

The Heifer Principles

Thoughts from 1 Samuel 16 on:

God's provision for those serving in communities where religious intolerance, suspicion and/or government restrictions are major obstacles to the spread of his Kingdom

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Beyond Tentmaking

Those servants of Jesus who live in communities where fear, religious intolerance, and/or government restrictions are obstacles to the spread of the Gospel can learn from principles gleaned from 1 Samuel 16. This passage points to God's provision of credibility, opportunity, welcome and security for the servants of God who serve in such communities.

Many of us serve Jesus in communities where religious intolerance, government restrictions, and suspicion of outsiders are normal. Such communities are prevalent in many nations and become a major obstacle for cross-cultural ministry. While tentmaking jobs can often provide legal access to a host community they may do nothing to address the other... more serious obstacles of fear, prejudice and suspicion. Therefore, *godly wisdom and divine provision is needed to be a blessing to these communities in a way that endears the 'disciple maker' to the people, protects the host community, and provides a platform to share the good news of Jesus Christ.* It is not surprising therefore, that God has left us with at least one model from Scripture that deals with accessing the lost in spite of existing social and political restrictions. In 1 Samuel 16 we can read how Samuel faced similar set of circumstances when God sent him on a mission to Bethlehem.

Samuel's Mission to Bethlehem

In 1 Samuel 16, God told Samuel to go to Bethlehem and anoint a son of Jesse as the new king over Israel. We can easily surmise that the reigning monarch, King Saul would have been more than a bit opposed to Samuel's God given mission. Samuel was not ignorant of the serious danger involved in this mission. This can be seen in Samuel's hesitancy to accept the mission. Samuel's recorded response was not a quick salute or "Yes Lord! Right away Lord!" as one might expect when God speaks so clear and direct. Rather, we see concern and hesitancy in Samuel. Samuel asked God, "How can I go? When Saul hears about it, he will kill me." Remember, that although God had rejected Saul as king, Saul was still the ruling monarch. King Saul stayed on the throne for many years after he was rejected by God. Samuel and King Saul were not on speaking terms (1 Samuel 15:35) since the incident in Carmel. Samuel's mission would be viewed as treason... it was very dangerous... both for Samuel and the community that Samuel was sent to. Let me elaborate.

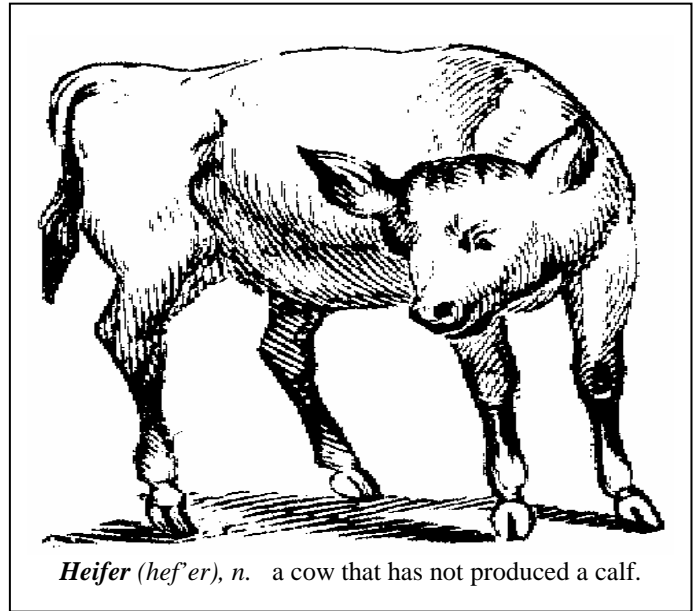
The mission God assigned Samuel was dangerous and would cost Samuel his life if King Saul were to find out. Since Samuel was well known throughout Israel he could not sneak into Bethlehem without being noticed. Apparently it was public knowledge in Israel that an adversarial relationship existed between King Saul and Samuel. This is reflected in how the elders of Bethlehem were so dismayed and fearful when they saw Samuel approaching their town. In stead of being excited and happy at the sight of Samuel approaching their village, they accurately perceived that to welcome an adversary of the king to their village would be interpreted as rebellion. They didn't want trouble. In those days (and today), people didn't travel about from town to town without purpose. Samuel naturally belonged in Ramah, his hometown, not Bethlehem. In Bethlehem, a man of Samuel's status would stand out like a pork chop at a bar mitzvah. He would normally be an honored guest...unless he was going to do something that would get the entire community in trouble with the government...i.e. King Saul. Thus, all the central elements of ministering in a restricted access community were present when Samuel embarked on his mission to Bethlehem.

In other words:

1. Samuel was sent to a community where he didn't normally belong.
2. The community was at risk of real (and imaginary) dangers that made them initially fearful and suspicious of Samuel
3. The government authority (King Saul) would be opposed to Samuel's primary mission
4. Samuel was thus a potential liability to the community of Bethlehem.

The Heifer

Therefore, God gave Samuel a secondary task which was both a blessing to the host community and served as a 'cover' to temporarily protect the primary purpose of his mission. Samuel was told to take a heifer with him and say to the elders at the gate of Bethlehem, "I have come to sacrifice to the Lord." The sacrifice, although a pretense, played a critical role in the overall success of Samuel's mission. It was not a cover to deceive, but a cover to protect, bless, and facilitate. It protected Samuel and the elders of Bethlehem from the wrath of King Saul. It is not hard to imagine what would happen to the elders of Bethlehem if King Saul heard that a new king had been anointed in their town. Samuel undoubtedly knew that King Saul could be very ruthless. (Saul slaughtered the village of Nob when he suspected they had been disloyal to him. See 1 Samuel 22.) Yet, God's command was carried out in spite of the adverse political climate that restricted Samuel's access to Bethlehem. Not only that, but the heifer sacrifice served to facilitate a common ground or context for Samuel to bless the people of Bethlehem and meet the sons of Jesse.



God's Provision for Overcoming the Obstacles

As Samuel predicted, the elders of Bethlehem were initially suspicious and fearful of Samuel when he showed up at their town gates. The Scriptures say that the elders were trembling with fear. Can you imagine what they were thinking? Perhaps things like, "Why does an enemy of Saul come to visit us? What will King Saul think? Is Samuel trying to stir up a rebellion? Is Samuel angry with us because we are loyal to King Saul? What are Samuel's intentions?" I believe these types of thoughts passed through the minds of the elders as Samuel approached their town. In any case, it is clear that they were worried and fearful. Now Samuel was not only a man of God but a man of wisdom. He knew better than to announce to the elders of Bethlehem, "I have come to anoint one of the sons of Jesse as the new King of Israel." Such news would have been BAD news to their ears. If the elders welcomed Samuel after such an announcement (and King Saul heard of it) the elders would be considered accomplices in an act of rebellion towards King Saul and would have good reason to fear for their lives. Samuel would have been unwelcome and ... perhaps (if the elders had the *flick*¹) would have closed their gates on him. Without doubt, Samuel's mission would have been severely hindered if he had been completely transparent about his purpose for being in Bethlehem from the beginning.

I believe that in the course of time Samuel's primary mission became obvious to everyone in Bethlehem, but not at first. God in his wisdom had Samuel withhold the primary objective of his mission for later. For now, it was enough for the elders to know that he had come with a peace offering... he had come with a blessing. Samuel came to offer a sacrifice, an act of peace that pleased and blessed the elders. I can imagine that Samuel had the heifer behind him, and he turned and pointed to the animal as he said, "I come in peace. I have come to sacrifice to the Lord. Consecrate yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." Can you imagine the sense of relief this news gave the elders of Bethlehem? The peace offering would not be interpreted as political rebellion by King Saul or by the elders of Bethlehem. It was a natural thing for someone of Samuel's position and stature to do. It was an act of good will and peace. It also helped set the stage for Samuel's primary mission in Bethlehem.

Earlier, God had told Samuel, "Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what to do." Samuel knew where he was to go and what he was to do, but he didn't know whom he was going to anoint. Samuel would have to get that information later. Samuel had enough information to get started but not enough information to finish. Isn't this a universal or classic pattern when God sends his servants on mission? He sheds enough light on our path to take the next step but not on the entire path. In 1 Samuel 16 we also see God provided Samuel with a 'secondary mission' that both blessed the people and created a platform to perform his primary task. I believe this is also a classic pattern. It seems to me that when God sends his servants on missions to communities where religious intolerance, suspicion, fear, and/or government restrictions are obstacles to accomplish the mission... God often gives them 'heifers.'

¹ Yiddish for 'pluck' or 'backbone'

Think C.O.W.S. Not Tents

Expatriate (and local) followers of Jesus (who are called to minister in communities that are dominated by fear, prejudice, suspicion, and/or government restrictions) readily identify with the problems Samuel faced in Bethlehem. The political/social/religious climate makes it both necessary and preferable for these followers of Jesus to have a modern equivalent of a heifer. The concept of 'heifer' is significantly different than that traditionally associated with the concept of tentmaker. Unlike the concept of 'tentmaker' a modern-day heifer provides much more than just an "entry visa" and a means of financial support. The concept of 'heifer' is closer... but not equivalent to the concept of 'business as mission.' By studying 1 Samuel 16 we can glean many principles of wisdom and prudence that are applicable for a modern-day heifer. Four of these principles can be summarized as: **Credibility, Opportunity, Welcome and Safety** or as an acronym, **C.O.W.S.**

1. Credibility: Just as sacrificing a heifer (or offering a peace offering) was appropriate for a man of Samuel's office and stature, a modern-day heifer will most likely consistent with the follower of Jesus' age, experience, energy level, training, gender and national origin. In my experience, I've many seminary graduates trying to pass themselves off as importers/exporters but don't know the difference between a Bill-of-Lading and a Performa invoice or FOB from CIF. I've seen middle aged men with large families accept entry level teaching positions that pay low salaries, offer no responsibility, and provide no status. They often make locals scratch their heads and wonder. It breeds suspicion and in the long run thwarts evangelism and tarnish the image of the would-be-change-agent. Application: Avoid the temptation to put on Saul's armor. The modern heifer will "fit" the person to whom God gives it. The heifer will also fit the host community. What will work in a big city may not work in a town or village. God may (or may not) speak to you as clearly as he did to Samuel when he commanded Samuel to take a heifer with him to Bethlehem. In most cases, Bible study, prayer, fasting, research, self-reflection and wise counsel are important aspects of hearing from God. He can provide for you what he provided for Samuel.

A modern-day heifer may or may not be full time. The issue isn't how many hours a week you devote to your heifer but that you devote enough time to do the job well. Modern-day heifers will vary in the amount of time and energy they require. The criterion isn't so much how much time it takes but is it credible for the person and the host community? Samuel didn't spend all his time in Bethlehem sacrificing heifers but he did do it and used the occasion to anoint a new king. The 'heifer' fit with who Samuel was. It wasn't a trick or a gimmick yet it was indeed a type of cover. Was Samuel dishonest or lack integrity? Does honesty and integrity require that we declare everything we know and everything we are to anybody who asks? I don't see Jesus command or operate by this definition of honesty and integrity. Rather the scripture instruct us to be prudent² and defines prudence as an ability to discern what actions are appropriate for the given situation. Integrity requires us to fulfill our promises and do what we say we will do. Samuel both sacrificed a peace offering and anointed a new king and thus maintained a clear conscious before God and men (Acts 24:16).

2. Opportunity: The heifer gave Samuel the opportunity or context to call the sons of Jesse in from the fields. **It provided the platform for doing his primary assignment.** After the sacrifice Samuel anointed David as king. The heifer facilitated Samuel's primary mission rather than hindering it. The meat of the heifer undoubtedly provided a material blessing to the community as well. Modern-day heifers should give followers of Jesus sufficient exposure to the people they're called to reach. A modern day heifer will likely provide a platform that facilitates the primary assignment. It should be a ministry platform that positions the change-agent to do the work God has called him/her to do... and endure him/her to the host community.

3. Welcome: Samuel's heifer endeared him to the community and turned a cool initial reception into a warm welcome. He was able to calm the initial fears and suspicion of the elders with the heifer. A modern-day heifer should be good news to the "elders at the gate", i.e. authorities of the community. Today, expatriates are often perceived as secret agents or some other instrument of western imperialism or capitalism. Conspiracy theories thrive in many of these communities. Some tentmaking activities fuel such suspicions and fears. This should not be. A ministry project or secular profession should serve to calm the host community's fears and suspicions, not confirm them. A modern day heifer will likely be a blessing and service to the host community. The clearer this is demonstrated (and understood by the host community) the better. The modern day heifer should also provide security to the host culture.

² i.e. Proverbs 12:23, Amos 5:13, Matt 7:6, Matt. 10:16

4. Safety/Security: Perhaps the most important yet most often overlooked provision in the heifer is safety. Samuel's heifer **provided protection for the citizens of Bethlehem from the wrath of King Saul.** King Saul would have been violently opposed to Samuel's goal of anointing a new king. However, he would not likely protest against Samuel sacrificing a peace offering in Bethlehem. Samuel was a celebrity and honored guest in Israel and therefore would have had no privacy during his visit to a rural township. Much like today, everybody knows what's going on in a rural town in the Middle East (or any small town anywhere). There are few secrets. We therefore must assume that the anointing of David was done publicly. There came a time when every one in Bethlehem knew that Samuel anointed David as the new king. This was actually good news to every citizen of Bethlehem. A local boy as king! Government jobs! But you can bet that not one of them was eager to tell the friends of King Saul what they had witnessed. It would have meant instant death of their entire village for treason (Remember what happened to the citizens of Nob in 1 Samuel 22:18-19). Even if King Saul had learned of Samuel's visit to Bethlehem and called a citizen of Bethlehem to report what happened, the citizen, with a clear conscience, could simply say, "Samuel came to sacrifice a peace offering". Today, well meaning ministers can be serious liabilities for local believers (and seekers) who live in communities where religious intolerance, suspicion, fear and/or government restrictions exist. More than once I have witness how a casual visit by well meaning but "heiferless" expatriates has resulted in unnecessary persecution, harassment and threats to local seekers and believers whom they meant to bless. The modern-day heifer will provide a cover of protection for local believers (and seekers) who receive and host a follower of Jesus. A modern heifer will be part of God's provision to protect the host community (and God's messenger) from evil men.



Summary

In 1 Samuel 16, we see that God called Samuel to accomplish a task in Bethlehem (a restricted access community). God provided all Samuel needed to accomplish the mission. An essential part of God's provision was in His command to take a heifer for sacrifice. The heifer provided:

- 1 Credibility: for being where he wasn't expected to be.
- 2 Opportunity: to do "the main thing" that God called him to do.
- 3 Welcoming: by an appreciative host community.
- 4 Safety: for host community and himself from the wrath of King Saul.

I strongly believe that followers of Jesus can expect God to do for them what he did for Samuel. Like Samuel, modern-day servants of Jesus need to ask God to provide them with His plan. There will be many different types of heifers according to the type of people God sends and the social, political and economic makeup of the host communities. God may use a believer's previous experience and secular profession or he may not. If not, the disciple should be willing to re-train and learn new skills so that his vocational or tentmaking plans are consistent with the principles of wisdom and prudence found in 1 Samuel 16 (as well as the rest of Scripture). I believe God will provide modern-day heifers for those he sends to communities where fear, prejudice, government restrictions, and/or religious intolerance are obstacles to the spread of his Kingdom.

