

**Dr. Lonnie H. Lee**

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## **When Vision Comes**

1 Samuel 3:1b

Last Fall, I spent Thanksgiving week in Virginia where I was able to have a good visit with both my sons and my daughter-in-law. A few weeks ago a member of this church asked me how my trip to Virginia went. When I described for him the time I spent with my family, he said, “No, that is not what I meant.” He knew that I could not spend a week in Virginia without doing some family history research. I think some of you are getting to know me a little too well.

It turns out that I did learn something important on that trip. I already knew that I had ancestors who came from England and settled on the Eastern Shore of Virginia about 1665. Two days of research last Fall enabled me to confirm that they were part of a group of families who in 1680 sent a letter to the Presbytery of Laggan in Ireland asking for the services of a Presbyterian minister.

At that time there was no organized Presbyterian church in America. Colonies like Virginia did not permit any churches other than Anglican ones. It turns out that this group on the Eastern Shore lived in range of the Maryland border. Because the colony of Maryland did have a degree of religious freedom at that time, they were attending lay led Presbyterian services held at Rehoboth plantation just across the border. In 1683 a newly ordained Scots Irish Presbyterian minister accepted the invitation to come to America to lead those services. He was Francis Makemie who would become one of the founders of organized Presbyterianism in America.<sup>1</sup>

Once again, my interest in family history and church history has converged. There are questions here that will keep me busy for years to come. Why were they looking for help from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland? They were Anglicans after all and they had migrated from England. The proper channel was to write to the Bishop of London to send more ministers. Had they given up on the Bishop of London because he had not been able to find enough qualified clergy willing to go to the colonies? Or were they Puritans who wanted to circumvent a bishop with whom they did not agree?

I may never know the answers to those questions, but I do know that these people were hungry for the word of God. The preaching of this word was far too infrequent in this new world to which they had come. They saw that the religious structure of old Europe would not work in this new setting. They dared to imagine a different kind of future in which the laity would assume more responsibility for shaping the direction of the church. They were ready for something new.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of 1 Samuel we read about the inauguration of a new era. The biblical writer tells us that this was a time when the word of the Lord was rare. The family of Eli was the dominant priestly family in Israel. They were expected to provide spiritual leadership to the people. Eli and his sons enjoyed their position of power and prestige, but they neglected their spiritual responsibilities. As a result the word of God was rare and the people were spiritually adrift.

The position of Eli and his sons seemed secure until the boy named Samuel began to hear voices in the night. Samuel was an apprentice to Eli at a time when the old priest was slowing down

and turning over the important work to his sons. When Samuel hears a voice in the night he assumes that Eli is calling out to him. After the third occurrence the old priest sorts out the confusion and concludes that the boy may be hearing the voice of God.

When God calls out the fourth time Samuel is ready to listen to a word from the Lord. What he hears is a savage condemnation of the house of Eli. The sons who have taken over from Eli have betrayed their calling. They live to indulge themselves rather than to serve God. They will be impeached at God's initiative so that new leaders may emerge.

When the old priest asks Samuel what the content of the message is the boy is afraid to tell. He fears that this powerful old man will become angry and resist this threatening word. He could even resort to violence. To accept this word means the loss of everything Eli holds dear. But Eli does not engage in denial. He knows his sons. He recognizes his own failure. He understands that no one can resist the word of God. He sees that the structures of the past are breaking down and that God is offering a new vision for the future. It is the boy Samuel who has the capacity to hear God's words and bring that vision to the people. Under the leadership of Samuel the people will be fed by a word that is no longer rare.

Albert Hale was pastor of this church from 1839 to 1866. Those 27 years were critical to establishing the identity of 2<sup>nd</sup> Presbyterian and then Westminster as a place where God's word is proclaimed even when it makes us uncomfortable. Hale believed that God's word was working to break down the worn out structures of his time. Hale was always listening for God's perspective on slavery, race relations, and war. He helped the Session to embrace a new vision of racial relations. Convinced that God was leading this nation to a new era when race would no longer matter, African Americans Elizabeth and Jamieson Jenkins were received into the membership of this church in 1848.<sup>2</sup> On February 15 we will celebrate this part of our church's history with a dramatic portrayal of the Jenkins' covering their work in the Underground Railroad, their relationship with Abraham Lincoln, and their experience in this church.

Church records tell us that Elizabeth was regular in her attendance but Jamieson was not. In those days people who did not attend regularly were called before Session to give reasons for their non-attendance. Apparently playing golf on Sunday morning was not an acceptable excuse. Members who failed to appear before the Session when summoned to do so were routinely excommunicated for contumacy (not accepting the authority of the Session). That's what happened to Jamieson. When he twice failed to appear before the Session he was excommunicated.<sup>3</sup> Once again, race did not matter. He was treated just like everyone else who ignored the authority of the Session. But Elizabeth continued to be a member in good standing until her death in 1880.

The year before the Jenkins became members the Mexican American War was raging. Hale saw in that war the unholy alliance of two of the most destructive elements of American society. Slavery supporters saw in it an opportunity to create new states where slavery could be extended. Many who were less attached to slavery were nonetheless caught up in a war fever based on jingoistic patriotism. In July of 1847 Hale preached a sermon in which he argued that the word of God stands in judgment against both of these attitudes. He preached that sermon understanding that the power of the old structures to resist the word of God was very strong. He was reminded of that when he was verbally and physically assaulted the following week because of what he said. His sermon included these words:

The law of Christianity—which is the law of God, and binding on all—treats all men as belonging to one family; commands all men to love one another as they love

themselves. That law allows no distinction of age, nation, language, clime, color, profession or pursuit...but what is war, in its relation to this law?... It is a requisition to destroy that life which the law of God requires us to save...If it is said these things are done on account of crimes committed, and to establish justice then let [the criminals] be sought out, their guilt established, and due punishment inflicted; and no Christian will complain. But let not the ruthless hand of indiscriminate destruction be raised over whole communities...merely because the state allows it. <sup>4</sup>

What Hale said 161 years ago still has the power to bring us up short. This word of God is rare indeed.

#### Endnotes

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1. Lefferts A. Loetscher, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, pages 52-53.
2. Second Presbyterian Church Session Minutes, 15 April and 5 November 1848.
3. Second Presbyterian Church Session Minutes, 29 August 1851.
4. Albert Hale, "Two Discourses on the Subject of the War Between the United States and Mexico Preached in the Second Presbyterian Church in Springfield on Sabbath, 11 July 1847," by Albert Hale, Pastor of the Church, published by the *Sangamo Journal* in August of 1847.