

“An Age-Old Question”

I Samuel 8:1-9, (10-18), 19-22; Matthew 22:15-22

May 11, 2025

1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

by Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Introduction

Religion and politics, Church and state; it's an age-old tension filled with “smoky, back-room deals.” For as long as human beings have believed in a God or gods, and have organized themselves politically, there have been the questions and tensions between religion and politics. It's the chief of a tribe wanting the support of the shaman, and the shaman wanting the power of the chief. It's Emperor Constantine in the 4th C making Christianity the official state religion of the vast Roman Empire, unifying his Empire and giving religious leaders new political power. It's the founders of this country knowing the dangers of a State Church in Europe and so establishing “the free exercise of religion,” and “the separation of Church and state.” It has been, is, and will be an on-going challenge.

When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, religion and politics formed what is called “Christendom.” It is religion and politics working together to support the interests of each. Religion was then used to justify the political ambitions and wars of the State. And the Church then also had the power of the State to enforce its own beliefs, such as the Spanish Inquisition. A more recent example of “Christendom” would be America in the 1950s: blue laws, American flags moving into sanctuaries, and “In God We Trust” printed on money. It was the height of the Cold War, so Church and State worked together to say we're “Christian Americans,” not “godless Communists.”

Now since the 1950s things have dramatically changed. It started first in Europe. The power and influence of the Church began to diminish. Fewer people were going to church. Religious leaders lost their social standing. Society became more and more secular. In the 1960s the diminishment of religion and secularization came to America. The change has been dramatic. I have seen it in my lifetime. So have many of you.

But that doesn't mean there aren't conversations between State and Church and new backroom deals. Before the “Church” in the deals with the State we were Mainline Protestants. Now it's the Evangelical Right.

Today we return to our sermon series in I Samuel. For the first 200 years of ancient Israel's existence, they were a loose tribal confederacy and theocracy. The 12 different tribes worship one God, and when a crisis arose they trusted God to call a charismatic leader to rally and gather the tribes to defeat their enemies. It worked, more or less. Samuel was the last of those leaders.

So in the text from I Samuel 8, something new is happening. Ancient Israel will move from a tribal confederacy to a kingdom with a king. And with that move will come the complicated and important questions about the relationship of religion and politics, God and king. And these are interesting questions for us today who know both “Christendom” and “separation of Church and State.”

II. Text and Brief Exegesis

I would like to read and make a few brief comments on I Samuel 8:1-9. Then summarize verses 10-18. And conclude with verses 19-22 and a few brief comments.

Read I Samuel 8:1-9.

Samuel’s two sons do not follow in the ways of their father. Rather they take bribes and pervert justice. We have heard this before. The judge Eli’s sons did the same, and that prepared the way for Samuel. Now it’s happening to Samuel and it will prepare the way for a king.

Though old, Samuel is still recognized as the leader of the confederacy of the 12 tribes. The elders are representatives of the 12 tribes. The pretext for their request for a king is the corrupt leadership of Samuel’s sons. Samuel doesn’t challenge what they say, so he must know it’s true.

But there is probably more going on here. There is a military reason to move in the direction of a king. The Philistines continue to be a worrisome threat. They are sea people who are wealthier and have more advanced military technology. Israel is always looking over their shoulder at the Philistines. Currently they have to trust God to call a leader to rally the 12 tribes against the Philistines. But with a king and kingdom there would be a standing army. It would be more modern. It’s moving ahead.

And in the “political backroom” there are also some deals being made. It would seem that some of the members of the 12 tribes have become wealthy and powerful. Stability always helps the economy. With a king “in their pocket” they could better secure their wealth and influence policy to add even more.

Samuel is old school. He trusts the one God who led the 12 tribes out of Egypt and out of the wilderness to the land. And so he knows this request for a king is a denial of their history and a softening in their trust of this one God. Samuel sees the problems of merging religion and state, God and king. And Samuel also sees it as a rejection of his leadership.

His conversation with God is even more pointed. God states clearly that this request for a king is a rejection of trusting God. It is a continuation of Israel’s long history of turning to other gods. They will come to trust the king like a god, and the king will come to act like he is a god.

Interestingly God does not outright reject the request. So that gets me to wondering. Perhaps in the evolution and development of civilizations it was, indeed, important for Israel to move from a tribal confederacy to a king and kingdom. Their survival in the real world with real

enemies required the order of a kingdom. But it also comes with a cost. And one of those costs is the confusion about religion and state, God and king. Political organization in the real world always comes with a cost. People throughout history have chosen to give up much for the promise of security.

So in the next section of the story, God directs Samuel to tell these elders who seek a king the cost of moving in that direction. It's "eyes wide open." It will not be all "goodness and light." The key word is "take." The king will "take." The king will take your sons for his army. The king will take your daughters to work in his palace. The king will take your best fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to wealthy supporters. The king will take a tax to pay his officers and officials. The king will take your slaves and oxen and donkeys to put them to work in his fields. And the king will take and take and take, and you will cry out because of the king you choose, but God will not hear you.

The story ends with this: **Read I Samuel 8:19-22.**

The elders representing the 12 tribes are determined. They are not dissuaded by the warnings of "take." They want to be like the nations around them. They want the security of having a king to lead them into battle. They want the organization that a kingdom will bring. So it's almost with a sigh you can hear God tell Samuel, "OK, go ahead and do it."

III. Brief Theological Reflections

Religion and politics, Church and State; it's complicated. Politicians want the support of religion, and religious leaders are seduced by the power of politics. And it's hard to keep some type of healthy balance between the two.

In our reading from Matthew 22 we see that the Pharisees are trying to pull Jesus into the mess of religion and politics. The Jews hated the Roman occupation. And what they especially hated was the Roman taxation system. There was an annual "head tax," and an annual "land tax," and a sales tax on all things bought and sold, and a "toll tax" on travel through Roman controlled areas. And it wasn't lost on the Jews that the taxes kept them poorer while supporting the lavish lifestyles of the rich and powerful in Rome and paying for the occupying Roman army.

And even more important than Roman taxation was "Pax Romana," Roman peace. This was a militarily enforced peace that allowed trade and commerce to thrive, and for Rome to control its vast empire. So any expressions of rebellion were dealt with quickly and harshly.

Both of these things come into play in the story. The question is "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" And by "law" they don't mean civil or Roman law. They mean Old Testament or religious law. It is a religion and politics question. If Jesus says, "Pay the tax," he'll lose the support of the common people who hated the tax. But if he says, "Don't pay the tax," he can be accused of rebellion and have the Roman authorities after him. The Pharisees think they have Jesus publicly in a tight spot.

Jesus' response is simple, open-ended, and brilliant. He knows that people need civil order. He also lives and trusts in the way of God. Jesus knows that people in the real world need both. So he says "Give to the emperor the things of the emperor and to God the things of God." To the emperor pay the tax because we live in this Roman order. But to God, well, give everything else. It's balancing religion and politics, Church and State. It's supporting the current Roman order while living a life of faithfulness to God. There are times when faithfulness to God puts the people of God more in opposition to the State, and that time will come, but that is not this time. God and faithfulness to the ways of God take priority, but Jesus knows people also have a responsibility to support social order. Jesus' answer invites ongoing discussions on the balance of religion and politics in specific times and places.

It is the 4th Sunday of Easter. Like Christmas, Easter is a season and not just a day. It is the season we proclaim the stories of Jesus' resurrection. It is the season we proclaim the same grace and power of God that raised Jesus Christ will raise us from death to life. And it is the season we proclaim that just as those earliest followers of the risen Christ lived in new, risen ways together, so do we. So do we.

I hung three paintings in my house a few weekends ago. They went together in a set. So I needed them to be level and evenly spaced. On a ladder I measured down 10 inches from the ceiling for each of three marks on the wall. I then measured 30 inches between each of the marks. I then double checked all of my measurements, carefully pounded the hangers into the wall and hung the paintings. Coming down off the ladder I stepped back about 15 feet and held my breath hoping the paintings were straight. Up close you can't really tell much, but stepping back you can. I was glad they looked fine.

In hanging the paintings even and straight it took patience and it took taking the measurements seriously. Sort of close wasn't close enough; 12 inches was not 10 inches; "in the ballpark" won't work. Getting it right mattered.

Religion and politics, Church and State; as with all human beings we live in the confusion and tension of what the balance of giving to God and the emperor means. Regardless of what's happening with politics, I believe the standards of God's people remain the same. And those standards are truth and justice. It is the tape measure for our life together. Sort of close isn't close enough; 10 inches is not 12 inches; "in the ballpark" won't work. Getting truth and justice right matters. Lies are not truth no matter who speaks them. Justice cannot be bought and sold no matter who demands it. Truth and justice are for everyone no matter what king or "want to be king" wants to "take" them away.

It has always been important in the confusing balance of religion and politics for God's people to stand up for truth and justice, to be the measuring tape. Stepping back to look at history I know God's people have not always got it right. But we need to get it right now. So that in 4 years, or 10 years, or 25 years people will step back and say the Church, this church, got it right and hung the paintings of truth and justice, religion and politics, straight and true. May it be so. Amen.