

## CONCERNING THE WORD OF GOD

### INTRODUCTION

This morning in a good many of the churches of the Protestant faith particular attention is being given to the fact that today is UNIVERSAL BIBLE SUNDAY. And so in view of this, we're going to set to one side, at least temporarily, our own immediate problems and concerns and our thoughts about Christmas, and go back, way back, to a story in the Old Testament about two men whose names were Samuel and Saul.

Most of you, I imagine are familiar with the names of these two men, but all of you, I imagine, are a little hazy with the role that these two men played in the history of their people. I'll try to tell you the story as briefly as I can. To begin with, Samuel was old and well established. History would say that he was something less than a prophet, and yet it would acknowledge that he was something more than just an ordinary fortune teller. The people of that time called Samuel a "seer", and they called him that because of his ability to see more than other men could see. He had the gift of vision; he could see things that were hidden from other people. And because of his peculiar gifts, it was only natural for people to turn to him when they were in trouble. Sometimes their troubles were relatively trivial; for instance, if they lost some money, or if they lost their donkeys, they would go to Samuel and often he could tell them where these things could be found. When they were in real trouble, they turned to Samuel, and he would help them straighten themselves out. You might say that he was a kind of spiritual leader of the people, their father in God, so to speak, and as Samuel from shrine to shrine, he settled their affairs the best he could.

At this particular point in his life, his people were in real trouble. They had made their way out of the desert into the land of Canaan, and they had done this at great cost and sacrifice. In so doing, they had taken possession of the hill towns, and their position seemed to them to be impregnable. They could defend themselves from all attack in this elevated position, so they thought. But they had overlooked and minimized the fierceness and warlike nature of the people who were occupying the coastal plain area - the Philistines. These people - the Philistines - were well organized and they were determined to drive the people out of the hills to the east of them. The Israelites were no match for them, even in their mountain seats. They were a loosely knit band of tribes; they had no unity; they had no king but Jehovah, their God. The situation was desperate; they were losing every battle.

And so at this time, they turned to Samuel, their "father in God" and said "We want a king". Samuel was reluctant. He knew the danger of power concentrated in the hands of one person. He hated to see a man take the place that God had always held in the life of his people. Perhaps he himself was reluctant to surrender the position of leadership that he had had for so many years to a younger, more politically-minded man. But the people persisted and because Samuel was a man who could see both sides of a situation, he gave in to their wishes. He could see that unless the people were united, they were lost. He could see that unless they had a king, they would never be united. So he agreed that they needed a king, but this was the question: WHO would be their king? Where could they find a man with the qualities of leadership that were needed. No one was in sight.

One day a young man came up the path looking for Samuel. He was strong, tall and young. Samuel had never seen this man before. His name Saul. He came from one of the smallest and most insignificant tribes in the whole of Israel, and his family was one of the humblest families in that tribe. We note as we read about it now that Saul was on a rather strange and amusing errand. Some of his father's donkey had strayed away and his father had sent Saul and a servant to look for them. They had looked everywhere and had had no success. They were just about to give up on their search for these lost donkeys when the servant said: "We can't go home until we have done one more thing. There is a man who lives in this vicinity, a man of God, who is a seer. Let us go to him; perhaps he can tell us where the donkeys can be found"

As Saul came up the path on this strange errand, Samuel, who had never before laid eyes on him "saw" his man. Here was the man with the gift of leadership. Here was the man with the physical and spiritual qualities there were needed to lead the people. Samuel listened politely as Saul told him what he wanted, and then he said, "Forget about those donkeys. They've been lost for three days, and by now someone has probably found them. You come with me. Come up to the high place where we are about to have a feast. I want the people to meet you and to see you." Saul went with Samuel. He joined in the feast. He met the people. He stayed overnight. Early in the morning Samuel aroused him to send him on his way. And according to the scriptures,

"As they were going down to the end of the city, Samuel said to Saul, 'Bid the servant pass on before us, but stand thou still a while that I may show thee the WORD OF GOD.'"

The servant passed on and Samuel took some oil and poured it on the head of Saul, and then kissed him. He then said "The Lord has annointed you to be prince over his people Israel." And so the young man who went out searching for his father's donkeys found a crown and the fortunes of Israel began to improve. A nation was born!

HISTORY So much for the story. There are two things that I should like to say about this story by way of comment and illumination. The first is that this is history. This is a record of things that were done by men in the past. As a matter of fact, it is one of the first pages from the recorded history of the Hebrew people, and as such, it is very moving. But like most history, especially ancient history, it is a mixture of fact, folktale and legend. It's not difficult to tell which is which especially if you read it with any imagination. For instance, I think that most of you if you were hearing this story for the first time might suspect that this story about a man who went off in search of his father's donkeys and who became king of his people overnight is something of a folk tale, one of those tales that are bound to cluster about a man who becomes prominent. But the fact that the tribes of Israel were about to lose everything - that is history. The fact that at the time of crisis, a man appeared with the gifts of leadership, a man who was strong enough to weld the people into a unit, that is history. And the fact that the people recognized the qualities that Saul had, and that Samuel was the spearhead of that recognition, that is history.

Now the Bible is filled with history like that. The Bible, mind you, it not all history however. The first chapter of Genesis, the story of creation, isn't history, that's mythology. To write history, you have to

be there and record what happened; at least, someone has to observe what takes place before it can be written down. Nobody was present at the time of creation; at a later time men wrote a story that would tell what they believed and how they felt about the wonder of the created order and how it all came from God. The 23rd psalm is not history; it's poetry, reaching the very heights of religious emotion and poetic beauty. Job isn't history; it's a meditation on the nature of God and the meaning of human life. The Revelation of John isn't history; it's a series of tracts for hard times. But the story that we've been touching on here this morning is history. It's a record of events that move you. So is the story of David and how he built the kingdom; so is the story of Solomon and how the disintegration of the kingdom occurred. So is the story of the crucifixion. So is the story of Paul's adventures as a missionary. This is history.

WORD OF GOD Now the second thing that I'd like to say about this story, and here we're coming to the heart of the sermon, is that this is also the WORD OF GOD. You know there was one particular line in this narrative concerning Samuel and Saul which to my way of thinking stood out above all the rest. Some of you may have noticed it. Samuel, the elder, looking at Saul, said to him:

"Bid the servant pass on before us, and stand thou still a while that I may show thee the Word of God"

Just think for a moment, if you will, on what that means - "The Word of God". Sometimes we're guilty of using that phrase casually and haphazardly. We fail to take in the tremendous meaning of those words. To put it simply: it means that God speaks to us. It means that behind all of this complex course of human events there is a mind of the maker, and from time to time the maker speaks that mind to men. This is what's implied when we use that phrase - the word of God. God has the will to communicate his meaning to us. He has the will to communicate his mind to us. We're not left entirely to ourselves to figure out the meaning of life's strange events. In the case of the story that we've been reflecting upon here this morning, I think that his message was that he wanted Saul to be King. How he communicated that to us is something of a mystery, just as it is today when this kind of thing happens, when we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God wants us to do some particular thing and we're moved to do it as though by an irresistible force.

All of this points to the climax of our thought about the Bible. It is the word of God. God speaks to men in the Bible in a very unique way. He tells us more about himself in the Bible than he does in any other place. Mind you, however, this doesn't rule out the possibility of God speaking to men in other ways. He speaks to a great many people in the wonders of the created universe. He speaks to a great many people in John Keat's "Ode to a Nightingale". But he doesn't speak to us in that particular "Ode" the way that he does shall we say in John's Gospel. In John's Gospel, he speaks to us about himself, and he tries to tell us what he is like, how he loved the world so much that he came into it as a Son of Man that all who believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Of course, some people, probably not any in this congregation, who make the mistake of thinking that the Bible is the DICTATED word

of God, and that God himself dictated each word, comma, semi-colon, and period, and that the very words are the word of God. Therefore, if in Genesis, the words say that the God made the world in six days, he did, and if anybody says that the world was made in any other way, he is wrong because this is the word of God. They would say it's not to be questioned, not to be analyzed, that we're wrong to use the modern methods of historical criticism when it comes to the word of God. It's a dangerous kind of interpretation because it can lead a person into endless confusion as it did William Jennings Bryan in the Scopes trial early in this century.

Harry Emerson Fosdick tells of an incident that happened in his ministry. One Monday morning a man called him on the telephone and after introducing himself said, "I listened to you yesterday on the radio". Dr Fosdick replied politely, "Did you, I'm pleased to hear it" The man went on to say, "You said in the course of your sermon that the healing miracles of Jesus were sometimes exaggerated. Did you say that?" "Why yes I did" said Fosdick. "Do you think so?" replied the man "Yes, I do" said Dr. Fosdick. "Does that mean that perhaps there may be other things in the Bible that are exaggerated" "Yes, I think it does". "Well...." said the man "I was brought up to believe that the Bible is the Word of God" "So was I" interjected Dr. Fosdick. "And if it's the word of God" said the man "Then every word in it is true" At this point Dr. Fosdick said "I don't think we can go into on the telephone. Do you belong a church?" "No" he said "I don't. I listen to all the preachers on the radio" "I think" said Fosdick "that your clue is to join a church, because the Bible is the literature selected and endorsed by the Christian community, and your church will help you interpret it."

For all I know there may be some people in this congregation who have not yet grappled with this problem. They have not yet come to see that the Bible as we understand it is the INSPIRED word of God, and not the dictated word of God. The words are the words of men through whom God has expressed and revealed himself, and each writer in writing undoubtedly leaves the stamp of his own personality on whatever he writes. God doesn't express himself equally in all his words, because all the writers are not equally inspired. For instance in the 137th Psalm the Bible says: "Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against a rock." Is that the word of God? Personally I don't think so. It's the word of a man who hadn't yet come to see the glory of loving your enemies and blessing them that persecute you. God may be saying something in that line from psalm 137, but you can't take these words and put them next to the words of Jesus in the sermon on the mount and in the same breath say that both are the Word of God.

To bring all of this together, I would say this that we ought to use our intelligence and understanding in reading the Bible. It takes imagination to understand the Word of God, just as it does to understand the words of any human being. When we read the Bible, we ought to be saying to ourselves "What is it that God is trying to say to me on this page." Take the story of Saul and Samuel. What is God trying to say in this ancient story.

This is what he says to me: (1) Above and beyond all of your planning and your attempts to run your own life, there is a greater plan by a greater planner. (2) And while you're looking for a king, he is preparing a king who will appear before you in due season. (3) While you're trying to work out the problems of your own life, he is working, sometimes in hidden ways, to bring his purpose to pass through

you. This is what he says to me. (4) When a need appears, a man will appear to meet it. (5) When you're in trouble, there is something already being prepared to help you meet it. (6) When you're at your wit's end and don't know which way to turn, and you think the Philistines will come up from the coastal plain to destroy your whole life, don't panic.

"Stand thou still for a while and hear the word of God."

And it's the conviction of those most deeply schooled in the things of the spirit that the word will come, at it came in the time of Samuel and Saul, to the person who listens carefully. This is reading the Bible as the INSPIRED word of God.

LET US PRAY:

Open the eyes of our understanding, O God, as we try to interpret thy word.

Keep our minds clear....

Our imaginations alive....

Our hearts pure and  
Humble....

So that as we turn to thy word, we may hear thee speaking to us.

Amen.