But God's command to Samuel was not to refuse the Israelite request for a king. His command was to acquiesce to their demands, for "they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them"! So the decision was made to end Israel's amphictyony and to embrace a monarchy!

In reality, although the choice between Yahweh and a king was a stark choice, the actual decision turned out to be far more nuanced. The crisis facing the amphictyony was resolved by a compromise that sought to preserve the best of the amphictyony while allowing for a centralized form of government and the military viability of a kingship. That compromise is hinted at in Samuel's negotiations with the elders recorded in 8:19-22 but is also alluded to in Exodus 19:6; Deut. 17:14-20; II Samuel 5:6-10; 10; 23:1-7; I Kings 4-11; II Kings 18:1-18; 22:1-23:24; Psalms 2; 72; 78; 89; 110;132; Isa. 55; and Jeremiah 33.

The premise for developing the kingship of Israel was the understanding that no man could truly be its king! Only Yahweh was king. He had to be recognized both by the human king and by the people as Israel's true ruler. The man who ruled as king, therefore, was to be a man selected by God as his designated representative; that selection was to be witnessed by the people. His title was to be "king", but it was understood that both title and office were delegated to that man by God.

This designation of the king as a "vice-regent" under God was symbolized in the rites inducting him into office. The hand of God would select the king; God's "charisma" would show through him, making his appointment by God obvious to all (this concept later changed when the kingship of Israel became hereditary under Solomon). God's selection would then be confirmed by the chief priest of Israel, who was to anoint the king-elect with oil. This action indicated that the candidate was anointed with God's power, and he was thereafter to be known as God's "Messiah" (which, in Hebrew, means "Anointed One"). Thus the king was not an absolute monarch but only God's vice-regent who was to be obeyed and followed only as long as he was doing God's will!

To guarantee the king's function as God's representative, he would be granted only limited power (best described in Deuteronomy 17:14-20, likely written several hundred years after the

creation of Israel's monarchy). The king was to have complete control over the army and over the waging of war (which, at least until the death of David, was always "holy war"). He was to provide for justice in the land by administering the law of Israel as already set down in its law codes. He was to be particularly concerned for exercising compensatory justice toward the poor, the powerless, the marginalized and women. And the land was not to be perceived as belonging to the king; ownership of the land remained in the people's hands and all land was to be redistributed to all families every fifty years (Deut. 15:1-23; Leviticus 25:1-55; see the response of the nation to one king's efforts to disobey this law in I Kings 21:1-29). Most important of all, the king was not an absolute monarch because the nation's Law did not exist to serve the king; rather, the king was to be subject to the Law. And the Law was to be interpreted to the king by the prophet.

Because neither king nor elders were at all times responsive to God's will, a third force developed outside the king and the "chief priests and elders". This force existed to call the political, economic and religious structures to accountability. God, as God would see fit, would periodically raise up a charismatic critic of the king. He was to speak God's judgment to the face of the king (e.g., II Samuel 12:1-15) and before the people. He was the prophet.

Sensing the weakness of Israel because of its repeated warfare with the Philistines, a contiguous nation east of Israel, Ammon, decided to capture an Israelite city, Jabesh-gilead. In desperation, the people of Jabesh-gilead sent messengers throughout Israel, telling of their siege.

A young, tall and extremely forceful Israelite was plowing his father's field with oxen when the messenger came by. The news kindled the young man's anger. Taking his sword, he slew his oxen on the spot and hacked them to pieces before the terrified stare of the townspeople. "Take these pieces to every tribe and enclave of Israel," he thundered, "and tell them that whoever does not come out after Saul and Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen" (I Sam. 11:7).

God's charisma had fallen! The people gathered at Bezek and marched to Jabesh-gilead. Under the inspired leadership of the angry young Saul, they achieved an amazing victory over the Ammonites, so destroying their army that Ammon was never a serious military threat again.

"Samuel said to the people, 'Come, let us go to Gilgal (one of the primary tabernacles of Yahweh) and there renew the kingship.' So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the Lord in Gilgal. There they sacrificed offerings of well-being before the Lord, and there Saul and all the Israelites rejoiced greatly" (11:14-15).

The amphictyony had come to an end. Israel now had its first king!

**Psalm 138** is most likely a post-Exilic hymn – but if it is post-Exilic, it is *immediately* post-Exilic. Seventy years earlier, the nation of Judah had been conquered by the Babylonian Empire and its political, economic and religious leaders had been clapped into chains and marched over the sands of the Fertile Crescent to the empire's capital city of Babylon (Jer. 29:1-13). There, "by the rivers of Babylon, (they) sat down and wept when (they) remembered Zion" (Psalm 137:1). In that 70-year exile, those Israelite captives had a profound conversion experience,

learning to “seek the shalom of the city to which I have exiled you, and pray to God on its behalf, for in its’ shalom will be realized your shalom” (Jer. 29:7). The former leaders of the Israelite people recognized that, with Babylon being the only supreme power in the Middle East, they would not quickly return to their beloved Jerusalem. And so they settled in for a long stay, seeking to recreate in Babylon a microcosm of Jewish society under the Law, practicing among each other a politics of justice, an economics of equity and a religion of relationship with God.

A second generation was born and grew to adulthood as that first generation of exiles slipped into death. Then a third generation was born as the second generation grew old. Then, miracle of miracles, in just a few days, everything changed. A formerly minor power, Media, combined with another minor power, Persia, and created a fighting force that quickly toppled the Babylonian Empire. That new empire’s leader, King Cyrus of Persia, declared all captives free, and suddenly, the Israelite exiles found themselves free to return to Judea! The unthinkable had happened and Psalm 138 was written for the returning exiles to sing as they skipped and danced over the miles of sand back to Jerusalem!

“I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods (angels) I sing your praise; I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything. On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul” (138:1-3).

The returning exiles cluster in joy and in song as they walk back to Jerusalem. But they are not the only ones so gathered. So do the present residents of Jerusalem – also Jews – who wait for their returning relatives. But most important, the very host of heaven<sup>1</sup> gathers around God’s throne to join in the mortals’ song of liberation.

But all do more than solely rejoice at the return of the former captives. As the exiles return to the city, the first thing they do is make their way to the site of the now-destroyed Solomon’s Temple, and there they “bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness”. That site may now be leveled and weed-choked. But Cyrus also gave the Jews permission to rebuild their temple, and they would soon commence that rebuilding. And the Temple that would rise there, they reminded each other, was only a representative of the actual Temple, the earthly manifestation of the heavenly archetype. What God has done in delivering them from Babylonian bondage and raising up Cyrus is utterly astonishing, a clear manifestation of God’s “steadfast love” for them. So the people cannot but praise God and seek to restore the symbol of God’s presence here among God’s people – the Temple!

“All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord, for they have heard the words of your mouth. They shall sing of the ways of the Lord, for great is the glory of the Lord. For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he perceives from far away” (vss. 4-6).

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew word used here is “*elohim*”, which is often used in Scripture to refer to Yahweh, but is also used in hundreds of Old Testament passages as a more generic way to refer to “gods”, “angels” or other heavenly personages. The consensus of most biblical scholars is that, in this passage, the word is used to refer to the “heavenly hosts”.

God's liberation of the Israelite captives, his toppling of ancient authorities and replacing them with new nations, and the promise of a newly-constructed temple is not the end of the matter. It is only the beginning. God's intentions in the freeing of the Israelite exiles and his return of them to a resurgent Israel are only preamble to the implementation of God's true design for the world. What God is actually about is the bringing of "all the kings of the earth (to) praise him". His intention is not just the defeat of the Babylonians and the exaltation of Israel; it is the conversion of all the nations of the earth. It is God's intent that they all embrace God's intentions for humankind, so that all nations are practicing a politics of justice, an economics of equitable stewardship and a truly relational faith, so that "shalom" reigns supreme throughout the world. So the Psalmist and the people praise God for the work he has initiated through Cyrus by setting his exiles free!

"Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand and your right hand delivers me. The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands" (vss. 7-8). The Psalm shifts from praise to petition, in very powerful ways reminiscent of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. The Jews are filled with exuberance in their liberation. But that does not mean that the road ahead of them will be smooth and easy. There are many struggles ahead of them, many people and nations resistant to the shalom intentions of God. The task to which God's people now commit themselves will not be easy to accomplish! So the Psalmist and the returning exiles commit themselves to take the actions necessary to rebuild Jerusalem, its Temple, and the shalom way of life. But they also depend upon God's continuing intervention on their behalf to bring about the complete implementation of the miracle God has now initiated. Without God's help, they cannot succeed. Therefore, "do not forsake the work of your hands"!

**Mark 3:20-35** continues Mark's examination of those in opposition to Jesus. The primary emphasis in today's Gospel lesson deals with the expected opposition of Israel's political/religious elite. But there is another group opposing Jesus which is quite surprising.

"Then Jesus went home, and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. **When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind"**" (Mark 3:19b-21). We know from the Gospel of Luke of the opposition that Jesus faced in his own hometown when he preached his first sermon in its synagogue (Luke 4:16-30). But here is another reference from a different source of the opposition he engendered from his own people.

His family – and his fellow citizens of Nazareth – thought Jesus was mentally ill! So thinking him possessed, they sought to restrain him for his own good! The way mentally ill people were treated in the Israel of the Roman era was to place them in chains and to isolate them (see Mark 5:1-20, Matt. 8:28-34; Luke 8:26-39). This is what Jesus' own family had decided to do with Jesus, for what he was teaching was not only politically dangerous, but could have a most negative residual impact upon his family, as well. And the question must be asked, was Mary a part of such a plot?

It is this intriguing reference to the actions of Jesus' family that makes sense out of the final verses of today's Gospel lesson. "Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother"" (vss. 31-35)!

His mother and his brothers, asking for Jesus to leave the meeting and come visit them outside, were not asking for him to spend the time of day with them. They were planning to lay hold of him, take him captive and spirit him away for the imprisonment and isolation of the deranged. And Jesus knew their intentions! So he both denies their request (there is strength in numbers) and he rejects his filial relationship with them. For it is those who can perceive the truth of what Jesus is doing and saying, and are willing to follow it in order to bring about God's new people of shalom who are "my brother and sister and mother"!

The not-so-subtle action of Jesus' family emboldens Israel's elite to make a new and even stronger accusation against Jesus. They had been the brunt of Jesus' social analysis and are therefore both defensive and critical of him. But now the actions of his family have given them the means to make a new accusation against Jesus. "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons" (vs. 24).

In other words, the priests, Pharisees and Sadducees are saying, "Look, his own family considers him crazy! This man is possessed by demons; in fact, he is possessed by Beelzebul<sup>2</sup> himself! That is where his power comes from. And it is because he is possessed by Satan that this Jesus should be both rejected by any thoughtful Jew and should be eliminated!" Although well-intentioned, the interpretation Jesus' family placed upon why Jesus was doing what he was doing and their attempt to stop him has given to Jesus' critics the means to divert the spotlight of his criticism off them and to provide them with the means to discredit and even eliminate Jesus and the threat he posed! This is how the politically, economically and religiously powerful use even the intentions of those who mean well in order to achieve their own diabolical ends!

We now move to the meat of today's Gospel lesson. Jesus has just been accused by the Powers that Be of being possessed by the demonic. Jesus' response to that accusation is brilliant!

"How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered" (vss. 23-27).

Attacked by Israel's leaders as being in league with Satan ("even his family thinks he is demonically possessed"), Jesus does not become defensive. Instead, he moves onto the offensive, reducing their arguments to absurdity. He, in essence, says, "Look around you and see

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<sup>2</sup> The word "Beelzebul" (or in some translations, "Beelzebub") was an alternate name for "Satan" and literally means "Lord of Dung".

what I am doing. ‘the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them’ (Luke 7:22). Clearly, my ministry is eliminating the pain, poverty and diseases of life. All that Satan would seek to accomplish to gain control of our world is being defeated. Are you suggesting that – if I am Satan – that Satan is defeating Satan? Do you really mean to argue that Satan is building his kingdom by destroying his kingdom? Does that make any sense at all?”

Jesus has reduced their accusation to absurdity. All present that day would see Jesus as healer, pastor, liberator and truth-teller. Is that really the work of Satan? Thus, Jesus has reduced the argument of Israel’s leaders to absurdity, has exposed that argument’s contradictions, and has thus destroyed their argument. They are made to look like fools!

But Jesus isn’t done yet. Instead, he moves to his most powerful argument of all.

“No one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered” (3:27).

This passage is pivotal to all of Mark,<sup>3</sup> but it is hard to truly appreciate because of our desire to cast Jesus in the best possible light. But in order to understand what Jesus is stating here, we must take seriously the image of Jesus’ advent as “a thief in the night”, used by the church throughout the New Testament (e.g., Matt. 24:43; I Thess. 5:2,4; II Peter 3:10; Rev. 3:3; 16:15).

The “strong man” in this parable is Israel’s religious-political-economic aristocracy (priests, scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees). The “thief” (and stronger man) is Jesus. The systems have been the “strong man” of Israel, managing its political, economic and religious structures principally for their own gain and empowerment, even if that has meant oppressing, exploiting and dominating the remainder of Israel -- its peasants and expendables. They have, indeed, been very strong and they have not been questioned. But now a “thief” has broken into their house! He is Jesus. The systems are about to be overthrown, Jesus is saying, by “tying up” or “binding” them (a word used in Mark both for exorcism of demons (e.g., 5:3ff) and of political imprisonment (e.g. 6:17; 15:1; 15:7)). That is what Jesus is all about – the binding of the authorities, so that the Shalom community (kingdom of God) can flower into all that God intended it to be.

Then Jesus concludes his shocking argument. “Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” – for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit” (vss. 28-30).

Jesus concludes with the point that God can – and will – forgive the denials of the mission in which Jesus is involved, if it is due to misunderstanding. Anyone can misunderstand, and do so in full innocence. Even being deceived by others in the establishment can be forgiven, for one can be most influenced by those with whom one is in closest association. But what cannot be

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<sup>3</sup> It is so pivotal that what is considered the single best political commentary on the Gospel of Mark that has ever been written, is entitled (and is built around) *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Ched Myers, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).



forgiven is to call human liberation evil, the freeing of the poor from their poverty or the powerless from their exploitation or of simple trusting folk from dominance by their leaders as being of Satan, or of trying to deceive people into believing that the transformation God would bring to them as being of the Devil. That is what cannot be forgiven! Thus, if the Pharisees, the scribes, the Sadducees, the priests – all of whom, because of their study of the scripture, should know better – persist in resisting what God is doing to liberate and transform the poor, then they will find their power broken, their being bound by God himself, and a new “strong man” created in the person of Jesus. For as the greatest rabbi of the time, Gamaliel put it in another context, “If this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow it – and you may find yourself fighting against God” (Acts 5:38-39).

**II Corinthians 4:13-5:1** continues the argument begun in 4:5-12. In last Sunday’s exposition of II Corinthians 4, I summarized the multiplicity of issues facing the Church in Corinth, and particularly the four-party divisions that had divided their church. As I pointed out in that lesson, Paul sought to address this schism by arguing that the Corinthian Christians should get beyond their differences and reclaim for their life together their theological roots in Pauline theology and to their mission as Christ’s body reaching out to their city. Their task, as it is Paul’s task, is to “proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as slaves for Jesus’ sake” (4:5), so that “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (vs. 6) can shine through them to the people and systems of Corinth.

In this light, Paul moves on in today’s Epistle lesson to affirm his determination to see the Corinthian Church become all that it has the potential to be in Christ Jesus. He makes that argument in two ways -- once in a most subtle way and the second in a very direct manner.

The subtle making of the argument is Paul’s decision to quote from a Psalm in the Hebrew Bible. He writes, “But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture – “I believed and so I spoke” – we also believe, and so we speak” (vs. 13). His quotation, “I believed and so I spoke”, is from Psalm 116:10. Of course he could have quoted similar statements from many of the Psalms, but he chose this unique one. Could he have done this as an act of passive aggression? You see, the very next line of the verse from that psalm that he quoted is “I said in my consternation, ‘Everyone is a liar’” (116:11)? Is he suggesting to the Corinthians (whom he knew were very familiar with the Psalter) that all those leading any other party than his own were adapting and perhaps even mutilating his teaching, resulting in a church at war with each other? It is an intriguing possibility!

But there is a much more direct argument, plainly presented by Paul. He essentially argues that his insistence that the Corinthians forget their party spirit and unite into one unified witness to Corinth is not an effort he will quickly abandon. Paul is here to stay! He is not going to give up on the Corinthian Christians until they become what they were called by God to be!

“So we do not lose heart! Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen, for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal” (vss. 16-18).

Whether it is Rome's opposition to the gospel or the church's tendency to make last-ditch stands in the wrong ditches, whether it is the subtle temptation that a permissive society like Corinth has in corrupting the church or whether it is the outright opposition that the political and economic systems of that day have in intimidating the church, whether it is Christians with particular agendas seeking to press down those agendas upon an unwary congregation or whether it is the sinfulness that resides in even the best of us, Paul will "not lose heart"! He will not give up. He will be a tenacious bulldog until each and all of us allow Christ to be formed in us and shaping both our life together and our response to the pagan world surrounding and sometimes infiltrating us.

Thus, Paul concludes his argument, "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (5:1). Why such dogged determination on Paul's part? Paul is determined because he is not about the task of building the institution of a church, a large ministry or even a building rivaling the Jewish Temple. Paul is about the task of building a people – a people of power – and that will happen only if they are continually held accountable for their actions and are urged to become in life and in ministry what God called them to be – a microcosm of God's kingdom of justice, equity and relationship, God's shalom community. Someday, Paul acknowledges, he will die, and someday, they will die too. But God will not be finished with them yet. God will continue to form them into God's people, and God will continue to form those who succeed both Paul and the Corinthian Church until we have all become "a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens". And it is this recognition that continues to relentlessly drive Paul to be a bulldog for Jesus!

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