

Engrafted, Not Replaced

How I View True Israel, and
Why I Support Ethnic Jews and the State of Israel and
Pray for Them to Be Saved by Jesus Christ

And still believe in Covenant Theology

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Much has been written, and even more said, about differences in Dispensational and Reformed understandings of True Israel.^{1, 2} I have heard and read much recently about the phrase “replacement theology.” It is being used about my views and the views of others in the Presbyterian and the Reformed faith (which also includes Baptists, Anglicans and many others, as well) concerning some of these matters. I have also been misunderstood and sadly, probably have contributed to the misunderstanding by not taking the time to explain my views to those for

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¹ A primer for Dispensationalism is Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, Rev. ed. (Dallas,: Dallas Seminary Press, 1951). For a critical review of the movement, from a Presbyterian perspective, see William E. Cox, *Amillennialism Today*, by William E. Cox (Philadelphia, Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1966.: 1966), John H. Gerstner, *A Primer on Dispensationalism* (Phillipsburg, N.J. Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1982.: 1982). See also Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001). For a presentation of Covenant Theology see the classic O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980). As Covenant Theology relates to the matter of Israel, see O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God : Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Pub., 2000).

² It should be stated, that there is large disagreement within Dispensationalist groups concerning major tenets of older claims. For a review of these views see Herbert W. Bateman, *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism : A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1999). See also Darrell Bock, "Why I Am a Dispensationalist with a Small 'D'," *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41, no. 3 (1998).

whom they may seem new or somehow different from what they have heard or even have been taught.

Well, what do Presbyterians and Reformed people believe about Israel and Jews in relationship to other believers? There have, in fact, been many in Reformed churches, particularly in the South (but also, notably, in Philadelphia at Tenth Presbyterian Church), who were influenced by godly dispensationalist Presbyterian pastors who stood up for the Word of God in the modernist-fundamentalist debates of the early twentieth-century; who believed and taught doctrine according to the teachings of J.N. Darby (1800–1882) of Ireland and others who popularized his views on these matters in our country.³ I still believe that we all have more in common than we at first think.^{4,5} and I am unworthy to even be in the same line as the men whose ministries have blessed so many hundreds of thousands of people.⁶ Where there are honest disagreements, I believe we must always stand together and do what we can to promote love and peace before a watching world. I am not saying that we should not be Bereans⁷ and, in love, challenge each other over the Word of God. I have done that on occasion, when I felt it necessary, and I may be doing so in this paper. However, when we do make our views known, we must speak with honor and charity as brothers unto brothers.⁸

³ There is a fine article (but not peer reviewed) on the movement at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dispensationalism>. An overview of the tenets of Dispensationalism may also be found at <http://www.theologicalstudies.org/dispen.html>. One reputable Southern Baptist web site (The Founder's Conference) offers a polemical review of the history of Dispensationalism in America. It is located at <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ09/article1.html>. See again: Bock, "Why I Am a Dispensationalist with a Small 'D'."

⁴ Fellow members of the Evangelical Theological Society, who teach at Dallas Theological Seminary, have written about trends within Dispensationalism that are causing them to come closer to the Reformed position. I would refer the reader to Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, Ill.: BridgePoint, 1993).

⁵ I greatly appreciate the magnanimous study presented by a former Dispensationalist Premillennialist who now espouses another position. See Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand Rapids, Mich. Leicester, England: Baker Books; Inter-Varsity Press, 2003).

⁶ See my Michael Milton, "Following Ben: Expository Preaching in the Pastoral Setting," *Preaching Journal* 20, no. 4 (2005).

⁷ "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17.11 NIV).

⁸ It should be noted that I gave my views of this matter before the Tennessee Valley Presbytery, as all PCA ministers are required to do when transferring between our presbyteries or being ordained. Dispensationalism is not a view al-

Now onto the controversy itself. In the Reformed faith there are a variety of views about the exact relationship of non-believing Jews and what God may or may not do in terms of reaching them with the gospel; therefore, I do not speak for all. Nevertheless, I would like to speak for myself. Here is why I, as a Reformed and covenantal pastor in the PCA, support Israel. Incidentally, my views are not novel but are held in one way or another by great luminaries of our faith.

I must clarify what I mean for the Bible itself speaks of Israel in several different ways.⁹ Jesus said that there were those who said they were Jews but who were not really Jews (Rev. 3:9). In Romans 9 we read that not all who are Israel are of Israel. Paul writes, "However, it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring (Rom. 9:6-8). Nothing could be clearer than Paul, the Hebrew of Hebrews, showing the distinction. There are those who are of fleshly Israel who are not of spiritual Israel, the ones who, by the same faith that Abraham had, trust in Jesus Christ as Lord. We read again: "For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither *is that* circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he *is* a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision *is that* of the heart, in the spirit, *and* not in the letter; whose praise *is* not of men, but of God" (Rom. 2:28-29, KJV).

So, I must, out of my own convictions based on the Scriptures, believe that I (and all who truly call Jesus Savior) am, by adoption, a part of "the Israel of God." According to Paul, we have not "replaced" the old people of God called Israel. We have been "engrafted" into their number. Thus, by using a phrase "replacement theology" to describe this position which has been held by godly Christians since the Biblical era (which includes Irenaeus, Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Matthew Henry, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the English and Welsh Puritans, the Scottish Covenanters, the Pilgrims who founded America, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge and all of the Princetonians, the Southern Presbyterian greats such as Henry Thornwell, Benjamin Morgan Palmer, modern pastor-theologians including such familiar names as James Montgomery Boice, D. James Kennedy, R. C. Sproul, and entire denominations, such as the Presbyterian Church in America and increasing numbers in other evangelical denominations) is not only uncharitable and divisive, it is simply wrong. I say again, I believe, according to Paul, that Gentile believers have become engrafted into the faith given once and for all to the saints, that one body sometimes called Israel. Paul writes, " ...some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were

lowed by teaching elders in the Presbyterian Church in America. I continue to hold that this system of doctrine, as taught in the Westminster Confession of Faith and its Larger and Shorter Catechisms, is the very teaching of the Holy Scriptures.

⁹ See Robertson, *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*.

grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, (Rom. 11:17). Yet, we must admit that Paul still distinguishes between True Israel and his brethren in the flesh, ethnic Israel, that is, the Hebrews.¹⁰ He not only prays for them, but in a passionate outburst, wishes that he were damned that they might be saved: “I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen” (Rom. 9:1-5).

He goes on to say to Gentiles who are engrafted into this new Israel that we must not “boast” (Rom. 11:18) or be “haughty” concerning our new status but we are to remember that God’s grace came to us through the old covenant people of God, the Jews. Thus, we should pray and actually expect that the present blindness of so many Jews will not last forever but that many will be engrafted back into True Israel (Rom. 11:22-25). When that happens—that is, when all of the elect Gentiles and elect Jews are brought into the faith—then, I believe, Paul is saying that “all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:26). I am not the last word on the meaning of a passage that has baffled greater minds than mine. Nevertheless, this is the light I have been given as I read this passage. One thing is for certain. No one, Jew or Gentile, can be saved apart from the name of Jesus Christ. The way Jews will be brought back into the one true fold of God is through the Spirit of God working through the preaching of the gospel. That is the whole message of Romans 10. For that reason, I am for increased outreach ministries to ethnic Jews.

So, I must differentiate, as Paul did, between True Israel—that is, believing Gentiles and Jews together in the one true faith in Jesus Christ, God’s promised Messiah—and ethnic Hebrews. Moreover, we must now, as a result of God’s providence in history, differentiate between the ancient theocracy of Israel (“Israelites”), the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16, where Paul is writing to Galatian Gentile believers), and the modern state of Israel (Israelis).

¹⁰ I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? “Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.” But what is God’s reply to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace (Romans 11:1-5),

You can already see how failure to unravel these distinct entities in Scripture, and now in history, can lead to misunderstanding. Thus, we do well to step back and clarify our words before chastising another. Where there are sincere disagreements, one can at least grant that the situation is not always clear.

But again, I am clear myself, from the Word of God, that the assembly of God's people who trust and believe in the Messiah of God, Jesus, whether in the Old Testament or in the New Testament, are of one and the same spiritual family. I believe in the oneness and unity of the people of God. Some misunderstanding about the church replacing Israel may come from the word "church" itself. The Greek word *ecclesia* is the word translated into English as "assembly," "church," and sometimes "congregation." It is the word that Stephen assigns to Israel when, in his great sermon before his martyrdom, he calls Israel "the church in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38, KJV). We must also recognize that in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), the Greek word *ecclesia* is used more than seventy times to translate *qa-hal*, the Hebrew word for congregation. There is an Old Testament verse that is used in the New Testament that will help us see this. Psalm 22 uses the Hebrew word *qa-hal* for congregation: "I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee. Psalms 22:22 (KJV). This same verse appears in Hebrews (note that the Holy Spirit has replaced *qa-hal* with *ecclesia*): "Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee. Hebrews 2:12 (KJV).

In the New Testament, the church, or *ecclesia*, of Christ is one with the *qa-hal* of God throughout the Old Testament. These are one people of God who trust in God's Messiah, although living under two different dispensations—Old Testament and New Testament. Having sought to establish this, however, I want to make some statements about what I believe concerning ethnic Israel and the modern state of Israel.

First, I honor non-believing ethnic Hebrew people, no matter what their modern citizenship.

By saying that I honor non-believing Hebrews, I do not mean to say that I am unconcerned about their unregenerate state. Let me be clear: unless they repent, they will be eternally lost, just like any other ethnic group failing to be justified through faith alone in Jesus Christ. I honor them in this way: they are descendants of my own spiritual forefathers and mothers, and whether they admit it or not or even care about it or not, we do have some connection.

First, through their ethnic people, God brought forth my Savior Jesus Christ; therefore, I honor them.

Second, through them came the covenants and promises that are so dear to us.

Third, through their amazing people came contributions in law, government, poetry, wisdom, and other language arts. On the back of those contributions, those who adopted her worldviews formed the greatest civilizations in history, in my opinion.

Fourth, I honor them in that they form a special object of prayer. When I meet a Jewish person, I am drawn to share Christ with him or her. As I read Romans 11, I sense that God desires that I do this. I marvel at the beautiful grace of God that will graft a Gentile like me into the Israel of God, and use me to share Christ with an ethnic Jew so that they may be brought back in themselves. I believe this will happen more and more, but I do not want to just wait for God to save the Jews without sending someone anymore than I want to just wait for God to save the Indians or the Albanians or the Africans without sending someone. Yet, they are a special people who deserve our prayers and our evangelistic efforts carried out with great sensitivity for injustices that have been done to them in the past due to bad theology and devilish influence.

Second, I admire the modern state of Israel.

As I have said, I differentiate between Israelis, Israelites, ethnic Hebrews of many different nationalities, and the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16). I do not believe that the modern state of Israel is the same nation as the ancient Israel of Scripture. Nor do I believe that they are the Israel of God. And I recognize that the modern state of Israel includes many people who are not ethnic Hebrews. My admiration and support for the modern state of Israel is based primarily on my evaluation of their international politics. This is not to say that modern Israel has been blameless in its dealings with other nations and people groups. Rather, it is merely to say that they have generally done a better job than their neighbors at upholding biblical standards of human dignity and justice.

The *State of Israel* is not as friendly and as open to Christian missionary work as I would hope. But the existence of the modern state of Israel still provides many Christian missionaries with a foothold for evangelizing the Near East. I do not know what role modern Israel will play in God's plan for reaching Jews and Arabs with the gospel, or in helping converted Jews reaching the world for Christ. However, I pray that it will be used to spread the gospel to ethnic Jews and others. In this regard, I suspect that God will surprise us all, as He often does. Should modern Israel become a great missionary-sending nation, it would be a cause of great rejoicing and honor for the name of Jesus!

I also support and stand with the modern state of Israel as they are facing enemies from all sides who would not only destroy them but also the Judeo-Christian heritage we enjoy as well. The threat posed by Islam is greatest in this

part of the world. And Israel stands of the front lines of defense against the Muslim countries that would destroy and subjugate the peaceful peoples of the world.

Yet, I have my concerns about this state. I am concerned that they not be confused with the one true people of God who have trusted in Jesus Christ. They are a good democracy (not a perfect one, by the way), but they are not a theocracy with Christ ruling them. Theologies that do, in fact, confuse the Israel of God, with the modern democratic state of Israel, may advocate (in their sincere, but sincerely wrong teaching) policies and positions which do not provide for missionary outreach, to Jews as well as Palestinians, or for the support of true believers (of various ethnic backgrounds) in that modern state. This was, in large part, the concern raised by the seminary paper which I signed at *Knox Seminary*,¹¹ following a public debate on the subject in evangelical circles, and which was published in Advent, 2002. I have a concern for Jewish and Arab Christians in Israel and for missionary activity to Israel. Simply put, Christians are not fulfilling our missionary task to the Jews there as well as I would desire. I honor Dispensationalists for their contributions, but they are not the only voice in evangelical Christianity. I am concerned about teaching which equates a modern democracy, not always friendly to Christian missions and evangelism, with the true people of God.

Conclusion

I have sought to differentiate between the Israel of God, which includes Jews and Gentiles, and ethnic Jews themselves. I have also sought to differentiate between the ancient theocracy of Israel and the modern Israeli government and people. I have sought to show that I believe the church of Jesus Christ does not replace Israel but is engrafted into the one true people of God, the Israel of God. Further, I have shown from Scripture that the Greek word used for church is also used for Israel, according to the very words of Stephen in Acts 7:38, and I have appealed to the use of the same word in the Old Testament to translate the assembly or congregation of God's people. I have also stated my hope and expectation for the continued conversion of ethnic Jews to the Lordship of Jesus and my zeal for evangelization of Jewish people as a priority in our churches and denominations today. Moreover, I have shown why I support ethnic Jews as well as modern Israelis.

My prayer is that our churches would all continue to focus on the Word of God, the Great Commission, the Reformed faith of grace alone by faith alone through

¹¹See the seminary paper at <http://www.knoxseminary.org/Prospective/Faculty/WittenbergDoor/index.html>.

Christ alone, and that we pray for God to use us to reach Jew and Gentile alike so that "all Israel may be saved."^{12, 13}

I end with the words of that famous, irenic Puritan pastor, Richard Baxter (1615–91), whose heart I would want to emulate when I use these words: "In necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity."

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¹² To that end, I fully support the *Willowbank Statement* (see <http://www.lcje.net/willowbank.html>), which is promoted by such ministries as *Jews for Jesus* (see http://www.forjewsforjesus.org/about/brief_history.html) and *the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization* (see <http://www.lcje.net/index.html>).

¹³ See also my academic article on the dangers of an unbalanced eschatological emphasis in the ministry, Michael Milton, "The Pastoral Predicament of Vavasor Powell (1617-1670): Eschatological Fervor and Its Relationship to the Pastoral Ministry," *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43, no. 3 (2000). Located at http://www.etsjets.org/jets/journal/43/43-3/43-3-pp517-527_JETS.pdf.

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