

# Our Inconsistency, God's Consistency

## 2 Corinthians 4:14 & 15a



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It's not an uncommon occurrence for me to find myself explaining to someone what it is that makes being Presbyterian distinctive, different from other Christian denominations. As recently as yesterday, upon learning that I was a pastor at Swarthmore Presbyterian Church, a neighbor asked me this question. I told her that the thing that really distinguishes Presbyterians from other Christian denominations is our polity. It is our form of government. How we order ourselves, how we make decisions, how we govern -- that we are governed by congregationally elected elders who serve three-year terms -- distinguishes Presbyterians from Roman Catholics, from independent churches, from ecclesial bodies run by bishops. Theologically, our denominations have a lot in common. It is polity more than theology, form more than content, that differentiates us.

The form of government, we know, makes a difference not just for religious communities, but for any people. A lot is at stake in the form of government adopted. Over the course of its history, ancient Israel went through a number of reconfigurations of social and political power. It began as a company of tribes, led at first by patriarchs, then by priests, and then by judges. Through it all, Israel was a theocracy, with one God, Yahweh, as ruler and with a single authorized mediator of that single God. If you recall, corruption in the priestly household of Eli caused authority to be handed over to judges. Now, there is corruption among the sons of Samuel, and so it seems that Samuel stands to be the last of the judges, the final mediator to advocate for the old covenant made with Moses, which constituted Israel as the people of God. With Samuel's urging, Israel had remained faithful to God and had victory over their enemies, the Philistines. Always, Samuel had urged Israel to remain loyal to Yahweh, to put away other gods, to remain faithful to God's covenant with them. So, Samuel can hardly believe it now when the elders make their request to cease their old order in favor of a new one, when Israel wants to cease being a company of tribes to become instead a centralized state.

The scripture lesson we read this morning marks the pivotal point when, for the first time, Israel explicitly raises the question of kingship. Of course, the idea of kingship wasn't new and out of the blue. Ancient Israel had certainly been exposed to other monarchies on the international scene. It was, after all, the form of government of other nations. And this was core to the problem. Listen, again, to how the elders make their request to Samuel. They say, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, *like other nations*." Like other nations. Israel, the nation that had emerged precisely as an alternative to other nations, the nation that had always been told to stand apart from other nations, now desires to be *like* them. It is almost as though Israel has no painful memory of Egypt, of Pharaoh. It is as though the elders have forgotten that it took forty years - a generation - to reset their minds from being under that king. As though none of that happened, Israel insists now on being "like other nations."

This is to Samuel an outrageous and alarming request, one of utmost urgency to address, because it is a request that signals that Israel no longer knows itself. It is on the brink of losing its character, identity, and vocation. You can imagine the ringing of alarms in Samuel's head, probably so loud that he cannot really hear anything. So, when he, as mediator, takes this issue to God in prayer, God tells Samuel three times to listen. "The Lord said to Samuel, '*Listen* to the voice of the people in all that they say to you.'" A second time, God tells Samuel, "Now then, listen to their voice." A third time, God says to Samuel, "Listen to their voice and set a king over them."

This is likely not the response Samuel expects from God. Samuel probably expected Yahweh to resist Israel's request for a king. That God doesn't resist is surprising, given that God is so displeased with it. But listen to the reasons for God's displeasure. First, their rejection is theological, not political. God tells Samuel,

“They are rejecting me, not you.” Second, their rejection of God is nothing new. God is used to it. The whole history of Israel has been one of forsaking God and going after other gods. Their request for a king is simply one more step in their continual disloyalty to God. These two reasons for God’s displeasure are theological, not political.

To be sure, God has some things to say about the political choice they made. God tells Samuel to warn Israel, so that the people aren’t naïve in their decision that a monarchy is going to cost them a lot. Whether by taxation, confiscation, or draft, a centralized kingship is going to take, take, and take from them. The verb “to take” appears in verses 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17. And by the time we come to the book of the prophet Ezekiel, we know that indeed, God’s warnings have come to pass. The kings of Israel are indicted by the prophet Ezekiel for having used the community for the well-being of the rulers only. God tells Samuel to warn the Israelites that under a king, “you shall be his slaves.” For a people remembering the Exodus, nothing could be more dreaded than this.

As dire as God’s political warnings are, these too do not prevent God from granting permission. “Listen to their voice and set a king over them,” God says to Samuel. Having known Israel’s whole history, God has no illusions, no naiveté that any particular political form of government is going to “save” Israel. Whereas the unstable and amorphous form of tribal life was vulnerable to religious syncretism, idolatry, and political and military barbarism, a centralized monarchy fostered no less idolatry and oppressive social relations. God knows that neither priest nor judge nor king will ensure Israel’s faithfulness. No particular political form of government will ensure that Israel lives in accordance with God’s covenantal commandment to worship God alone and to practice justice among all peoples, without privilege or preference.

There is a realism that runs throughout God’s response to Israel, a realism that recognizes that, while forms of government and their policies surely have significant consequences in human life, they do not determine a people’s faithfulness. French theologian and pastor Jacques Ellul writes about the importance of this realism, if Christians are to gain clarity about their role in the world. Having lived in Europe during the rise and fall of Hitler and having been part of the church at a time when European Christians wrestled with their role in the world, Jacques Ellul made it his quest to understand, through study of scripture, the social sciences (specifically law, economics, and history), and ethics, what the Christian’s distinctive responsibility is in the world. When, after World War II, Ellul saw that committed Christians were divided into two camps, on the one hand, those who went back to the work of theologizing as they had before and, on the other hand, those who were preoccupied with taking political stances, Ellul came to the following conclusion:

Neither the Christian nor the church should become disinterested in the history of man, any more than the church should become assimilated into one of the political movements (which had too often been the case in history). And neither should one fall into the temptation of wishing to elaborate and prescribe a Christian society, a Christian state, a Christian politic (Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, x).

A Christian, Ellul goes on to say,

has a part to play in this world which no one else can possibly fulfill. He is not asked to look at the various movements which men have started, choose those which seem “good,” and then support them. He is not asked to give his blessing to any particular human enterprise, nor to support the decisions of man (3).

Rather, a Christian “must not,” he writes, “act in exactly the same way as everyone else.”

Ellul took the apostle Paul’s statement as a point of departure. In his letter to the church in Rome, the apostle Paul wrote, “Do not be conformed to this present age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind so that you may discern the will of God, what is good, what is pleasing to him, and what is well done” (12:2).

Each generation has to recognize for itself the things to which we tend easily to conform - the political, philosophical, ideological biases and movements that make up our culture. Sometimes these movements may

seem to be in conformity with the gospel. Even at those times, especially at those times, we have to be careful not to conform to them. That is not our vocation as Christians. It is not for the Christian to define the problems of the world in the same terms as others use. It is rather our job to discover the real spiritual difficulties that *every* political and *every* social situation contains as well as the real spiritual opportunities and possibilities that surprisingly arise in the ambiguities and complexities of any situation. There is no straight line to walk or code of rules to follow or slogan to say or side to take when you live as a Christian.

There is creative work to discover and do, and if we are going to do it, we have to have our minds renewed. We cannot desire to be like others or to choose between already existing sides or among already existing options. Instead, we may have to listen, really listen, and accept reality for what it is and then do the creative work that the Christian is called to do, the work of forgiveness, the work of self-sacrifice, the work of love.