

Culture Wars – Does God Take Sides?

From the series: Heroes in Clay: Samuel

Text: 1 Samuel 8:19-20; Matthew 5:45

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

... we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations... 1 Samuel 8:19-20

... God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on righteous and on the unrighteous. Matthew 5:45

Last evening on the evening news there was a brief bit of the heavyweight championship fight of the night before and of Riddick Bowe who delivered the telling blow to Vander Holyfield. “I won,” said Bowe, “because God was on my side.” Now that’s really dumb! One guy beats up another, makes him bloody and says, “God’s on my side.” But it’s really only the extreme of what we all do at one time or another. We get in a conflict or a debate, or a discussion or we get into something that deeply divides and we do our best to make sure that God is on our side. We make the claim and Samuel made that claim too. Samuel believed that God was on his side - or maybe, in all fairness to Samuel, I should say that Samuel believed that he was on God’s side.

Samuel was one of the great leaders of ancient Israel – a good man, a man of integrity and of spiritual depth. He had been one of the judges of Israel at the end of that historical period we call the time of the Judges. Israel was a tribal confederacy at the time following the conquest of Canaan under Joshua. It was that period of time in which Israel lived as a kind of loosely confederated group of tribes. They would, when a crisis arose, rise up together for a common defense. They believed that God would, at a decisive moment, raise up a charismatic leader who could rally the tribes together. Then, when the crisis had passed and the battle won, they would go back and do their farming again in their respective tribal territories. They were a tribal confederacy.

We can understand that because we had thirteen colonies at one time or thirteen states that were in a confederacy. A confederacy is a kind of government where the independent units maintain a certain amount of autonomy, but they feel the need for a certain amount of centralizing and organizing power for such things as common defense, etc. If you remember your ninth grade civics class, at least a

hundred years ago it was called the United States Civics class, you learned there about how the Confederacy moved into a strong central government. Wasn't it Alexander Hamilton who wrote the "Federalist Papers" and argued the case for the strong centralization of power? Well, that's exactly what was going on in Israel at the time.

Samuel had been an excellent judge and a great spiritual leader. As long as you have a towering figure, the old forms and structures survive somehow because such a figure as a Samuel commands such trust and respect. But we are told in the eighth chapter of I Samuel that Samuel is old and his sons are not following in his footsteps, and so the elders of Israel, (kind of the leading citizens, I suppose) come to Samuel. I hope they were a little more sensitive than the text says. It says, "You're old." It can be a difficult thing, you know, growing old. You don't need somebody to remind you! Somebody comes up to Samuel and says, "You're old. And your sons aren't doing well. Give us a king." Samuel was displeased. These people were about to fall into the same trap from which they had so long ago escaped in Egypt. The Hebrews had vowed they needed no king but God. So he prayed to the Lord, and the Lord said, "Yes, I understand you are displeased, but recognize they are not rejecting you. They are rejecting me and I am used to it. This has been going on since the very day I brought them out of Egypt. Listen to the people. Give them what they want." However, Samuel warned them what they were in for. Then we come to the ninth chapter and it is as though we are reading a totally different account, because now we have Saul in the picture. God speaks to Samuel and he says, "Tomorrow there is a young man who is going to come. His name is Saul. I have appointed him to be a king and I want you to anoint him, etc." And very interestingly, in the ninth chapter and the sixteenth verse, the Lord says, "Anoint him to be ruler over my people Israel. He shall save my people from the hands of the Philistines, for I have seen the affliction of my people because their outcry has come to me."

Now here in the ninth chapter you have another source. You have another perspective. You've got another understanding of things. Here, very much parallel to Moses, you have God coming to Samuel and saying, "This man is going to be my answer to meet the affliction and suffering of my people Israel. Anoint him. Appoint him. He will be my instrument in response to the cry of my people." God said, "The cry of my people has risen to me and I am going to do something for them." The words are very similar to the ones spoken to Moses at the burning bush. In the ninth chapter, after that rather discouraging beginning about the initiative for a king, it seems as though God is on the bandwagon now and it is God who is doing this thing. God is saying, "I am going to move this tribal confederacy into monarchy in order to meet the needs of the immediate situation." Well, that whole section meanders between these two points of view. You have, we'll call it, the Samuel source, the source that speaks for the old tradition, the covenantal community. And you have the Saul source, which reflects the view of those who want to move into something new, into some new social organization in order to meet the exigencies of the time. Both sides are sure

that God is on their side. Neither side is pure. None of us is ever pure. No faith conviction of ours is without some measure of vested interest. You can count on that.

Now I think Samuel was genuinely upset about the undercutting of that ancient covenant community where a people was gathered into a community, not through political alignment or economic philosophy or ethnic purity, but out of a common trust in God. But I also think he was hurt. He felt rejected. And those who were seeing where Israel had to go had a concern for the well being of Israel, but I think probably there were also the ones who had been able to accrue some considerable bank accounts here and there and they really wanted some kind of security system. They wanted to take the bull by the horns and make sure that the accumulated wealth and positions they had acquired would somehow or other be secure. They wanted to be like other nations where a king could help maintain an army and a measure of stability. So there is always that mixture.

What's going on here? Well, I suppose it's a culture war. I don't know who introduced the phrase "culture war," but I do know that it came into prominence in this past political campaign. Pat Buchanan at the Republican Convention spoke about being at war for the soul of this nation. And out of the campaign has come an accentuation of that polarization of our society. If we look back to Israel we can see that polarization and culture divide wasn't devised in the 1990s; it's not a 20th-century phenomena. It has been going on forever. Then, there were two visions of what Israel was to be. There were two visions of what the identity and the mission and the nature of the community ought to be. They were at odds. They were at cultural war with each other.

It's really interesting that in the biblical account you don't have one setup as the right way and the other way as the wrong way, but you have a weaving together of these two positions. Now in the old way that we used to read the Bible, and the old way I used to preach the Bible, frankly, I would have had to iron out those two undissolvable knots of material. I would have had to make one be subservient to the other. I would not have been able to recognize that a biblical writer might have left in there, intentionally, an unresolved tension. The biblical writer is no fool! He didn't just cut and paste and put things together. It is intentional. As he looks back on Israel's history, the tensions and conflicts and the movement that made them what they were and what they became, he is trying to see the way in which the uncanny presence of God moves in the unsettled, unstable, unpredictable human, historical situation.

It is a marvelous study of how Israel became the nation that it was and the writer in retrospect portrays both sides of the issue for us so that we could see these tensions that existed within this ancient people of God. There have always been those who have clung to old values--What shall we call them? Shall we call them the orthodox? Or conservatives? There have always been those who have felt that new times demand new solutions. That growing explosion of knowledge and new

understanding in insights call for new arrangements. What shall we call them? Progressives? Liberals, maybe? There have always been those who have looked to the past in order to secure the present and the future. And there have been those on the other hand who, looking to the future, have recognized the necessity of scuttling the past as a straightjacket.

In which camp would you have been? Would you have put your arm around Samuel and said, “You’re right, old boy. Things are going to pot and there may not even be a future if those radicals have their way. Everything is going to pot. No more morality. No more spirituality. No more God. Secularism. Secular humanism, etc.” Or would you have been one of the lobbyists who were pushing for the king and would you have said, “Look, the future is here. And the new situation demands that we move out of this inherited confederacy that has served its time. It’s time for a new form and a new structure to carry out into the future in order that we can be all that God would have us be.” Where would you have been? Let’s have an election. Shall we have another election? You can cast your vote.

Why is it even important to look at this? In this fascinating biblical narrative, seeing these tensions, we might get a word of enlightenment for the present situation in our own nation and society. For we are a nation deeply divided. We are a society that is polarized and poisoning each other, and everybody claims that God is on his or her side. There is a kind of conflict of moral vision about what this nation ought to be, and what kind of society God is calling us to be. And moral vision held with passion sometimes becomes violent. There is name-calling and acrimony, and there is division and adversarial spirit - a kind of polarization that fragments society and makes civil and rational discourse almost impossible. So I think that it may well be that in this narrative we have some help to understand how we should negotiate these times.

When I was at Brandeis three weeks ago I met Professor James Davison Hunter. I didn’t know at the time that he had authored a book which was reviewed in the October *Perspectives*, entitled by the way, *Culture Wars*. I picked up a copy a couple of weeks ago in New York. His focus is the struggle to define America - making sense of the battles over the family, art, education, law and politics. It is an excellent study. James Hunter is an evangelical Christian, and he is an excellent sociologist. So I find this a very intelligent survey of what’s going on in our nation - the things that are tearing our society apart. I would recommend it to you. *Culture Wars*. He uses the phrase, and he points out the perils in which our society stands: the potential fragmentation and the potential for the breakdown of all discourse, which of course, is so essential for a democratic society. As we look at the biblical account, might it not help us simply to recognize in the first place that these tensions are endemic to the human situation? So you’re orthodox. That’s good! But that’s not all. And so you are a wild-haired liberal. That’s great! But it’s not the whole picture. The one who clings to ancient values and the one who reaches for that which is new and untested need each other. In a

healthy society there will be a creative tension with a strong enough center to hold people together. But I think it is simply important first of all to recognize, not despair, and not throw up our hands as though it is the end of the world.

We didn't invent this kind of polarization. Maybe the mass media, and the television, and the sound bite, maybe that accentuates, maybe that polarizes and divides us more than in earlier times. I think that is probably true. But, nonetheless, we have to learn to live with that and to work with that. If you are conservative and orthodox, you have every right to be thus. And it is your responsibility to hold to values that are tried and true, and to make sure that the treasures of the past are not lost. Yours is a good voice, but it's not the only voice. And if you are always champing at the bit, and always on the growing edge trying to break through to something not yet jelling, then, bless you! Keep everything unsettled and unstable. Be a nudging discomforter, but recognize that there are perils out there. As old Samuel said, "You are going to get your king, and you are going to get yours." What we need in a healthy society is an acceptance of the legitimate and authentic tension that rests within any community of people.

I like the way God is portrayed in this whole narrative. I think that I would have to say that God is kind of a grudging progressive. That I say without bias. (Oh, come on. Where's your humor!) [Laughter] He says to Samuel, "Samuel, you're right. You're right." I think the narrative is saying, "You can't give up traditional values without some significant loss, but the nature of the historical experience is such that you have to keep moving on. Yes, they've rejected me. But listen to the people. Warn them, but listen to them. Give them their king. No arguing. No pouting. No raging. No manipulation. No coercion." God seems to be able to handle that which is threatening to so many of us. God seems to be confident about the future and God's ability to cope with the future regardless of which alternatives are chosen.

And then I love this in Samuel's farewell speech in the 12th chapter. The people are rather humbled at this point, and they say, "Pray to God for us." And Samuel could say this to them, "For the Lord will not cast away his people, for his great name sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself." Don't you love that? Isn't that the kind of God that you could worship? Samuel can say, "Look, this isn't some petulant, petty, capricious deity. This is Almighty God. This is the Creator of the heavens and earth. This is the One who has created us in his image, who will not let any of his children go. This God will not abandon you. This God will not forsake you. Stop quivering in your boots. Trust God. God forbid that I should cease to pray for you. And I will continue to instruct you in the way you should go."

And then if you follow the story on, there is also this - that as there is this normal, inevitable kind of movement, the values of the old tend to get incorporated into the vision of the new. Samuel anointed Saul king, and the new was here. But Samuel said, "Saul, buddy, don't think you're a sovereign, an absolute like all

those puppet kings around you. Saul, you're just another citizen before the eternal, sovereign God." And you know the thing that made Israel unique? Even when it became a monarchy, it was the fact that its king always trembled before the prophet - that its king knew that he was accountable and that he had no absolute sway, but must always regard the ways of righteousness and justice, and seek the ways of peace. The old values - the community and tribal confederacy in covenant with God - that somehow or other got laced into the monarchy, so that when we reach Chapter 16 we have David. We have the ideal king and it would seem for all the world that God always intended that there would be such a kingdom and there would be such a king - the Golden Age. Samuel wouldn't have dreamed that it could be so good.

I read from the Sermon on the Mount this morning because it seems to me that as God's people we are called to that kind of posture and spirit and attitude. I think one of the great problems in our present social unrest is the fact that we have politicized things that cannot be politicized. You cannot legislate morality. You cannot legislate spirituality. The things that tear us apart - abortion, homosexuality, a National Endowment for the Arts, family values - those trigger words set off emotions and generate a lot of heat and very little light. They are not things that the government really can handle. Those are the things for us the people of God to deal with. We, as the people of God, are called to live an alternative community. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth. Light illumines. Salt preserves." And we are called to be God-like. The God who causes the sun to shine on the just and the unjust, and causes the fields of the righteous and the unrighteous alike to be watered with rain and snow. Jesus final word is "So, be like God."

The word *perfect* in the RSV is not a good translation. The word is *kellos* in Greek, which is the end or the purpose. Realize that for which God created you. God created you in God's image. Be God-like, with a kind of universal benevolence, with a kind of love and a compassion, a justice and a seeking of love and fairness, and finally, peace in society. You be different. Don't let the sound bites polarize you. When you feel your anger begin to rise, recognize that God is not on your side. Or rather, God is on your side - *and on* the side of your adversary. Have a moral passion, but lace it with humility and express it with compassion. Simply be God-like. God knows. God can handle this alternative, that alternative, and another alternative, but if somebody tells you, "This is God's way," don't you believe him. God is bigger than that, bigger than my vision and your vision. A vision that embraces us all and calls us all to be civil and committed, agents of the kingdom that will surely come. Sorry folks, God doesn't take sides.