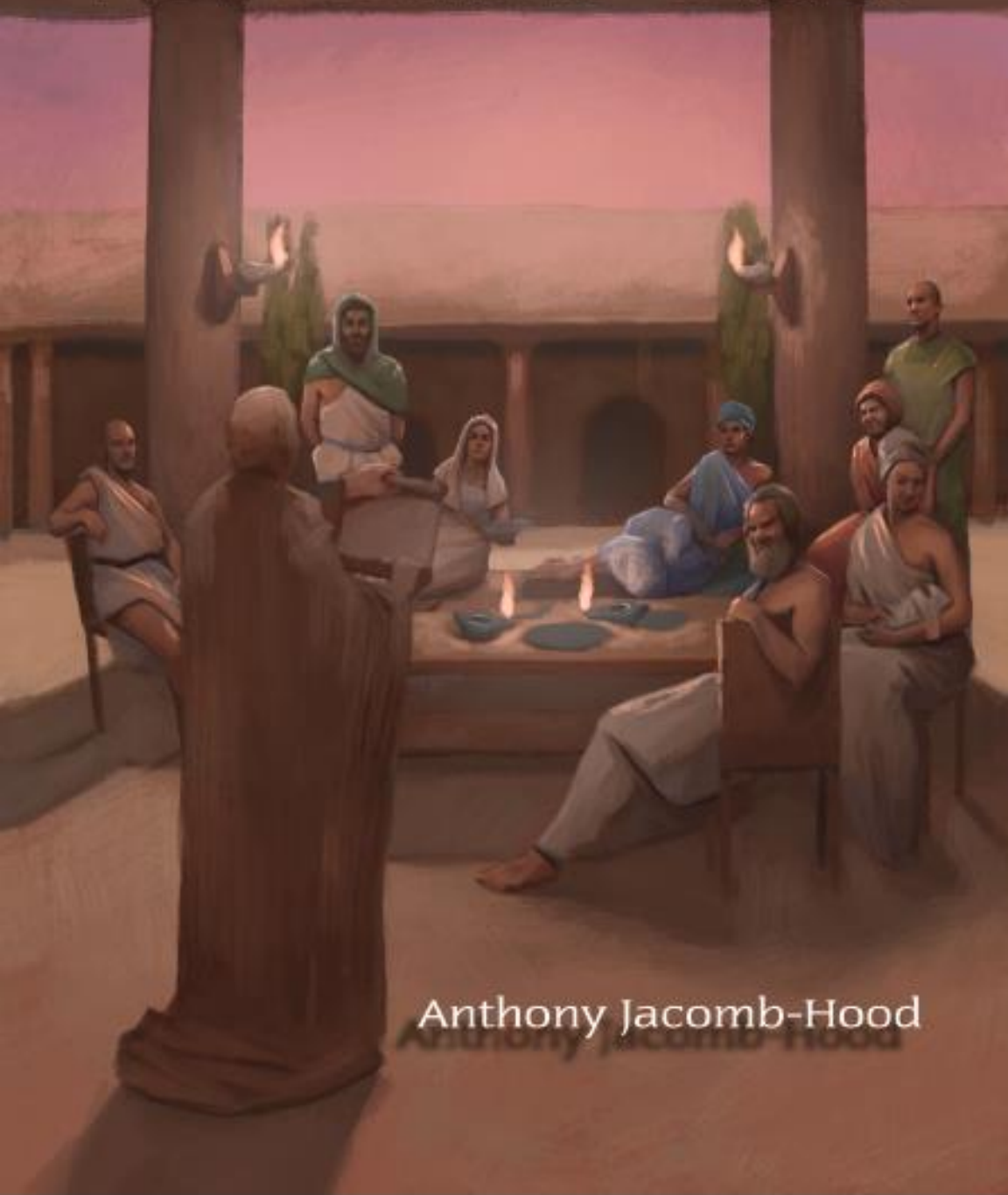


Rediscovering the New Testament Church



Anthony Jacomb-Hood

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This document is an excerpt taken from my book “Rediscovering The New Testament Church”. This excerpt contains most of Section 1.6 *Desire for a King*, which addresses the appointment of Saul as the first king of Israel. I believe there is a parallel between the desire of the Israelites for a king and the desire of many believers to have a church centered around a pastor or priest. Many people like to have a defined human leader.

When the people of Israel asked for a king, God made clear that His preference was to lead them directly and that He considered this desire to be a rejection of His personal Kingship over His people. However, He acquiesced to Israel’s demand for a king, promising that He would still, in some measure, bless His people if they and the king walked in obedience. Similarly, God wants to directly lead each of His children. He does not want to be restricted to leading through priests and pastors. However, if communities choose to give this role to a priest or pastor He is still willing to bless, in some measure, as long as the leaders and people are still obedient in other areas.

Anthony

RediscoveringTheNTChurch@gmail.com

www.RediscoveringTheNTChurch.com

1.6 Desire for a king

There is a parallel between the desire of the Israelites for a king and the desire of some believers for a conventional pastor/priest. Many people like to have strong human leaders to take responsibility for making decisions and for setting direction. Jeremiah says “An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?”¹⁰⁴ The desire to have a priest or king rule over us is widespread in every age, but this is not God’s preferred way to interact with His people.

1 Samuel 8-12 recounts the appointment of Saul as the first human king of Israel. This passage says that God directed Samuel to anoint Saul as king in response to the people’s desire for a king.¹⁰⁵ God instructs Samuel to warn the people of the abuse of power that will follow from the appointment of a king.¹⁰⁶ God also used Samuel to define in writing the rights and duties of the king.¹⁰⁷

A repeated theme in this passage is that God considers this desire of the people for a human king to constitute a rejection of his personal kingship over them.¹⁰⁸ In 1 Samuel 12:17 Samuel says that this is a great wickedness and he prays for a storm to destroy the wheat harvest as a sign that he is correct. In 1 Samuel 12:19-20, after the storm has come, the people agree with Samuel that they sinned.

After Saul is anointed king, God promises the people that things will go well for them if they and the king fear, serve and obey Him.¹⁰⁹ Given that God considers the people’s desire for a king to be a rejection of Him, this is a most gracious promise. However, compared to many of the other promises of blessing contained in the Old Testament, it is somewhat limited. Having a human king was not God’s best for His people, but He was willing to allow them to have what they wanted and He was prepared to continue to bless them (if they obeyed) even though they were ruled by a king.

There are several specific parallels between God’s leadership of His people in the Old Testament and His leadership of His church. Firstly, God wants to directly lead His people.¹¹⁰ He does not wish to lead His people through a human intermediary such as a king or a typical current-day priest or pastor. Jesus is our king; He wants all believers to look to Him for leadership.¹¹¹ This includes looking to Him for leadership as to what each one of us should contribute to church assembly meetings and in all other situations. In a conventional pastor-led church, believers sometimes end up looking to the pastor for leadership instead of to Jesus. Many people find it easier to trust a human leader they can see to guide, teach and protect them, rather than to have faith in a God they cannot see. This is a rejection of God’s personal kingship over us, comparable to the Israelites rejection of God’s personal kingship.¹¹²

Secondly, God allows his people to be led by a human king or pastor/priest if this is their wish. God gave Samuel permission to appoint a king for the Israelites.¹¹³ It was not His best for His people but He was willing to allow them to have what they wanted. Similarly in my opinion, conventional leader-centric churches are not God’s best for His children, but He is willing to allow us to have what we want. As discussed in Section 7.3, I believe that leader-centric churches are less conducive to healthy spiritual growth than New Testament style house church assemblies where each believer directly relates to God as King.

Thirdly, God graciously continues to bless his children and their leaders, even if they choose to have a human king or pastor or priest, as long as they continue to obey Him in other matters.¹¹⁴ The history of the Israelite kingdom shows that God was faithful to His promise in 1 Samuel 12:14. Whenever the king and people chose to obey Him He blessed them. There are also a

huge number of wonderful examples of this in church history. Some of the Old Testament kings were great spiritual leaders who greatly helped their people to walk in righteousness. Many pastors and priests similarly help other believers walk in righteousness.

Fourthly, God commanded Samuel to give the Israelites a solemn warning concerning the negative consequences of choosing to have a king. [115](#) Some elements of this warning are relevant to believers in leader-centric churches. In particular, believers in such churches often lose a great deal of their ministry freedom and they often lose the opportunity to participate in the making of decisions concerning their ministry contributions. In some churches believers are commanded to tithe to their local church to pay for the church staff and facilities. [116](#) In a few churches the leadership is abusive and controlling, treating the members of the congregation a bit like slaves. [117](#)

As we have seen, 1 Samuel 8-12 describes the appointment of the first king of Israel, and this passage emphasizes God's desire for Israel to have no human king. I believe that this passage is also relevant to church leadership. However, there is some ambiguity in the Old Testament concerning the appropriateness of the Israelites having a king. So in the next two paragraphs I discuss some of the passages that present the Israelite monarchy more positively to show that these passages do not undercut the conclusions I have drawn from 1 Samuel 8-12.

Deuteronomy 17:15 says, "you may indeed set a king over you whom the LORD your God will choose." But it is clear from the preceding verse that the desire for a king came from the Israelites and not from God. Also the next four verses contain a series of commands for the king. This passage anticipates that kings will abuse their position of power to benefit themselves at the expense of their people, which is part of the reason why God preferred for Israel not to have a king.

One of the positive aspects of the Kings of Israel is God's prophetic use of this institution to help individuals understand Jesus' Kingship. [118](#) Similarly King David is presented as a type of Christ. [119](#) In several places the Royal Psalms prophetically jump to Jesus from material related to the human kings of Israel. [120](#) It seems that in these passages God is choosing to use the context of the Israelite monarchy to help us to understand Jesus. This does not prove that having a human king was God's best plan to lead the people of Israel. It is an example of God using the situation His people were living in to teach them about Himself. God did not need the Israelites to have a monarchy to teach us about Jesus' Kingship. He can and does use our knowledge of the kings over other nations to teach us about Jesus' Kingship. [121](#)

Notes

[104.](#) Jer. 5:30-31

[105.](#) 1 Sam. 8:7, 9, 22, 12:13

[106.](#) 1 Sam. 8:9-18

[107.](#) 1 Sam. 10:25, *cf.* Deut. 17:16-20

[108.](#) 1 Sam. 8:7, 10:19, 12:12, 17-20; *cf.*, Isa. 41:21, 43:15, 44:6

[109.](#) 1 Sam. 12:14-15

[110.](#) 1 Sam. 8:7, 10:19, 12:17-20, Isa. 43:15, 44:6 and Subsection 1.1.3

[111.](#) Matt. 2:2, 21:5, Rev 17:14

[112.](#) 1 Sam. 8:7, 10:19, 12:12, 17-20

[113.](#) 1 Sam. 8:7, 9, 22

[114.](#) 1 Sam. 12:14-15

[115.](#) 1 Sam. 8:9

[116.](#) *Cf.*, 1 Sam. 8:15

[117.](#) *Cf.*, 1 Sam. 8:17. Obviously, unlike slaves, church members are free to leave. Some abusive leaders seek to prevent this by pressuring individuals to stay.

[118.](#) *E.g.*, Isa. 9:1-7, 11:1-6

[119.](#) *E.g.*, Ezek. 34:23-24

[120.](#) *E.g.*, Psalm 2:6-12, 21:3-4, 45:1-6, 72:8, 110:1-2

[121.](#) *E.g.*, Dan. 2:25-45 and possibly Isa. 44:28 45:7