

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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JUNE 29, 2008



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### Romans 11:1-7,25-29 "What About the Jews?"

Today's question in the *Ask The Pastor* series: "The Bible tells us that the Jews were God's chosen people, but that salvation now is through Jesus Christ. Why is it then that some Christians strongly support the current day secular country of Israel? Is there any reason for Christians to believe that the Jews or Israel have any role in salvation, or in the end times foretold in the Bible?"

To get at this very complicated issue, we will have to start with what the New Testament says about Israel, and then ask how Christians apply those ideas to the modern state of Israel. There is a major issue that has to be understood, which you can frame in a number of ways; at its simplest it asks: Does the church of Jesus Christ *replace* Israel, or does it *join* Israel to make one "people of God"?

#### 1) *The New Israel*

First, the idea that the Church replaces Israel. There are places in Paul's letters where he refers to the Gentile churches as "the Israel of God" and he says explicitly that "circumcision now means nothing... what counts is a new creation" (eg. Galatians 6:15-16). In *Galatians* Paul also says that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, all are one in Christ Jesus... if you belong to Christ, you are Abraham's seed." In *Romans 9*, he says "not all who are descended from Israel are Israel... it is the children of the promise who are Abraham's offspring."

The book of *Hebrews* goes to great lengths to say that Jesus our great High Priest has done away with the Old Testament sacrifices, the temple imagery, the priesthood, the old covenant: "by calling his covenant new, he makes the first one obsolete;" "a change in priesthood means a change in the law;" "Christ entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption."

The extended passage in *1 Peter 2* confers on the Gentile churches of Asia the titles "spiritual house... holy priesthood... chosen people... holy nation... people belonging to God. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God." All the titles of Israel as a nation are now applied to the churches of Jesus Christ.

All this sounds like a clear theology of "replacement." Israel has been superseded by the church of Jesus Christ as "the people of God." On this score, there is nothing specifically Christian to say about the persistence of the Jews through history, or the re-establishment of the state of Israel in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. You might marvel at the perseverance of the Jews, or weep over Christian and pagan anti-Semitism, or be glad that after the Holocaust the western nations got together to help establish a "Jewish homeland;" you might admire Israeli energy and commitment, or want to support the only democratic state in the Middle East. But you would not see any of

this as fulfilling Biblical prophecy or as figuring in "salvation history."

## 2) *Israel and the Church*

Why then do so many Christians, especially of a fundamentalist or Pentecostal flavor, seem to regard the creation of modern Israel as fulfilling prophecy and as part of God's work in the world?

Here we have to uncover another vein of New Testament writing. This one says the church did not replace Israel, but that Christian Gentiles were joined to Israel to become a new "combined people of God," perhaps even a "third race" that is neither Jew nor Gentile.

*Ephesians 2-3* would be one source. "You (Gentiles who are now Christians) were once separated from Israel, foreigners to the covenants, without hope and without God... but now in Christ you who were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ." "He is our peace, who made the two one, and destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility... you are now fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household." "The mystery of the Gospel.. is that the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, sharers together in the promises."

And in Paul's extended wrestling with "the question of Israel" in *Romans 9-11*, he writes: "Did God reject his people? By no means! ... there is today a remnant chosen by grace, while others were hardened..." "Did they fall beyond recovery? Not at all! ... you [Gentile believers] are wild branches grafted into the olive tree [that is, Israel] in place of the broken off branches... but remember that the root supports you... and if they do not persist in unbelief they will be grafted in again." "A

hardening in part has come on Israel... until the full number of Gentiles has come in, and then all Israel will be saved." "As far as election is concerned, they are loved... for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable."

That does not sound like supersession – that the Christian church has replaced Israel. On the contrary, it says God's call is still in effect, and that he has a plan to redeem "all Israel" once the designated number of Gentiles have come into his kingdom. God's plans for the world, and for his chosen people, have not been thwarted by the disbelief of many Jews that Jesus is their Messiah. He will yet call them in. Oh, to be sure, it's a mystery why they did not respond in greater numbers in the 1<sup>st</sup> century and since. How could "God's chosen people" not believe? But that, says Paul, is part of the mysterious hidden election of God: he has chosen Israel, and he will save them. How he will do that is beyond our imagining, but it will be "through Jesus Christ".

So maybe God is still at work with his ancient people the Jews. Maybe that's why they have survived millennia of dispersion and persecution. Maybe there is something special about the Jews, even today, in God's eyes. But how, we wonder, does that relate to the salvation that is offered us in Jesus Christ? Is there a "Jewish track" and a "Gentile track," or a "Jewish track" and a "Christian track?" What would this say about the supposedly universal offer of salvation in Jesus? And what if anything would this have to do with modern Israel? - which is far from being a "spiritual nation," and is in so many ways a secular modern state with energy and enemies and a checkered history already!

## 3) *The Rise of Dispensationalism*

To understand why many modern Christians are strong supporters of modern Israel, we

need to understand an approach to Biblical interpretation that began in the mid-1800s and has since traveled very far indeed. It is called "dispensational pre-millennialism." It is complex, and I can only touch on parts of it that apply to Israel.

It sees the history of God's dealings with his world as a series of seven "dispensations," each of which involves tests for God's people, ends badly, and gives rise to a new one. So there was one in Eden, one that ended with Noah, one with Abraham, one with Moses, and so on. Most important to us is how it sees the ministry of Jesus in relation to Israel. According to Dispensational views, Jesus came offering "the kingdom of God" to Israel, but this was rejected. So he announced instead an alternative route, and introduced "the church age." But the mainline of God's work remains Israel, and the church age is a "parenthesis" in the history of God and Israel.

Dispensationalists make much of Old Testament prophecies for Israel from the time of the Babylonian Exile, and say that they have yet to be fulfilled physically and literally: Jews will be gathered from the nations, resettled in their land, and eventually converted in large numbers to Jesus as their Messiah. So picking up on Paul's words about the limited time for the Gentiles and the day when "all Israel will be saved," Dispensationalists look with favor on any sign that these "last days" are approaching. They have read what Jesus says about "troubled times" at the end, and they see the world-wide disruptions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the re-establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, as "signs of the times" that God's plan is coming to fruition soon. So every step towards that end, however ambiguous, is seen as another prophecy fulfilled, and a day nearer to the Rapture of the Church, the Second Coming of Christ, the Great Tribulation, the Restoration of Israel,

the Last Judgment. And the Restoration of Israel is the key to the timing of all the rest.

These ideas were first proposed in the mid-1800s by J. Nelson Darby, an Irish minister. He had concluded that "the kingdom of God" meant only and always Israel, and *not* the Christian church. He was sure that the "parenthesis" of the church age was temporary and very "mixed," and that the "true church" would be removed from earth at the "secret rapture" before the Great Tribulation broke out. Darby soon decided against all ordination, and formed lay-led church groups that became known as "the Plymouth Brethren." The spread of Dispensational theology was largely due to the publication in the early 1900s of the immensely popular *Scofield Reference Bible*, whose footnotes take you through the entire Dispensational interpretation of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

In North America, these views had emerged through the Niagara Bible Conferences, were picked up by D.L. Moody, the greatest evangelist of the late 1800s, as well as by R.A. Torrey and A.J. Gordon. The Moody Bible Institute, Biola University, Dallas Theological Seminary, soon spread it into every Baptist, Bible and Pentecostal church in America. Hal Lindsey and later Tim LaHaye have made it the *only* view of the "end times" for most Christians in America. Beth Moore teaches it, as do most Southern Baptists.

Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Reformed, Congregationalists have never embraced it as a theology, though doubtless many people in these churches believe it, perhaps because they have read the *Left Behind* novels! I will not hide from you that I think it is seriously mistaken in many areas.

However the presence of Dispensationalism is a major sociological fact in American

Christianity today, and it accounts for the widespread and usually uncritical support that many evangelicals give the state of Israel. Other Christians do not necessarily deny that God has plans for the Jews, but doubt that they are now connected to Jewish *ethnicity*. It is important to remember that being Jewish has always involved a varying mixture of religious belief and ethnicity, and today in America, and in Israel, there are far more ethnic Jews than observant Jews. So even those who believe God has a purpose yet for the Jews, and that they are still in some way *in covenant* with him (as I do), still want to consider whether that applies to all Jews or only to observant ones, and what this has to do with the state of Israel.

In relation to modern Israel, remember that the British ruled most of the Middle East after WWI, and drew some bureaucratic lines in the sand to create new "nations" that took too little notice of ethnicity or religion or history (which is what got us what we today call "Iraq"). The worthy attempt under the "British Mandate" and later a United Nations partition plan to create a "Jewish homeland" in 1947 was almost fatally crippled by the assumption that hundreds of thousands of people - mostly Arab, mostly Muslim and Christian - who had lived in the area for generations, would accept the creation of an "Arab state" and a "Jewish state." For those who called the area *Palestine* (a name which goes back to Old Testament times), and had lived under Syrian, Greek, Roman, and Byzantine rule, and then under an Islamic Caliphate, the Crusaders, the Ottomans, and the British; the re-establishment of Israel was anything but a time of rejoicing, as tens of thousands of people were displaced, and 60 years later are still trying to resettle.

By all means support Israel as a modern, democratic, innovative state. The courage of its 7 million people in the past 60 years has

been remarkable. By all means long for a time when Palestinians (3-4 million of them) can live in a viable state alongside Israel, in a place where Muslims and Christians can flourish. By all means pray for a day when the government of Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah do not threaten Israel's peace and existence. But do not be confused by the idea that Old Testament prophecies have to be literally fulfilled on that piece of land, and therefore whatever Israel does is fine with God and deserves the support of Christians.

It's better we don't confuse being part of God's people with being of a particular ethnicity, or living on a special piece of land - whether we are Israeli Jews or American Christians!

Let us pray...