

Move on: 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

by [Scot McKnight](#) in the [February 22, 2005](#) issue

Samuel, the Billy Graham of his day, was adviser to the political leader Saul, the Pete Rose of ancient Israel. Samuel anointed Saul to be the first king of Israel. But soon (to quote James Thurber), “confusion got its foot in the door” and went through the entire “system.” Samuel observed Saul disobeying the explicit word of God, and it became Samuel’s job to inform Saul that God had rejected him as king.

The Bible tells us that Samuel “grieved” (*abal*) over Saul. But Yahweh told Samuel that the time for grieving was over, and that it was time to appoint a new king.

Sometimes we just need to move on.

The Amish resist certain aspects of “moving on.” I appreciate the Anabaptist resistance to the inhumane features of “progress,” the Anabaptist call to simplicity and fidelity to ancient traditions. But why stop with the 19th century? Why not go to a period prior to buggies, ovens, cupboards and battery-operated adding machines? The operative word here, as Donald Kraybill so ably demonstrates, is the German word *Gelassenheit*, or “yieldedness”—to God’s loving, providing and guiding will. But sometimes what is perceived as *Gelassenheit* is actually a stubborn resistance to the inevitability of change.

The gospel proclaims an alarming fact about historical movement—it is what God is all about. The entire Bible hinges on one undeniable reality: *reality* is God’s workshop. God doesn’t give Abraham a set of beliefs but an event (a smoking fire pot) and a rite (circumcision). And God gives the Christian church a son—a child born of a woman whose reputation was stained, and reared by a father who surrendered his status as a *tsadiq* or “righteous man.” Yet this son does not just teach the gospel: he embodies it.

In acting this way God sanctifies history, making it something to embrace instead of resist. When Samuel resists he hears the voice of God directing him to a future that will be better. That future will include David the shepherd boy. Like all shepherds, he is often on the move. As the author of Psalm 23, David the shepherd lies down, is led beside still waters, walks through the shadow of death and sits in the presence of his

enemies. David will do whatever it takes to guide his sheep even as he remembers that Yahweh is *his* shepherd, guiding him.

Then another shepherd will arrive. Jesus the Good Shepherd will be the Light of the World, removing darkness and trumping, for example, the darkness of the man born blind. Like Samuel, the disciples will “get stuck” because they’ll wonder whose sins have made the man blind. But Jesus, pushing them into the “Shepherd’s era,” will lead them to see that simplistic correlations from the past (sin leads to curse, obedience leads to blessing) do not always work.

He will guide them with his light, and when that light is turned on, three things will happen. First, those who live in that light “try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.” Samuel was stuck for some time in wanting Saul’s era to be the kingdom era, but God gave him a horn of oil to search for the Shepherd’s era. It does no good to apply more and more oil to the old era, God said. It is gone; it is history. We please God by moving on.

We do this too by taking no part in the “unfruitful works of darkness,” but instead exposing them. Like many others, I am deeply saddened by Americans’ tendency to gloat triumphantly in its victories. I am also saddened by Christians who, instead of weeping over current world affairs, have picked up a new sword of Constantine, a wicked instrument of triumphalism.

We need what John Howard Yoder calls the “politics of Jesus” and what Stanley Hauerwas calls the “peaceable kingdom.” Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams says it well: “From now on, all that can be said of God’s action in the past or the present must pass under the judgement of this fact [the cross].” He also says, “God is known in and by the exercise of crucifying compassion; if we are like him in that, we know him.” These theologians are calling us out of the old era of warfare, the Saul era, into the Shepherd’s era of justice, peace and love.

This future kingdom is marked by “justice,” a word that is fast losing its robust Christian profile. It has, as Flannery O’Connor said of another word, “a private meaning and public odor.” Some use the term in the sense of “retribution”(bring them to justice), and some in the sense of “rectification”(give the victims and the marginalized an equal opportunity). Neither of these senses is adequately Christian. The Christian sense of “justice” is “what is right before God and others.” And, according to Jesus’ own creed, what is “right” is to love God and to love others (Mark

12:29-31). In the Christian sense, justice means providing our world an opportunity to love God and to love others.

We need the words of the apostle Paul, who said, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light." We need a renewed commitment to listen to Jesus Christ, to let him be the good shepherd who can dispel the darkneses of war and bring in the Shepherd's era. Peace and justice embrace one another because they will be empowered by love on a day when, to quote Samuel Johnson, "we shall not borrow all our happiness from hope."