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Eric Ellison

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ERIC ELLISON

THE PROPHET SAMUEL: IN THE WRONG PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME

In the world today, there are many ideas about the best strategies for effective Christian leadership. One clear model is exemplified by how the prophet Samuel faced the tremendous challenge of guiding Israel through the transition to the monarchy.

The Bible traces Israel's government through several developmental stages. Beginning as slaves in Egypt, they progressed through a nomadic state, settled in Canaan under periodic judges, and finally established a monarchy that lasted until the Babylonian exile. Each was fraught with challenges as well as blessings. Through all this time, the Israelites, like modern Christians, saw themselves set apart to accomplish a special purpose (see Deut. 32:9; Jer. 10:16).

The period between the conquest of Canaan and the establishment of the monarchy saw a completely unique form of government, described in Judges, Ruth, and 1 Samuel. From a socio-political standpoint, Israel was devoid of stable leadership, with no centralized government, ruling dynasty, or any human way of ensuring they would always have a leader. From a religious perspective, God was their king and the priests and Levites interspersed throughout the land were a highly structured leadership (Josh. 21). They were to live in complete freedom, trusting God to defend and provide. They lived under this unique system, with varying success, for centuries. But over time the people longed for a more visible, less radical arrangement; they wanted a king, and they asked Samuel to give them one. And it is Samuel, the spiritual leader and prophet in Israel whose "career seems to be the culmination of a political revolution begun by Moses" (Minkoff, 2002, p. 257), who gives us a remarkable example of a leader faithfully serving God in a hard situation.

Eric Ellison has served in leadership roles both in America and abroad, teaching and pastoring over the last 16 years. He currently serves a church in Chicago as he works on his Ph.D. in Old Testament Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

God's Faithful Servant

The first leadership role Samuel illustrates is the most foundational, and clearly dictates his actions throughout. He maintained a direct connection with God, stalwartly faithful to all that God instructed. While not everyone is a prophet, speaking directly with God, the principle is the same for all. A true Christian leader will lead God's people in congruence with God's will.

When the people first requested a monarchy, it was evil in Samuel's sight (1 Sam. 8:6). This could mean simply that he saw that it was not in Israel's best interest. Barnabas Lindars (1965) suggests this:

Samuel does not object to kingship as such, but to the Canaanite conception of it. It is the request for a king "like all the nations" (1 Sam viii.5), which is so reprehensible, for it implies the adoption of the forbidden religious practices of the Canaanite cities. (p. 316)

As we shall see, Samuel knew this was not good for them and had their best interest at heart. Contextual clues, however, suggest that Samuel took this request as a personal rejection of his leadership. First, the leaders couched the request with a complaint that he is old and his sons are wayward (1 Sam. 8:5). Second, when Samuel stood before all Israel (1 Sam. 12:3-5), he felt the need to publicly verify his integrity. Third, God reassured the prophet, explaining that they are rejecting God, not Samuel (1 Sam. 8:7). The Hebrew grammar of God's statement emphasizes the persons involved by beginning with the direct object. Rather than "They have not rejected you," it reads, "It is not you, whom they have rejected" (וְסָאֵם יִתְּאֵי־כֹּהֵן וְסָאֵם רָתַם אֶל־יְכֹהֵן). This highlights the personal nature of the issue. The request shows dissatisfaction with the leadership, and Samuel evidently saw it that way. He had done his best and, like Christian leaders today, took their demand personally. As much as we might like to imagine ourselves to be impartial, emotions and value of self are tied up in all we do. Samuel must have also recognized that this change would drastically reduce his sphere of influence.

All these reasons could have strongly motivated Samuel to reveal his feelings, or even to attempt to exercise the authority he would seem to have by nature of his position as prophet and judge. Yet he silently retreated from the public eye and requested God's counsel in prayer. When the correct choice seems clear to us, and especially when we are engaged in the issue emotionally, we must seek God's will for His people above our own beliefs, reputation, or even our

perceived effectiveness. Samuel, believing the request to be evil and feeling attacked, still chose to first discover God's will.

Empowering the People

Second only to Samuel's deference to God's will, and likely the most surprising, is Samuel's example of enabling the people to make their own decision. One might assume that a leader has the authority to make decisions for the people, but this story exemplifies a different approach. Here, leadership meant something other than making executive decisions about what is best.

Based on the knowledge he had received directly from God, Samuel was completely sure what was best for the nation. He returned to those who requested a king and enumerated to them the consequences that would accompany the introduction of a king to Israel (1 Sam. 8:11-17). Everything the prophet said was a reminder of the freedom they had enjoyed and would lose under a king. Samuel's approach is another indication of their freedom under this system: he appealed to them to make the decision. Harvey Minkoff (2002) describes what was at stake:

In effect, the centerpiece of Mosaic revolution was being rejected. The idea that Israelites could be distinct from the nations around them was epitomized in their having no earthly king. As Gideon had said, God was to be their king. When needed, there would be special leaders filled with the spirit. By demanding an earthly king—like all the other nations—the people were rejecting this special polity and opting instead for the system that had enslaved them. (p. 260)

Despite Samuel's warning, the elders adamantly chose to appoint a king, and Samuel complied, as God wanted. Anyone who hopes to be as faithful to God's will as Samuel must take note of this decision. He knew the people's choice was not ideal. God saw it as a rejection of Himself, and that it would result in the loss of the freedoms they currently enjoyed. Yet He acquiesced to the demands of the people, who refused to know what was in their own best interest.

Interestingly, God had already described this eventuality at the birth of the government Samuel was defending. In Deuteronomy 17:14-20, not only is the establishment of the monarchy described, but the acceptable rules within which the king should live are outlined, too. This text was the topic of much controversy in rabbinic circles, where such commentators as Ramban, Ibn Ezra, and Radak had a hard time reconciling this with the negative light in which it is cast in 1 Samuel. (Record of the controversy can be found in the Talmud, in Sanhedrin

2ob.) Such conflict can be reconciled if one believes God is willing to implement a less-than-ideal plan to accommodate the wishes of finite humans. When people act “in opposition to His revealed will, He often grants their desires, in order that, through the bitter experience that follows, they may be led to realize their folly and to repent of their sin” (White, 1976, p. 606). We clearly see in this case that, while He had an ideal plan, God had long prepared for the request and had taken proactive steps to guard the freedoms of His people, even when it was not in their own best interest.

Leaders today should keep this in mind when tempted to cling to a plan they consider ideal, no matter how superior or even directly inspired it is. No one could have greater assurance than Samuel did that a decision was against God’s will, yet he consented. He did nothing to block them, either with his position or the allegiances of those who had served under his administration for a lifetime. He did not even excuse himself from seeking a king, anointing him, and officiating at his coronation (1 Sam. 10:1, 17). While a Christian leader’s first duty is to learn God’s will, it is ironically not his responsibility to force the people to live according to that will.

Teacher of the People

Since people should be allowed to make their own decisions, we may be tempted to think there is no purpose to the leader discovering God’s will for the people. However, though Samuel empowered them to decide, he did not stand silently by and watch them do so. The tension between the first two principles is resolved by the third: a responsibility to instruct God’s people.

The decision was made, the king was designated by God, and a crisis was handled well, silencing all opposition to Saul as Israel’s first king. Coronation day marked the transfer of power from the prophet to the new king, and it was done without a hitch; then Samuel stepped forward (1 Sam. 12). After the whole congregation verified that he had led them with great integrity, Samuel explained the significance of what they had just done. He juxtaposed both governments, showing that this change was a step backward. One can see that Samuel approached his responsibility as a teacher sincerely and thoroughly, as his words of instruction form the majority of chapters 8 and 12.

When a lifetime career in leadership ends with a bad decision, a personal attack, and rejection of advice, one would be tempted to lay down responsibility for these wayward people. Samuel’s contractual

obligation had ended and his reputation was secure, yet he seized the opportunity to open their eyes. Leadership literature often emphasizes casting a vision toward the beginning of one's tenure, but Samuel broke the mold, continuing to do so after his time was up.

God Their Defender

First, he stated that, since Israel's beginning, the only times they were in need were when they had forgotten God. Just as God had sent Moses and Aaron, He sent deliverers such as Gideon, Jephthah, and Samuel to save them from oppressors. According to Tryggve (1985), "the monarchical understanding of God depicts the battling God as the God who manifests his power through combat with evil" (p. 36). The very request for a king to "judge us and go out before us and fight our battles" (1 Sam. 8:20) was a rejection of their Defender King. Ellen G. White (1969) puts it this way:

Preferring a despotic monarchy to the wise and mild government of God himself, by the jurisdiction of his prophets, they showed a great want of faith in God, and confidence in his providence to raise them up rulers to lead and govern them. (p. 354)

They may have had no visible plan for defense, but Samuel reminded them that their safety had always been God's privilege.

God Their Guarantor

Next, Samuel made a quick, loaded statement: "You lived in security" (1 Sam. 12:11). He did not need to elaborate, having already given the elders an earful when they first approached him. The Hebrews enjoyed complete freedom in all they did. God is able to rule without anything on the list of kingly activities in 1 Samuel 8:11-17. He needs no charioteers or horsemen—He keeps no standing army. God needs no cooks, bakers, fields, or vineyards—He needs support no royal palace. Interestingly, a 10% tax on seed, vineyards, and flocks would be levied (vv. 15, 17), similar to the tithing system, though "tithing was never meant to be an onerous weight, that one must give a tithe of what one earns. Rather, the tithe was a liberating act of joyful worship" (Harris, Archer, & Waltke, 1980, p. 703). Taxes supported the centralized reigning dynasty, but tithing supported the Levites, who were spread throughout the entire land of Israel. Harris, Archer, and Waltke put it this way:

There was an inter-relatedness, therefore, between their ministry and the daily labor of the non-Levites. In this synergistic bond there was a regular reminder of their need one for another.

Moreover, the poor, the widows, and the orphans (proverbial subjects of neglect) were to be maintained by means of the tithe of the third year (Deut. 14:29). They too, though defenseless, were a part of the community. (p. 704)

The similarities between God's rule and an earthly king merely point out in bolder tones the differences. The former included greater freedoms, a stronger, more inclusive administration, resulting in greater benefit to the ministry and helping the needy in their disparate communities.

God Their King

Samuel's last point shows that the only difference between Saul's recent victory over the Ammonites and previous invasions was that they now claimed a human king (1 Sam. 12:12). Israel had been unique, with no king to rule over them. The absence of a human king was to draw attention to the special relationship they had with their God, described in this way by Ellen G. White (1976):

[He] desired His people to look to Him alone as their Law-giver and their Source of strength. Feeling their dependence upon God, they would be constantly drawn nearer to Him. . . . But when a man was placed upon the throne, it would tend to turn the minds of the people from God. (p. 606)

Forgetting God was the reason they had fallen into captivity before. While they hoped appointing a king would insure against future invasions, they were only making it easier to forget God.

It is differences from the norm, not similarities, that arouse curiosity and catch attention. The Hebrews were turning their backs on a wonderful opportunity to draw the world's attention to God. Certainly they could bear witness to God's greatness with a king, as the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon demonstrated, but how striking it would have been had they achieved the same international standing without a strong human leader to whom it might be attributed.

Samuel's Strategy for Success

Samuel's speech was carefully constructed so it would be virtually impossible for the people not to realize their mistake. Such a speech on coronation day seems a little inappropriate, and many might question whether a good leader should do such a thing. In prophetic retrospect, however, Hosea 13:11 declares that God gave Israel a king in His anger. Perhaps it would have been more inappropriate for the prophet to speak nothing but congratulations on that day. One of the less enticing

aspects of the Christian leader's role as teacher is that it may be necessary to teach the people God's will when it is less than popular—maybe even inappropriate. Samuel again is an example of a leader who instructs truthfully, even when it violates custom and tact.

To demonstrate his congruence with God's will, Samuel predicted a miraculous rainstorm. Scholars have attested that rain has been seen to fall in this season, though it is rare, and certainly the timeliness of this cloudburst created a memorable impression. (See comments on 1 Sam. 12:16-18 in Pfeiffer, 1962, and Walwood & Zuch, 1985.) His speech and demonstration had the desired effect, in that the people realized their folly and responded in a spirit of repentance.

Why would he wait until after the coronation, instead of doing this when he could have averted their rejection of God? Here again, Samuel showed his value for the people's freedom, and placed himself and his motivation above reproach. Had he done so earlier, it could easily have been construed merely as an attempt to maintain his position. His approach placed the focus on the people and their condition, thus he could show concern for their welfare without question about his own tenure. The timing of this speech showed that Samuel was a leader "who sank all private and personal considerations in disinterested zeal for his country's good and whose last words in public were to warn the people, and their king, of the danger of apostasy and disobedience to God" (Jamieson, Fausset, & Brown, 1997). Samuel is a model for all leaders who hope to have a lasting impact, willing to accede to their less-than-ideal request, thus retaining his ability to influence their future long after his position had officially ended.

After the Fact

In response to his farewell speech, the people asked him to pray for them, that they would not die because of their evil decision (1 Sam. 12:19). Significantly, the people referred to their deed as evil (*racah* in Hebrew, רָעָה), the same word used to describe Samuel's reaction to their initial request in 1 Samuel 8:5 (יִנְיַעַב רָבְדָה עָרְיוּ). This parallelism serves to underscore the fact that Samuel, as the leader, was one step ahead of the people. He realized the nature of the request four chapters before the people did. One would be tempted to say their repentance was "a day late and a dollar short." Samuel might have said, "I would love to help, but you just elected a new king. Take it up with him; this is out of my jurisdiction." Instead, he responded to their plea with assurance, hope-filled exhortation, and a promise of personal support,

again demonstrating his selfless leadership. As his role as their judge ended, he explained four new roles he would fill.

Comforter

The people were clearly concerned about their own future, giving the reason “so we will not die” (תּוֹמְנֵי־לָאֵדָוָה). Such a reaction is understandable, since Samuel had just told them that their previous defeats had come from rejecting God. It follows that rejecting God as their king would constitute a still greater threat to their nation. Any sovereign thus replaced would be well within his rights to leave their defense and overall welfare solely up to the new monarch. Samuel, however, comforted the people with the news that this would not happen, assuring them that God would not abandon them because of this offense (1 Sam. 8:23). God had been the sole sovereign of Israel for almost three centuries; He had a vested interest in their success and, even with their appointment of an earthly king, their success would reflect upon His reputation. Like Samuel, God was concerned with the long-term results of His leadership, even after His official time as their only King had ended. Moses had declared that God has rejoiced and continues to rejoice over His people for good (Deut. 30:9). God’s actions on behalf of His people were motivated by an overarching love for them and desire for them to succeed, even when they were directly rejecting God as their king. Such assurance in God’s constancy should be communicated by all Christian leaders, and is key to Samuel allowing the people to adopt a government that was less than ideal.

Exhorter

The purpose of Samuel’s speech was to motivate them to a more faithful future. The assurance of God’s love for His people was inextricable from the expectations He had for their behavior. Samuel’s response to the people was saturated with this thought, containing statements that, if they were faithful, the Lord would do great things for them, but if not, they would be swept away. These statements, in 1 Samuel 12:20-21, 24-25, form the introduction and conclusion of his response.

Samuel’s closing words in public were, “indeed you and your king will be swept away” (וּפָרֶטֶתְכֶם וְכִנְיֹתְכֶם יִסָּרֵף וְאַתֶּם יִסָּרְפוּ). As the Hebrew makes even clearer, he grouped the king together with the people in the same category, showing that the same arrangement still existed between the people and God. The only difference was that now they had a king, who

himself was under the protection of God, based upon his faithfulness and that of his people. The Lord works the same way, regardless of human leadership structures. This makes it even more evident that the change to a monarchy was unwise, inserting an extra, unnecessary level of administration while still utilizing the same power for their defense. Christian leaders today should bear in mind that, no matter how evidently faulty a leadership structure is, God can work through it with the same power.

Intercessor

Then, in the most forceful terms possible, Samuel pledged his support of the people through personal prayers and continued instruction (1 Sam. 12:23). His use of the word *halilah* (חֲלִילָהּ) gave adversative emphasis, and he referred to the idea of not praying as a sin (*hatah*, חָטָא, denoting guilt or culpability). Samuel believed “that prayerlessness was sin against a holy God. The New Testament admonition to pray continually (e.g., Luke 18:1; 1 Thess. 5:17) picks up on that theme. Prayer is not only a blood bought privilege, it is a demanding responsibility” (Kroll, 1985, p. 22). Having been pushed aside as judge, Samuel took his role as intercessor so seriously that he prayed for the people who had rejected him. Such selflessness makes it clear why God names Samuel with Moses as one of the greatest intercessors of all time (Jer. 15:1).

Instructor

As a capstone, Samuel promised to remain as their instructor, showing them the good and right path. The word he used to describe instruction is *yarah* (יָרָה). Its fundamental meaning is “to shoot arrows” (Brown, Driver, & Briggs, 1979, pp. 434-435). One of the most accurate and deadly weapons in the ancient world was the bow and arrow. He chose this word picture instead of a more common word like *yada* (יָדָע), which means (in its causative/hiphil form) “to instruct or give knowledge.” Samuel did not see himself as a former leader who retires to a quiet life, making himself available for advice. Rather, he saw himself actively and aggressively making sure he did everything to guarantee they would stay on the right path, like one hurling projectiles. It is one thing to pray behind closed doors, but quite another to proactively influence the people, especially after having been replaced. Such large footsteps are hard to follow for any leader, even one who possesses less than the average dose of pride.

Conclusion

The transition to the monarchy was a sad moment in the history of Israel, for this was when they rejected God as their king. But this episode also gives us a remarkable example of Christian leadership. Samuel relied on the Lord for direction, empowered those under his care to make their own decisions, and clearly taught them the significance of what they had done. Afterward, he comforted the people, exhorted them for the future, promised to continue to pray for them, and vowed to actively and aggressively instruct them regarding God's will.

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