

## **An Open Letter to Evangelicals and Other Interested Parties: The People of God, the Land of Israel, and the Impartiality of the Gospel [Abridged]**

Recently a number of leaders in the Protestant community of the United States have urged the endorsement of far-reaching and unilateral political commitments to the people and land of Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, citing Holy Scripture as the basis for those commitments. . .

At the heart of the political commitments in question are two fatally flawed propositions. First, some are teaching that God's alleged favor toward Israel today is based upon ethnic descent rather than upon the grace of Christ alone, as proclaimed in the Gospel. Second, others are teaching that the Bible's promises concerning the land are fulfilled in a special political region or "Holy Land," perpetually set apart by God for one ethnic group alone. As a result of these false claims, large segments of the evangelical community, our fellow citizens, and our government are being misled with regard to the Bible's teachings regarding the people of God, the land of Israel, and the impartiality of the Gospel. In what follows, we make our convictions public. We do so acknowledging the genuine evangelical faith of many who will not agree with us. Knowing that we may incur their disfavor, we are nevertheless constrained by Scripture and by conscience to publish the following propositions for the cause of Christ and truth.

1. The Gospel offers eternal life in heaven to Jews and Gentiles alike as a free gift in Jesus Christ. Eternal life in heaven is not earned or deserved, nor is it based upon ethnic descent or natural birth.
2. All human beings, Jews and Gentiles alike, are sinners, and, as such, they are under God's judgment of death. Because God's standard is perfect obedience and all are sinners, it is impossible for anyone to gain temporal peace or eternal life by his own efforts. Moreover, apart from Christ, there is no special divine favor upon any member of any ethnic group; nor, apart from Christ, is there any divine promise of an earthly land or a heavenly inheritance to anyone, whether Jew or Gentile. To teach or imply otherwise is nothing less than to compromise the Gospel itself.
3. God, the Creator of all mankind, is merciful and takes no pleasure in punishing sinners. Yet God is also holy and just and must punish sin. Therefore, to satisfy both his justice and his mercy, God has appointed one way of salvation for all, whether Jew or Gentile, in Jesus Christ alone.
4. Jesus Christ, who is fully God and fully man, came into the world to save sinners. In his death upon the cross, Jesus was the Lamb of God taking away the sin of the world, of Jew and of Gentile alike. The death of Jesus forever fulfilled and eternally ended the sacrifices of the Jewish temple. All who would worship God, whether Jew or Gentile, must now come to him in spirit and truth through Jesus Christ alone. The worship of God is no longer identified with any specific earthly sanctuary. He receives worship only through Jesus Christ, the eternal and heavenly Temple.
5. To as many as receive and rest upon Christ alone through faith alone, to Jews and Gentiles alike, God gives eternal life in his heavenly inheritance.
6. The inheritance promises that God gave to Abraham were made effective through Christ, Abraham's True Seed. These promises were not and cannot be made effective through sinful man's keeping of God's law. Rather, the promise of an inheritance is made to those only who have faith in Jesus, the True Heir of Abraham. All spiritual benefits are derived from Jesus, and apart from him there is no participation in the promises. Since Jesus Christ is the Mediator of the Abrahamic Covenant, all who bless him and his people will be blessed of God, and all who curse him and his people will be cursed of God. These promises do not apply to any particular ethnic group, but to the church of Jesus Christ, the true Israel. The people of God, whether the church of Israel in the wilderness in the Old Testament or the Israel of God among the Gentile Galatians in the New Testament, are one body who through Jesus will receive the promise of the heavenly city, the everlasting Zion. This heavenly inheritance has been the expectation of the people of God in all ages.

7. Jesus taught that his resurrection was the raising of the True Temple of Israel. He has replaced the priesthood, sacrifices, and sanctuary of Israel by fulfilling them in his own glorious priestly ministry and by offering, once and for all, his sacrifice for the world, that is, for both Jew and Gentile. Believers from all nations are now being built up through him into this Third Temple, the church that Jesus promised to build.

8. Simon Peter spoke of the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus in conjunction with the final judgment and the punishment of sinners. Instructively, this same Simon Peter, the Apostle to the Circumcision, says nothing about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel in the land of Palestine. Instead, as his readers contemplate the promise of Jesus' Second Coming, he fixes their hope upon the new heavens and the new earth, in which righteousness dwells.

9. The entitlement of any one ethnic or religious group to territory in the Middle East called the "Holy Land" cannot be supported by Scripture. In fact, the land promises specific to Israel in the Old Testament were fulfilled under Joshua. The New Testament speaks clearly and prophetically about the destruction of the second temple in A.D. 70. No New Testament writer foresees a regathering of ethnic Israel in the land, as did the prophets of the Old Testament after the destruction of the first temple in 586 B.C. Moreover, the land promises of the Old Covenant are consistently and deliberately expanded in the New Testament to show the universal dominion of Jesus, who reigns from heaven upon the throne of David, inviting all the nations through the Gospel of Grace to partake of his universal and everlasting dominion.

10. Bad Christian theology regarding the "Holy Land" contributed to the tragic cruelty of the Crusades in the Middle Ages. Lamentably, bad Christian theology is today attributing to secular Israel a divine mandate to conquer and hold Palestine, with the consequence that the Palestinian people are marginalized and regarded as virtual "Canaanites." This doctrine is both contrary to the teaching of the New Testament and a violation of the Gospel mandate. In addition, this theology puts those Christians who are urging the violent seizure and occupation of Palestinian land in moral jeopardy of their own bloodguiltiness. Are we as Christians not called to pray for and work for peace, warning both parties to this conflict that those who live by the sword will die by the sword? Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ can bring both temporal reconciliation and the hope of an eternal and heavenly inheritance to the Israeli and the Palestinian. Only through Jesus Christ can anyone know peace on earth.

The promised Messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ has been inaugurated. Its advent marks the focal point of human history. This kingdom of the Messiah is continuing to realize its fullness as believing Jews and Gentiles are added to the community of the redeemed in every generation. The same kingdom will be manifested in its final and eternal form with the return of Christ the King in all his glory.

Of all the nations, the Jewish people played the primary role in the coming of the Messianic kingdom. New Testament Scripture declares that to them were given the oracles of God, the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises. Theirs are the fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and from them, according to the flesh, came Christ. Salvation is, indeed, of the Jews. While affirming the Scriptural teaching that there is no salvation outside of Christ, Christians should acknowledge with heartfelt sorrow and grief the frequent oppression of the Jews in history, sometimes tragically done in the name of the cross.

But what are we to make of the unbelief of Israel? Has their unbelief made the faithfulness of God without effect for them? No, God has not completely rejected the people of Israel, and we join the apostle Paul in his earnest prayer for the salvation of his Jewish kinsmen according to the flesh. There always has been and always will be a remnant that is saved. While not all Israel will experience the blessing of participation in the Messianic kingdom, yet Jews who do come to faith in Christ will share in his reign throughout the present age and into eternity. In addition, it is not as though the rejection of some in Israel for unbelief serves no purpose. On the contrary, because they were broken off in unbelief, the Gospel has gone to the Gentiles, who now, through faith, partake of the blessings to the fathers and join with believing Jews to constitute the true Israel of God, the church of Jesus Christ.

The present secular state of Israel, however, is not an authentic or prophetic realization of the Messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, a day should not be anticipated in which Christ's kingdom will manifest Jewish distinctives, whether by its location in "the land," by its constituency, or by its ceremonial institutions and practices. Instead, this present age will come to a climactic conclusion with the arrival of the final, eternal phase of the kingdom of the Messiah. At that time, all eyes, even of those who pierced him, will see the King in his glory. Every

knee will bow, and every tongue will declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. The kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever.

In light of the grand prophetic expectation of the New Testament, we urge our evangelical brothers and sisters to return to the proclamation of the free offer of Christ's grace in the Gospel to all the children of Abraham, to pray for peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and to promise all humanitarian sympathy and practical support for those on both sides who are suffering in this current vicious cycle of atrocity and displacement. We also invite those Christian educators and pastors who share our convictions on the people of God, the land of Israel, and the impartiality of the Gospel to join their names with ours as signatories to this open letter.

Advent

In the Year of our Lord 2002

Soli Deo Gloria

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