

Culture Wars: Battling For the Soul of the Nation

Reformation Day Sunday

Text: I Samuel 8:7; I Samuel 9:16

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"... The Lord said to Samuel, 'Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but have rejected me from being king over them.' "

"... you shall anoint him to be ruler over my people Israel. He shall save my people from the hand of the Philistines; for I have seen the suffering of my people, because their outcry has come to me."

In the lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures you will notice a reference to the book of Judges. I am not going to read that, but that simply is a reference that says that after Joshua, Moses' successor, died, there arose a generation that knew not the Lord – a very serious portent of bad things to come. The book of Judges talks about that period of time between the settlement in Canaan of the children of Israel, and the first king, Saul. It was a period of a hundred or two hundred years. It was a time when leadership was charismatic. A leader would arise, would be filled with the Spirit of God, execute a task and then retire to his farm, or her farm. Deborah, Gideon and Samson, those great Bible stories are recorded in the book of Judges. The last and greatest judge was Samuel. Samuel was a priest, prophet, judge, and ruler. He led Israel for many years and then as he grew older the people were concerned because his sons were not following in his steps, and they wanted a king like all the other nations, so they asked Samuel for a king.

Israel had been a loose confederacy of tribes, and they had gotten together to do certain things on specific occasions, but they were rather loosely connected as semi-independent tribes. But now, recognizing the threat from without, they request a king.

The scripture lesson lists in the first book of Samuel a Saul source and a Samuel source. I do that so that you can see that there were two points of view that come together in this lesson. There are two traditions, and the author purposely let both traditions stand. The one tradition said that the people of Israel were vulnerable and in danger, and God said to Samuel, "Anoint Saul. Through this

first king I will deliver my people." The Samuel source, the conservative point of view, rejects that idea and resists the movement toward monarchy. I list these two sources so that you could feel the two of them that are interlaced together in these chapters.

First, the ninth chapter of I Samuel, the fifteenth verse: "Now the day before Saul came, the Lord had revealed to Samuel: 'Tomorrow about this time I will send to you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him to be prince over my people Israel. He shall save my people from the hand of the Philistines; for I have seen the affliction of my people, because their cry has come to me.'"

Doesn't that remind you of Israel in Egypt in bondage to Pharaoh? The cry comes to God, God raises up Moses, and the people are led to freedom. Now here they are in Canaan, but they are in a situation again of danger, and so God says to his leader, Samuel, "I hear their cry. Anoint this man. I will, through this man, deliver them." Samuel saw Saul. The Lord told him, "Here is the man of whom I spoke to you. He it is who shall rule over my people." Now that happens.

Then in the tenth chapter and the first verse, Samuel took a vial of oil, poured it on Saul's head and kissed him and said, "Has not the Lord anointed you to be prince over his people Israel? And you shall reign over the people of the Lord and you shall save them from the hand of their enemies round about. And this shall be the sign to you that the Lord had anointed you to be prince of his heritage." If you go on to read the eleventh chapter, Saul gains a great victory and everyone says, "Wow, what a man. He's our man." They are all ready to go. They are excited.

The other point of view is expressed in the Samuel source, the eighth chapter and the fourth verse: "Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, 'Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations.' But it displeases Samuel when they say, 'Give us a king to govern us.' And Samuel prayed to the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, 'Hearken to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds, which they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, hearken to their voice; only, you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.' "

Then follows a serious indictment of monarchy — In a word God says, "Tell them that once they get a king, the king will be on the take. Take their money. Take their sons and daughters. Take their animals. Take their property. They are in for trouble because governments tend eventually to become oppressive and coercive. Just let them know what they are in for." Then in the nineteenth verse of that chapter, the people refuse to listen to the voice of Samuel and they said, "No, but we'll have a king over us."

I set for you this Biblical story because you have two traditions next to each other, and it was a hinge-point in Israel's experience. We know about the confederacy, the tribal union. It was very much like the early colonies in this country. Those thirteen colonies did not have a strong central government. They were a confederacy. They each yielded of their sovereignty some of their power and some of their rights in order that there might be a central government to do certain things for them that they couldn't do for themselves: national security, for example – trade, commerce, that kind of thing. To this day in this country that tension continues to exist in our nation.

Do you remember Alexander Hamilton and the Federalist Papers, and how he argued for a strong central government. There was a conflict at that time. In the nineteenth century this country went through the terrible tragedy of the Civil War and, though it was really over the question of slavery, what was being tested was this form of government, a federal government where they could instruct the states to give rights to people or could instruct all states to release their slaves. The governors of some southern states back in the 60s, in the Civil Rights days, argued for states rights over against the interpretation of the constitution from the federal government which said that it is wrong to segregate in schools and all of those so called Jim Crow Laws that demeaned and dehumanized the black race.

So we know about confederacy. It is a kind of government that has power on the periphery and less so in the center, as opposed to the federal form of government where there is power at the center that can dictate to the respective units of government. That was what was going on in Israel. They were a confederacy. A charismatic leader would arise on occasion to meet a specific crisis and then go back to the farm. And they had a central shrine where they worshiped together, and where they renewed their covenant.

But God was their king, that was their understanding, and they had no strong central government or strong national leader, no dynasty, no imperial house. But as a kind of loose tribal confederacy they were vulnerable to the attacks of people on their borders, and once they got established people began to get some possessions. They built barns, and had fields and oxen and one thing and another. They said, "We don't want to be vulnerable to these attacks. Every six months or so somebody comes in and burns our fields. We need a strong leader. We need a strong government. We need security. We need secure boundaries." Sound familiar? So they came to Samuel who had been the greatest spiritual leader in Israel since Moses and they said to him, "Your sons aren't following in your steps. You are growing older. We need to move on to another form of government. We need a king." Well, if you read the one source, it sounds as though that was a movement that was not only approved by God, but initiated by God in response to the cry of the people and who said, "Through this man whom you are to anoint, I will deliver this people."

But if you read the Samuel source you see that God not only does not initiate it, God doesn't even approve of it, but sort of reconciles God's self to the inevitable, and says "Go ahead and do it, but warn them because they are in for trouble. Just wait until the king really establishes a royal house." That's the situation.

That's the focus of the morning as we think about the culture wars, the battling for the soul of a nation. There were conservatives who said, "Foolish people, you want a king? Don't you remember that it was Moses who led us out of the oppression of Pharaoh out of the bondage of Egypt? Don't you realize that in establishing a royal house you will be bringing yourselves right back into a situation where there is oppression from on top? The conservatives had a point. They did remember. That was the best thing about the conservative mind. It remembers the values of the past. It has a memory of those things that were valuable and important and significant and that had a shaping determination of a people.

But there were progressives as well, and they said, "To be sure. But on the other hand, look, we simply can't survive this way." The conservatives said, "Trust God," and the progressives said, "We do trust God, but look what's happening. We are being assaulted, invaded. The marauders come in. We are at a loss, we are victims. And, it's not going to change." So they went at it, these conservatives and progressives, and the Biblical story allows both of those voices to be heard.

Now it is interesting that on Reformation Sunday we should have a scripture lesson that has two traditions that are at variance with each other because one of the models of the Reformation was *sola scriptura*— Scripture alone is our authority. But I would raise the question: If scripture alone is our authority, which of the traditions are you going to buy into? Where would you have been in this discussion? Are you a conservative or are you a progressive? Do you remember the values of the past and try to preserve them and perpetuate them, or are you one who believes in the movement of history, that new times demand new forms and new structures? Do you set things in concrete or do you remain fluid and flexible with the ongoing movement of history? The Reformation was a time that gave us this insight, which ought never to be forgotten—the Latin model I can't repeat but its translation is— the Church re-formed according to the Word of God and always being re-formed.

In the sixteenth century there was a situation where the Church, not the nation Israel in the thirteenth century B.C.E., but now in the sixteenth century C.E. you have a church that had become a mammoth world power. There was a union of throne, and altar, and thus times during those centuries of Christendom, a medieval age when the Church was the most powerful human institution. It was not simply a religious institution. It was cultural, it transcended national boundaries, it was powerful, and it became decadent, just as decadent as any imperial house that has no checks on it. And the reformers said, "Something has

to change. The Church needs to be renewed. We need a reformation of the Church." Institutions don't change until something blows sky high.

Martin Luther, of course, was the one who blew it. Martin Luther, brilliant, powerful, vulgar, a bull in a China shop, was excommunicated. He returned the favor and excommunicated the pope. And we were off and running. At that time, just as in the experience of Israel, it was a hinge-point in human history. It was Luther who said, "We must re-form and we must become the body of Christ in a total new structure. The other is the Babylon, the harlot that is in bondage, and God has turned away from it."

A humanist scholar, a Dutchman named Erasmus was a faithful son of the Church. He and Luther communicated. Erasmus was a renaissance scholar. He was a part of the fifteenth-century revival of learning in Europe where they rediscovered the classical culture of Greece and of Rome and the old language of the Semitic peoples. And in that renewal and revival there was a whole blossoming of the human spirit in the fifteenth century, and it was a preparation for that breakthrough in the sixteenth century, the religious Reformation. Luther wrote to Erasmus, "Join me." Erasmus said, "No, I am going to stay." Luther said, "You can't stay. That Church is decadent and it is dead." Erasmus said, "You want to break it, rend the Body of Christ. For your renewal the price is too high. I will stay within the Church of the Body of Christ. We must not rend this institution that is, after all, in all of its corruption and decadence (which Erasmus readily admitted), nonetheless still the Church of the Living God."

Luther left. Protestantism is the consequence. Erasmus stayed and in the following century the Roman Church reformed itself, as always happens in human culture. It's action and reaction. As the Reformation identified or created its identity over against Rome, the reforming Roman Church reformed itself over against the Reformation. Yet we have had this tragic split for all these years.

Who was right, Luther or Erasmus? The conservatives who came to Samuel and said, "Don't do this." or the progressives who said to Samuel, "Give us a king." Who was right? Who was wrong? In human history, there's not right and wrong. There are wise choices, foolish choices. There are marvelous breakthroughs and dead ends. It's not a simple question of something being right or wrong. In the ambiguity of the human situation, in the ambiguity of the text of history at any particular time there are a lot of factors that have to be factored in. Erasmus was right. The price was too high. It was tragic. Luther was right. Nothing would happen without the break. Of course, some four or five hundred years later for us to continue to reiterate the sixteenth-century insights is to fall into the pattern of fundamentalism. For us to continue to talk about Reformed distinctions is to forget that we, with history, continue to move.

We inaugurated a new President at Western Seminary, and you can hear him preach tonight. As Peter said, "He's a great guy, a good scholar, a good preacher." The Reformed and Christian Reformed Churches are getting together for that

service, and I think that's nice. But if you really want to celebrate Reformation Day today, then why don't we get together with the Roman Catholic Church and all the other churches in the community to recognize that the split back then was tragic, as well as necessary. Then, of course, if we really want to be prophetic, next year let's gather all the churches across all the barriers and also some people from Islam and our Jewish friends and let's have an inter-faith service of worship that recognizes that the future does not lie in the perpetuation of the divisions of the past but the overcoming of those decisions and the healing of relationships.

What we need in this world is reconciliation. We live at a hinge-point in culture, which is as critical as that faced in Israel when they were trying to decide whether to have a king or stick with the old forms. We are at a hinge-point in history, which is as critical as the sixteenth century. We are in this nation today in the midst of a culture war. If you had the misfortune of listening in one evening to the Republican Convention a couple of years ago when Pat Buchanan said, "we are in a warfare." If you listen to the rhetoric of Randall Terry, the anti-abortion person, if you receive the propaganda of the religious right, you will find that what they want is the restoration of yesterday, failing to recognize that history is a stream that moves on.

Now the conservatives back in Israel had remembered some important things that ought never to be forgotten — and that is the value of the conservative. But the progressives knew that new times demanded new forms — and that is the value of the progressive who recognizes that history is movement, and that yesterday's answers reiterated become fundamentalism today. Today's crises and dilemmas demand deliberation and decision today, in the light of the Biblical story, in the light of the Church tradition, with the exercise of human intellect, and in the evaluation of human experience. It not *sola Scriptura*. If we really want to be true to the Reformation and continue being Re-formed then we've got to stop throwing those models around, as though once that model is set, everything is set. That is not *sola Scriptura*. It is one witness. It is a valuable witness. This is our Book. This is our story, but the story has been lived out over centuries of time. We take that tradition seriously. Rome was right about that. Rome has always been right about that. This Book ought always to be a prophetic critique of tradition. But we weren't born in a vacuum. We take seriously the roots from which we come, and we use our heads. For God's sake, we use our heads, we think. To have an external authority that we simply clamp onto ourselves without being able to think, to liberate ourselves, is to deny we are made in the image of God, to think, for God's sake.

Then, of course, human experience. You can't just speculate in the abstract. You make decisions in the concrete context of human experience. For example, the people who are pro-choice are not necessarily pro-abortion. They have other values they are looking at. What does it mean to be human? There are other human values that they weigh over against the value of the fetus. It's not easy folks. It's not simple, you see. To get up with all kinds of violent rhetoric and to

make out as though there is a simple easy course, and every God-fearing person would go that way is to deny the reality of the whole course of history in which we see it even in this Biblical example today, where there were Godly people who were trying to find out what it meant to be the people of God in the twelfth and thirteenth century B.C.E. Some said, "Don't you dare anoint a king." And others said, "You'd better anoint a king." And both of them had a text. And we have a text for both of them. Some of us will tend to be conservative. Some of us will tend to be progressive. But in the culture war of this nation today, what is so absolutely imperative is that we begin to talk to each other and to listen, that we be done with this sloganeering and just thinking that once you've said the cliché the argument is over. Look at the data, listen to each other, be in dialog, respect each other, esteem each other.

Modernity was born in the French Revolution actually. The Renaissance detoured by the Reformation of the sixteenth century and came to full flower in the eighteenth century with the Enlightenment. The French Revolution, which overthrew the authoritarian divine rights, etc. had as its slogan, "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity." If we remove the sexist language, "Liberty, Equality, and Community." That was the birth of the modern. Unfortunately, the modern came to birth in reaction. It had to come in reaction. These things always move in history by reaction. You bust something open, and consequently modernity has been colored with secularism and it has given birth to atheism, which is a recent phenomenon of modernity. But we are moved beyond that. We are in a post-modern age. We know that modernity lost mystery, transcendence. But now, before the face of God, in serious reverence and deep engagement, it is time for us to spearhead a new movement of reconciliation.

Some of us recently, had an opportunity to stop in Coventry at the Cathedral. Perhaps you've read the story of how Churchill had gotten possession of the machine by which the Nazis coded their messages and he learned that Coventry was to be bombed a couple of days hence. It was a great industrial center with this great cathedral. Churchill had to wrestle – Do I simply give away the fact that I can break the code or do I simply let it happen and preserve the code and the ability to break the code? He did the latter. Coventry was terribly bombed. The Cathedral was in ruins. And they have allowed the ruins to stand. In the midst of the ruins they have built a magnificent new Cathedral. The morning after the bombing someone went in to take two of the old timbers from the roof that were smoldering and tied them together in the form of a cross. And with the char wrote on the stone ruin, "Father, forgive." If you would go there today, you would find there is still a charred cross. Behind it, etched in stone of the ruins, in gold now, "Father, forgive." There is a magnificent chapel off to the side. It is the Chapel of Reconciliation. Someone, the morning after the bombing, took the old square nails out of the beams and wired them together into a cross. The nailed cross, which perhaps you've seen, has become a symbol of reconciliation.

It is time for Christ Community to lead in a ministry of reconciliation. It will not try to reinvent yesterday, but believe in tomorrow when all God's children will kneel and embrace each other.