

St. Timothy's Lutheran Church
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1 Samuel 8

Our Family Tree: Samuel

It was the period of the judges, a time when men and women were appointed to enact justice for each tribe of Israel. They were to “judge people fairly...not to pervert justice...show partiality...[or] accept a bribe.” They were to “follow justice and justice alone, so that [Israel] might live” and remain in the Promised Land (Deut 16:18 – 20).

Some time after our spiritual cousin Ruth, a man named Samuel came to be. Samuel was a prophet, priest, and judge, and he had a special relationship with the LORD. When he was a child, he heard the voice of the LORD calling to him. He thought it was the voice of Eli, the priest. He heard his name called three times, and each time, he came running to Eli, saying, “Here I am; you called me” (1 Sam 3:5b). Each time, Eli said that he did not call Samuel. Finally, after the third time, Eli realized that *God* was calling Samuel.

Samuel was a good judge, and when he became old, he appointed his sons as judges. But, his sons were *not* good judges. They “accepted bribes and perverted justice” (1 Sam 8:3b). They did exactly the *opposite* of what a judge should do.

“So, *all the elders* of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel” to demand a king (1 Sam 8:4). What’s interesting is that 1 Samuel 8 verse 4 says that *all the elders of Israel gathered together*. Samuel’s sons were judges in *Beersheba*, one of the tribes of Israel; they weren’t judges over *all* Israel. *Surely*, there were good judges in other tribes. But, the elders used this opportunity to devise a plan to suit *their*

interests, for *their* gain. They demanded a king, “as all the other nations [had]” (1 Sam 8:5b).

Samuel *immediately* dislikes this idea, and goes to the LORD in prayer.

The LORD *knows* that Samuel is upset and offers Samuel a surprising response. The LORD says, “*Listen* to all that the people are saying to you; it is not *you* they have rejected, but they have rejected *me* as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them” of “what the king...will do” (1 Sam 8:7 – 9).

The LORD assures Samuel that *Samuel* has not been rejected; the *LORD* has been rejected as their king. As their king, the *LORD* has led Israel through battle; the *LORD* has provided for them; the *LORD* deserves their praise and worship. And now, He is being rejected as their king. Instead of refusing to hear them or smiting the elders, He tells Samuel to *listen* to them and to warn them of what the king will do.

The king will *take*. The king will *take* their sons; he will *take* their daughters; he will *take* the best of their fields and vineyards; he will *take* a tenth of their grain and vintage; he will *take* their best cattle and donkeys; he will *take* a tenth of their flocks, and they will become his slaves. *Six* times, the king will take, until he finally makes his own people his slaves. And “when that day comes, [they] will cry out for relief from the king [they] have chosen, and the LORD will not answer [them] in that day” (1 Sam 8:18).

The LORD’s intention is to be Israel’s king *forever*. He is the *only one* who can perfectly lead them, *but* they can choose to reject Him and have an earthly king. That

king will need to consolidate land, property, and resources to build his army, make a name for himself, and to maintain his power. He will create alliances and will need to confiscate property, creating an even greater gap between the wealthy and the vulnerable. Some will greatly benefit (perhaps the elders), and others will lose everything, until all the people finally become his slaves.

The people cannot have it both ways; either they have the LORD as their king or, they have an earthly king. If they choose to have an earthly king, the LORD will not answer their cries in slavery.

When the people refuse to listen to the warnings and demand a king, the LORD listens, and steps down.

For some reason, I can't recall hearing this story until I was an adult in seminary, studying to become a pastor. I had known that Israel had kings and that that didn't work out so well and then Jesus came, doing away with the whole "kingly" notion, and inaugurated the church, and we don't have kings in the church or in the United States. The history of Israel included kings, so I simply thought of it as matter-of-fact. In seminary, I finally heard this story, and recognized that this is a *critical* story. The LORD *never* intended His people to have a king, because *He* was their king. This one choice led to a cascade of events that the LORD never wanted. But, on the other side of Jesus, *why* does this story of Samuel matter?

After Jesus' death and resurrection, the growth of the church skyrocketed. We read in the book of Acts, of *thousands* being added to the church in one day. The church in Rome was known for their love and kindness toward each other, "alleviating the distress of those in need," and financially supporting churches in

every city.¹ The church grew at a miraculous rate. According to sociologist Rodney Stark, the church grew approximately 40% each decade. Nearly 300 years after Jesus' resurrection, there were approximately 6,300,000 Christians.²

And Christians posed a serious threat to the Roman Empire because they refused to worship Roman gods and challenged the Roman way of life – people of all races, genders, and social standing were considered equals. Christians were loved and admired, and were willing to face persecution and death. Over time, the emperors' attempts to eliminate Christians from the Roman Empire failed, because “Christianity had become too widely accepted in Roman society to make possible a successful persecution on the part of the government.”³ As a result, Emperor Constantine issued an edict of toleration for Christians in 313 A.D. Constantine converted to Christianity, and the marriage of Christianity and politics had begun. Over time, the Roman Empire expanded through violence and conquest in the name of God.

Likely, you are aware that in recent years, public opinion of Christians in the United States has declined. In 2007, the Barna Research Group published a 3-year study, wherein they explored this growing negative sentiment toward Christians. In the 90's, “the vast majority of Americans outside the Christian faith, including young people, felt favorably toward Christianity's role in society.” *The majority were favorable in the 90's*. In 2007, however, “just 16% of non-Christians in their late teens and twenties said they [had] a ‘good impression of Christianity.’” *Just 16% of*

¹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 9.

² Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 7.

³ Stark, 10 – 11.

young non-Christians had a good impression of Christianity. Barna's research concluded that the young non-Christians had similar negative impressions. Their negative impressions included: "Christianity is judgmental...hypercritical...old-fashioned...and too involved in politics." *Judgmental, hypercritical, old-fashioned, and too involved in politics.* Many of these young people offered specific examples, some of them including personal stories of hurt by the church. In their research, Barna discovered that "when young people were asked to identify their impressions of Christianity, one of the common themes was that 'Christianity is changed from what it used to be' and 'Christianity in today's society no longer looks like Jesus.'" This comment was made, unprompted, equally by non-Christians *and* by Christians.⁴ *Christianity is changed from what it used to be, and it no longer looks like Jesus.* (In my husband's conversations with non-Christian friends, he has found that they too refer to the inconsistency of what the church ought to be, and some have described person hurt incurred by Christians.)

We have a *lot* to learn from today's youth and from our past. Do we, the church, look like Jesus? Do we take Scripture seriously when it says that Jesus became king through his death? Do we take seriously the call to pick up our cross and follow Jesus? Do we care for the poor, the forgotten, and those without power? Have we gotten lost in our greed and desire to have power like others?

The story of Samuel is a *recurring* story. Israel, the early church, us – we all desire to remove God from His rightful place as king and have more power, more control. It stands to reason that because we are God's people, we believe that God

⁴ Barna, *A New Generation Expresses its Skepticism and Frustration with Christianity*, 9/21/07.

wants us to have more power, because after all, we will do God's work. But church, this temptation is a lie. Greater power for the Christian does not equal greater good. Scripture reminds us that it is in our weakness that God's power is made perfect (2 Cor 12:9).

After WWII, a group of Mennonites from Germany fled the Soviet Union, and settled in colonies in Friesland, Paraguay. Over time, they learned to survive and flourish.

In the 1990's, they had increasing problems with neighbors stealing their cattle. At times, *organized* groups came to steal their cattle. The Mennonites had no idea what to do, so they called in the army *and* the police. But, instead of helping the problem, *more* cattle were stolen.

They recognized that the cattle would oftentimes be killed and butchered right in the field – the Paraguayans were stealing the *meat* from the cattle. The people were not stealing the cattle to increase their herds but were stealing because they were *hungry*. The problem of the stolen cattle, however, needed to be solved.

The Mennonites got together and discussed what they ought to do. Perhaps they ought to move to Canada and be near family. Some within the group proposed a *different* solution, one that was agreed upon by the entire group. They imagined an *alternative* solution.

In 2000, they started a community development program for the very poor peasant farmers living near them. Their motto was: A life of dignity for my neighbor. They invested a significant amount of money and worked at this broadly and diversely. They instructed their neighbors in better agricultural methods. *They* were

prospering and living on the same land; their *neighbors* could be prospering too. But, of course farm production was only one *piece* of the puzzle; marketing, selling, and getting the produce *to* market were also a part of the process. They put in money to build better roads and educated their neighbors in marketing, selling, accounting, and health.

And what was the result? A 600% increase in production in these regions and a 68% increase in income for the families that surrounded this Mennonite colony. The stolen cattle went down to 0. This group imagined an alternative to violence and escape, and proactively sought a solution.⁵

St. Timothy's Lutheran Church, we are a diverse, beautiful community, which God has brought together to bring healing to a hurting world, and to a world which may have been hurt by the *church*. Our neighbors *need* to see Jesus in us through our words and actions. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him" (Jn 3:16 - 17). Amen.

⁵ Mark Baker, *Peace*, www.discipleshipandethics.com.