

# ICEJ Response

## To Evangelical Letter to President Bush

30.08.2007

Recently, a group of 34 Evangelical Christian leaders in America wrote an open letter to U.S. President George W. Bush to register their support for his efforts to achieve a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and to clarify that not all Evangelicals oppose such a resolution of this long-running dispute. As a leading Christian Zionist ministry, we value the opportunity to graciously respond to these Christian brothers, particularly in regards to their handling of the Biblical "mystery" that is Israel.

We respect the right of American citizens to engage with their government on matters of such immense importance as the Israeli-Arab conflict. We cannot agree, however, with the historical and moral equivalence that these Christian leaders have drawn between Israel and the Palestinians, nor with their exegesis of Scripture.

The Jewish people have an ancient claim and attachment to the Land of Israel dating back 4000 years to the Hebrew Patriarch Abraham. There they became a nation that made universal contributions to all humankind, not least of which are the Bible and the Messiah that we Christians hold so dear. In modern times the Jews have returned to their ancient homeland many centuries after being violently uprooted from it not once, but twice. On repeated occasions, Israel has demonstrated its bona fide willingness to partition the land into separate Jewish and Arab states for the sake of peace with their Arab neighbours.

In contrast, though the Palestinian Arab presence in the Land of Israel dates back several generations, they never built an independent nation here and, with all due respect, have made no positive contributions of note to the world. Palestinian nationalism gained traction a mere 40 years ago and only then due to the movement's adoption of terrorist tactics. It is an historic fact that at every point in which the Jewish people agreed to a two-state solution, the Palestinian Arabs have rejected such compromise in favour of violent 'resistance' to any expression of Jewish sovereignty in the land.

As a result, most Evangelical Christians distrust Palestinian intentions and therefore remain highly skeptical about the merits of a two-state solution at this time, as do a great many Israelis. We think Christians should be very cautious about urging our governments to push Israel prematurely into such risky and unworkable solutions.

At the same time, this does not mean we are "blocking" peace in the Middle East. The blame for that lies largely with the parties in the region themselves and primarily with militant Arab and Islamic elements that seek Israel's destruction.

It is our assessment that the Evangelicals writing to President Bush were nonetheless able to place Israel and the Palestinians on an equal footing because of two theological errors:

- 1) A failure to grasp the biblical paradox of 'free grace' versus 'divine election', and
- 2) Their adherence to the vestiges of a doctrine known as Replacement theology.

It is clear from the Bible that God indeed loves all men the same, whether Israelis, Palestinians or others. Yet it is equally true that God in His sovereignty calls and elects certain vessels for His eternal purposes. "Jacob I loved, Esau I hated", affirms Romans 9:13. Thus we understand that God established a unique relationship with Israel for the purpose of world redemption, and that relationship is enduring and has no equivalent whatsoever on the Palestinian side.

Yet many Christians to this day deny that Israel still stands in a special covenant relationship with God. Because it was the source of so much evil and hostility against the Jewish people down through Church history, many who cling to such Replacement thinking prefer the term "Fulfillment" theology – meaning that the coming of Christ and birth of the Church fulfilled all the promises that God made to ancient Israel. In either case, the result is the same – Israel is seen as having already completed her redemptive mission, leaving the modern state of Israel with no theological significance and she should be treated accordingly.

It is our belief, however, that God's covenants with Israel are as valid today as when He first swore two irrevocable and unconditional oaths to Abraham:

- 1) To 'bless' or redeem the world through his seed (Genesis 12:1-3), and
- 2) To deliver the Land of Canaan to Abraham's natural descendants as an "everlasting possession" (Genesis 17:8).

Thus both the people and the land of Israel were chosen for the purpose of world redemption, and to remove either one from the equation undermines the Abrahamic covenant, and by extension even our own salvation as New Testament believers. Why? Because according to the Apostles' teaching it would render God a liar and absolutely untrustworthy (see Romans 3:1-4; Hebrews 6:13-20).

Yet many Christians ignore or demean the land component of the Abrahamic Covenant, even though the Bible lays emphasis on it throughout its pages. For instance, when the Psalmist describes the covenant with Abraham, he stresses the land promise and its validity for "a thousand generations" (Psalm 105:8-12). Nothing in the New Testament abrogates or nullifies this land promise (see Romans 3:3; II Timothy 2:13; Galatians 3:15-17).

Now it is true that in the Mosaic covenant, God then comes along and places conditions on Israel's right to enjoy possession of that which they already own (Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28). Yet Israel's loss of domicile in the land has never meant her loss of underlying title to the land (Leviticus 26:44-46). Even the past 2000 years of exile is not a sign of Israel's ultimate rejection before God; rather God was simply keeping His side of the 'bargain' made at Sinai. Thus in Israel's exiles we see God's righteous and just character, but in Israel's returns we see His faithfulness and favour (Psalm 102:13).

In the end, Abraham was promised not only a 'seed' to bless the whole earth, but also the physical land of Israel as an 'everlasting possession'. The Bible essentially tells us that the first coming of Messiah fulfilled the first promise (Galatians 3:16), while His Second Coming will ensure the latter.

In other words, Israel will one day finally enter into her promised rest and peace in the land. We believe this will have its ultimate fulfillment in the Messianic Age. Until then, we will not be advocating that an unredeemed Israel enter into her full land allotment. But neither will we be a part of any effort to force Israel to permanently divest herself from her land inheritance.

