

Israel Asks for a King 1 Samuel 8

We read in the Old Testament about lots of kings of Israel. But this was not the situation from the origination of the nation in the promised land. Nor was this the case after the Captivity. In very round numbers, Israel was governed by judges for a little under four centuries, kings for slightly over four centuries, and, after the Captivity, various governors for about five centuries. The king over Israel when Jesus was born was, of course, King Herod, who was not an Israelite but an Edomite, and had not been appointed by God but by the Emperor in Rome.

Even though kings were not the way God wanted Israel to be governed, He had provided some rules for kings in the Law of Moses, as recorded in Deuteronomy 17:14 – 20:

“When you come into the land which the Lord your God is giving you, and possess it and dwell in it, and say, ‘I will set a king over me like all the nations that are around me,’ you shall surely set a king over you (rule 1) whom the Lord your God chooses; one from among your brethren you shall set as king over you; you may not set a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. (rule 2) But he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, for the Lord has said to you, ‘You shall not return that way again.’ (rule 3) Neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away; nor shall he greatly multiply silver or gold for himself. (rule 4) Also it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, from the one before the priests, the Levites. (rule 5) And it shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted above his brethren, that he may not turn aside from the commandment to the right hand or to the left, and that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he and his children in the midst of Israel.”

How well did the various kings follow these rules? Even if you are not all that familiar with the Old Testament, I think you can guess that they were, collectively, a disaster.

The change from judges to kings happened towards the end of Samuel’s career, recorded in 1 Samuel 8:1 – 9:

“Now it came to pass when Samuel was old that he made his sons judges over Israel [note that Samuel had appointed them, not God]. The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beersheba [the southernmost walled city in Israel]. But his sons did not walk in his ways; they turned aside after dishonest gain, took bribes and perverted justice. Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah [Samuel’s home which was in the middle of the country], and said to him, ‘Look, you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.’ But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, ‘Give us a king to judge us.’ So Samuel prayed to the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt, even to this day – with which they have forsaken Me and served other gods – so they are doing to you, also. Now, therefore, heed their voice. However, you shall solemnly forewarn them, and show them the behavior of the king who will reign over them.”

What can we learn about ourselves and the way Christianity is practiced from this example in the Old Testament?

First, note that God let them have a king, and even participated in the process. God knew that this was a bad idea that would lead to a plethora of problems. He gave them fair warning about how this change was going to play out. God lets us make our own decisions. And, we get to live with the consequences. Just as the Israelites felt that they would be better off with a king than with more judges, Christians have come up with several leadership styles, mostly based on what felt comfortable to them, based on their culture and experience. And, around the world in different cultures, you will find quite a diversity of styles.

Some in the history of Christianity have turned to what is called legalism; we must do everything in a certain way, exactly, if we are to have a hope of being accepted by God into His eternal family. And, each of those groups thinks that their way is the right way, obviously, or they would not have chosen that way. Their similarity to the Pharisees of Jesus' day does not come to their minds, just as the Pharisees did not find it strange that they argued over whether a miracle could be performed on the Sabbath, when an indisputable miracle had happened right in front of them.

This scene in 1 Samuel should raise some questions about how confident I should be in my own conclusions. God let those Israelites have that king, and even adapted His presentation about the Messiah to fit. During the time of King David, it was revealed to him (and repeated a few centuries later to Isaiah) that the Messiah would be his descendant and would sit on his throne (2 Samuel 6:13, Isaiah 9:6 – 7, Psalm 132:10 – 18), even though God did not want them to have kings at all.

Those who think they have exactly the right way to run the church have not learned from the failures of Israel or the failures apparent in almost 2000 years of church history. In fact, any group that has an essential set of standards for the church needs only to look at its own group from 50 years ago and realize that they do not even agree with themselves.

Some in the history of Christianity have adopted a “close enough” attitude. The way we want to do the things of God are close enough; after all, we're only human. That one did not work for Israel, either. Their excuses and compromises never found acceptance with God.

Rather, the attitude we should have about practices that, historically, have gone terribly wrong somewhere, are best expressed in 1 Corinthians 3:10 – 13:

“According to the grace of God that was given to me [Paul], as a wise master builder, I have laid the foundation, and another [in this case, Apollos] builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is.”

Poor construction increases the probability of collapse when we are under fire. Our structure (our faith) will be less able to see us through. The power of the Spirit is obscured. The Word develops irrational parts, suppressing discovery (maturity) and blocking investigation.

Do you know people who have walked away from faith after a catastrophe? In many cases, they were not taught well; perhaps they were given the idea that, if they were good, nothing bad would befall them. Or, perhaps they had been presented with a self-centered gospel, and self

was not getting its required attention. Or, perhaps they just had not been taught how to overcome in this broken world.

Do you know people who feel helpless when their world comes crashing in on them? Likely, they have not been taught about the promises of God about the indwelling Spirit that is responsible for character development, to build the kind of character that gets us through to the other side of the disaster.

Do you know people who have rejected the gospel because it doesn't make any sense? Unfortunately, a significant percentage of church-going people do not know the evidence for Jesus and the Scriptures. They see the Scriptures as rambling philosophical nonsense that has no practical application. Sometimes we call the Scriptures the Word of God. The Word is translated from the Greek, *logos*, which is where we get logic, logical. God borrowed that term which had been a well-known philosophical concept for centuries. The Word is the collection of the principles that are the foundation of math, science, and philosophy. Those principles always work and connect together all of existence and rational thought. The concept of the Word that those philosophers developed was an apt description of the Creator, so God decided to use it to describe Himself. Like John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Then, skipping to verse 14, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." So, we should expect the Word to be logical, to make good sense, and not settle for platitudes or nonsensical suppositions.

The quality of the building materials and the skill of the builder dictate the survivability of the resulting structure. When the Israelites opted for a king, they were abandoning the ultimate logic of God (judges for the big stuff, and local elders for the small stuff) in favor of the construction techniques that have never worked in all of history (in this case, a king). And before we try to make ourselves feel superior for seeing their shortcomings, we should look at church history, which has fared no better.

So, back to 1 Samuel 8. The second thing we can learn from Israel opting for a king is the illogic of the statement by the Israelites for wanting a king, in verse 5 and again in verse 20, "We want to be like our neighbors; we want a king."

We, as Americans, are not familiar with living under a king. But, we are familiar with communism. Have you listened to someone arguing for communism? With broad generalizations, they propose economic and political structures that promise wonderful things. Why do experiments in communism never actually work? Because people are not idealistic constructs. They are all over the map when it comes to ethics and degrees of self-centeredness and motives. Those fond of dishonest gain and with a lust for power will, in alarming numbers, rise to the top of any political structure, including communism. While appointing a king seemed a better situation than dealing with Samuel's dishonest sons, they really did not think this through.

What can we learn from Israel's example?

Do we want to resemble the general population? Do we fear being different? Do we think we can avoid the pitfalls of government or business if we pattern the church's organizational structure after them? The New Testament knows nothing of the hierarchies we see in churches today. The original leadership was miraculously appointed, and were predicted to disappear when the church was able to edify itself (Ephesians 4:11 – 16). We have troubling imagining an organization without proper authority figures to run it. But, I have seen such a thing twice, and it worked spectacularly.

Many groups developed their structures because someone sold the idea that the common person could never understand the Scriptures, so we need a class of people to explain it to us. But, that assumption is illogical on its face. If we are not able to understand a communication from God, how are we to understand a fellow human who has considerably less skill at communication? After teaching the Law to the Israelites for the second time, at the end of the Wilderness Wandering period, Moses said, “This is not too difficult for you.” (Deuteronomy 30:11). Paul cited another part of the same paragraph from Moses in Romans 10:6 – 8.

Do we really think that modern church structure will get us where we want to be? Do we even know the end game?

In the New Testament, church leadership was set up to be bottom-up, not top-down, based on the concepts of liberty and hegemony. Liberty I think we understand. Each person is responsible for his or her own choices and the consequences of their choices. Hegemony is a bit more rare of a word. But in Greek, that’s the word – hegemone. It means choosing to follow the lead of another because you think that will work best for you. My example is Poland. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the government of Poland had to make economic decisions they had not been permitted to make previously. They could have organized their economy for trade with Russia and other republics of the former Soviet Union. But those countries were poor, had a history of non-payment, and were floundering just like the Poles. So, the government of Poland decided to re-orient their economy for trade with the US, which offered a much larger group of buyers, a legal system to which to appeal if payment was not forthcoming, and a much better opportunity for a decent profit margin. So, Poland followed US economic policy. The US had no authority over Poland, they had hegemony. Poland chose to follow US economic policy because it seemed to offer the best benefits for themselves. That is what New Testament leadership looks like. We follow those whom we deem to be further along the road of faith than we are. We retain the authority over ourselves to switch whom we follow as we learn more, or someone we previously chose to follow isn’t working out so well. Historically, authority figures have not liked the idea that they could easily lose their authority.

Do we want a king to rule over us, or do we want to be free to make our own choices and be responsible for the outcomes produced by those choices? The Israelites were tired of the corruption of Samuel’s sons, but instead of getting rid of the problem by asking God for better judges, they decided that kings would be a better deal, as in the latter part of verse 20, “...that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles,” which is exactly what the judges appointed by God had been doing for nearly four centuries, proving once again that people are not very smart.

God told Samuel to describe to the people the reality of opting for a king, in verses 10 – 17:

“So Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who asked Him for a king. And he said, ‘This will be the behavior of the king who will reign over you: He will take your sons and appoint them for his own chariots and to be his horsemen, and some will run before his chariots. He will appoint captains over his thousands and captains over his fifties, will set some to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and some to make his weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will make your daughters to be perfumers, cooks and bakers. And he will take the best of your fields, your vineyards, and your olive groves, and give them to his servants. He will take a tenth of your grain and your vintage and give it to his officers and servants. And he will

take your male servant and your female servants, your finest young men, and your donkeys and put them to his work. He will take a tenth of your sheep, and you will be his servants.”

Obviously, kings come with overhead. And, all through history, royalty has always lived at a much higher level than the general population. Samuel reminded the people that the tax burden was going to be significant. Whereas the tithe in the Law of Moses had no enforcement provisions and was not collected into a central location for the upkeep of the religion, the king's tithe or two implied tax gatherers and more overhead.

Just as an historical reminder, each Israelite was responsible for donating 10% of their gross produce through one of three paths:

1. They could donate their tithe to the local widows and orphans, or to the strangers (like those who had escaped their own land because of war or famine or such), or the local Levite (who was the local schoolteacher).
2. The Law also required that all males attend three festivals each year, Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Each was 8 days long, during which time you needed lodging and food. Plus, you needed travel expenses and multiple sacrifices. Your tithe could be converted to cash and then dispensed to pay for those three festivals each year.
3. Each city had a storehouse whose primary purpose was as a hedge against siege by an enemy or drought or pestilence. You could donate your tithe to the local storehouse.

Of course, Israelites who did not care about God did not participate and there were no repercussions other than perhaps the faithful looking at you with disdain.

Samuel let the people know that a king would take at least one more tenth, if not two, and this by force if necessary.

What can we learn from Israel as we consider how the church should be operated?

Obviously, leadership comes with overhead. In addition, in much of the world, expensive facilities are considered essential, probably because that is what we grew up with. In most cultures, a church facility is considered essential, along with various expensive things for the inside and a staff to operate it.

The first congregation with which Sharon and I were associated after becoming Christians was, in my view, a wonderful place. It was well managed and did many things well. One year, it fell to me to give the annual giving sermon, which was made much less uncomfortable by the fact that we had just paid off the mortgage on the facility. So, we were all excited that now, fully 10% of the operating budget was going to be dedicated to missions. We thought that was a fantastic success. Everyone just expected the vast majority of the donations to be absorbed by overhead.

Reading through the New Testament, I just have not seen overhead in the early church. They shared so as to meet needs. Simple as that. But, we live in America. We have cash flow. Our economic standards are the highest in all of recorded history. So, such expenditures just seem normal and appropriate to us. God did not give rules for church overhead. We are on our own. If we want to pool our resources to have a comfortable place to meet, that's fine. The unfortunate thing is that we have exported that model to the Third World, so, in most places, the preacher is the richest guy in the village, and the church building is the nicest structure.

We can do better. We are not condemning ourselves by admitting to past bad ideas. Laugh about it; learn from it, do better. In every generation, we fix a few things, we mess up a few

things. That is just how it has been since the beginning, so we should not take ourselves too seriously.

Traditions make us comfortable. Traditions generally began from a good idea of how to bring God to mind as we encounter the ordinary troubles of life. Of course, over time, we tend to lose sight of what the tradition was to illustrate, and enshrine the tradition itself. Attacking traditions just because they are traditions is ill-advised. It just makes people uncomfortable and less effective. Instead, have confidence that the original reason for the tradition probably made good sense, so make a conscious effort to remind everyone of that reason.

Recognize that times change, and we often do not like the changes. But, we have to live in the culture we have in order to relate to it and expose the people around us to the gospel. Again, wisdom is necessary. We don't want to become the bad parts of our culture, but to be able to affect the people who are trapped in it.

Make sure that the proposed change is actually better. The Israelites wanted a king and were agreeable to the overhead that implied, when they could have had the exact same functions in a judge if they had just asked God to appoint one, and then trusted that He would.

God expects us to think.