

FROM THE HOUSE OF JACOB TO THE IOWA CAUCUSES:
IS THERE A PLACE FOR ISRAEL IN AN EVANGELICAL
PUBLIC THEOLOGY?

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The place of Israel in American politics has always been about more than just foreign policy. New York senatorial candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton, for example, found her budding political career jeopardized this year by a videotaped image of her kissing the cheek of the “First Lady” of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Candidate Clinton faced further scrutiny from her Jewish constituents when her campaign accepted contributions from an anti-Israel group, the American Muslim Association, which a staff member artfully listed on financial disclosure forms as the “American Museum Association.”

If Israel is ideological quicksand for American politicians, however, then it is a virtual minefield for evangelical theologians. After all, evangelicals have longstanding internal divisions on a variety of topics related to the nation of Israel. As evangelicals seek to construct a meaningful theology of political engagement, however, the nation of Israel cannot be a peripheral issue. An evangelical theology that seeks to offer a comprehensive biblical worldview cannot ignore the most politically incendiary stretch of land on the globe. Further, as evangelical theologians seek to apply the biblical understanding of the Kingdom of God to the present

political structures, how can they ignore a theological question so foundational to understanding the nature of the Kingdom?

Israel and the Politics of Evangelical Theology

The task of constructing an evangelical public theology is complicated by widespread confusion as to the role of electoral politics in shaping evangelical identity. The national media, after all, seem at times to caricature evangelical churches as not much more than Sunday morning distribution centers for Christian Coalition voter guides. This is understandable since the American populace seems to associate the contemporary evangelical movement with a kaleidoscope of images directly related to American electoral politics: Billy Graham expressing shock at the foul language on the Watergate tapes; Jimmy Carter announcing that even “born again” Sunday School teachers sometimes have lust in their hearts; Pat Robertson blaming his Republican presidential rivals for media exposure on the Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart sex scandals; George W. Bush claiming Jesus as his favorite political philosopher.

While the definition of evangelicalism may be hotly debated among evangelical theologians, all sides agree that evangelicals are not to be identified primarily as a special interest constituency of the Republican National Committee.¹ This does not mean, however, that sociopolitical activism is incidental to contemporary evangelical identity. The call for an evangelical presence in the public square did not suddenly emerge in the aftermath of the 1973

¹ For a discussion of the divide over the boundaries of evangelical identity, see R. Albert Mohler Jr., “Reformist Evangelicalism: A Center Without a Circumference” in *A Confessing Theology for Postmodern Times*, ed. Michael S. Horton (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000). Mohler criticizes post-conservative evangelicals such as Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson for seeking to redefine evangelical identity in terms of sociological identification, rather than theological conviction. Reformists and their allies within evangelicalism reject the “two-party” taxonomy offered by traditionalists such as Mohler. See, for example, John G. Stackhouse Jr., “The Perils of Left and Right,” *Christianity Today*, 10 August 1998, 58-59.

Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision.² The postwar evangelical coalition included sociopolitical engagement as a crucially important factor in distinguishing the new movement theologically both from the Social Gospel activism of Protestant liberalism and from the culturally disengaged isolationism of Protestant fundamentalism.

The theological manifesto of the neo-evangelical “third way” was Carl F. H. Henry’s *Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, a book which called for political activity not because of a pragmatic need to “save America,” but because evangelical theological convictions demanded such action.³ Henry can hardly be called a political guru seeking to mobilize evangelicals into a strategic voting bloc. Instead, Henry and his cohorts argued that evangelical theology is about more than individual regeneration. It must also witness to the political implications of an already initiated Kingdom of God. Further, they contended that cultural isolation would derail evangelistic initiatives by turning evangelicalism into an irrelevant wilderness cult.⁴

² The abortion debate certainly did serve to energize evangelicals politically, however. The abortion question not only served to rouse the political activism of previously disengaged fundamentalists such as Jerry Falwell, but it prompted a resurgent political focus on the part of evangelical theologians such as Francis Schaeffer. See, for example, Schaeffer’s Reagan-era *A Christian Manifesto* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1981).

³ Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947). Henry’s call for a theologically grounded evangelical political engagement spanned almost six decades in works such as *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); *A Plea for Evangelical Demonstration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971); *Twilight of a Great Civilization* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988); and *Has Democracy Had Its Day?* (Nashville: ERLC Publications, 1996).

⁴ To those who wished to jettison political engagement for an exclusive emphasis on personal evangelism and piety, Henry said the following: “Perhaps, despite all that I have said, somebody here is looking for a bomb shelter in which to propagate the evangelical faith. If so, let me propose a change on your reading list: retire your Bible to the Smithsonian Institute and get a copy of the Dead Sea Scrolls instead. The Essene caves are waiting for you. You won’t have to worry about the world outside. You won’t have to worry about neo-evangelicals. You won’t have to worry about anything. And in A. D. 4000 some roving archaeologists from Mars may discover in those Judean hills that, during the great crisis of the twentieth century, Saint Kilroy slept here.” *The God Who Shows Himself* (Waco: Word, 1966), 50.

Since the founding generation, of course, evangelicalism has indeed found its political voice. Within the tent of the contemporary evangelical coalition even the Anabaptists are now politically activated.⁵ Grassroots evangelical political activity, however, has often lacked the robust theological grounding outlined by Henry and others. Since the mobilization of the religious right and the religious left in the 1970s and 1980s, political movements have formed primarily around a common commitment to temporal political goals, without much reference to any shared theological worldview. Often faith-based political organizations are composed of a theological motley crew of evangelical Protestants, Roman Catholics, Mormons, Jews, and even a smattering of culturally conservative secularists.⁶

Recent years, however, have seen new attempts to ground evangelical political engagement in a theological consensus. Whatever the shortcomings of the ongoing series of *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* documents, at least they are efforts to fight the “culture war” on the basis of shared theological commitments.⁷ Similarly, there has been a mild thawing in the theological cold war on the relationship between divine revelation and the ordering of society. Some natural law proponents now emphasize the noetic effects of human depravity

⁵ Mennonite Ronald J. Sider, for example, has been at the forefront of the political engagement of the evangelical left, articulating a view of evangelical public theology that would call for nuclear disarmament, legal protection for the unborn, and, in the economic arena, a heavy dose of government intervention. Sider’s prescriptions have been called both theologically faulty and politically naïve by many conservative evangelicals. See, for instance, Ronald H. Nash, *Why the Left Is Not Right: The Religious Left- Who They Are and What They Believe* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

⁶ It may be argued that this phenomenon has led to the recent backlash against political action within some evangelical quarters. For example, see Ed Dobson and Cal Thomas, both former Christian Right organizers, in their *Blinded by Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999). Thomas and Dobson object to the temporal goals and secular methodologies of evangelical political activist groups. While Dobson and Thomas have overreacted to the excesses of the religious right, perhaps a more carefully developed evangelical theology of political engagement may have ameliorated the very real concerns they have expressed.

⁷ This is also perhaps the most significant failing of the *ECT* project. Even a peripheral survey of the doctrinal commitments of the signatories will reveal that a theological consensus does not exist on the questions the documents attempt to address (justification by faith, et al).

while some natural law detractors now carefully emphasize the reality of a transcendent moral order and the common ground between believers and unbelievers in the *imago dei*.⁸

The construction of a coherent evangelical public theology may find most potential, not primarily in establishing an “ecumenical jihad” with traditionalists within Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, or Judaism, but by reexamining the public implications of its own theological synthesis. This is all the more possible when one considers that evangelical theology has largely self-corrected one of the chief obstacles to united evangelical action in the public square- a lack of consensus on the relationship of the Kingdom of God to the current activity of the people of God.

The arguments of Henry’s *Uneasy Conscience*, for example, are striking in the importance for sociopolitical action that he places on assembling a consensus on the Kingdom. In his plea for evangelical engagement, Henry criticized the political implications of the Kingdom theology of dispensational fundamentalism. He called on evangelicals not to divide over eschatological emphases, but to create a two-pronged evangelical thrust that would have both “an apostolic and an apocalyptic turn.” It would be prophetically sensitive, but socially alert.⁹

In recent years, disparate traditions within evangelical theology have coalesced around a remarkably coherent understanding of the Kingdom in relation to such doctrinal issues

⁸ For example, when offering an interpretation of Romans 1, natural law apologist J. Budziszewski sounds almost Van Tilian in his *Revenge of Conscience: Politics and the Fall of Man* (Dallas: Spence, 1999). “The paradox is that the natural law is both really known, and really suppressed,” he writes. “Among my Catholic friends, who see the knowledge, I stress the suppression; among my Reformed friends, who see the suppression, I stress the knowledge” (p. 141). On the other hand, Carl Henry, a natural law critic, follows a comprehensive dismissal of natural law with an acknowledgement that all human beings share in “some light” of the knowledge of good and evil on the basis of their status as created in the image of God. Henry, “Natural Law and a Nihilistic Culture,” *First Things*, January 1995, 54-60.

⁹ Carl F. H. Henry, “The Vigor of the New Evangelicalism,” *Christian Life*, January 1948, 32.

as eschatology, ecclesiology, and soteriology. This is perhaps most strikingly seen in the parallel developments within dispensationalism and Reformed theology, both of which were seminal in the construction of contemporary evangelical theology.¹⁰ Both covenantal and dispensational theologians have moved closer to one another as leaders in both groups have embraced an “already/not yet” model of eschatology, an understanding of the church as an initial approximation of the Kingdom, and a holistic understanding of salvation.¹¹

The current discussions over the place of Israel in evangelical political engagement reflect the changing landscape of evangelical theology. By discussing the public ramifications of a theology of Israel, evangelical theologians acknowledge that their forebears were right. The purposes of God extend beyond issues of individual salvation to include questions of structural righteousness and political responsibility as well.

The Politics of Israel Past: Toward a Theology of Corporate Righteousness

The relationship between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church may seem to be of little relevance to the construction of an evangelical public theology. This question, however, is intertwined with a myriad of contingent controversies ranging from baptism to church government to Sabbath observance. The very presence of a Baptist church building across the street from a Presbyterian sanctuary is evidence that such a divide has implications for

¹⁰ For a discussion of the importance of the alliance between the dispensational and Reformed traditions in the formation of contemporary evangelical theology, see Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 815-17. Ahlstrom’s treatment of the twin streams of evangelical theology is preferable to that of Roger Olson’s understanding of the competing “Puritan-Princeton” and “Pietist-Pentecostal” paradigms of evangelical theology in *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 594-595. Although Olson is correct to note the influence of revivalism on evangelical theology, revivalism did not necessarily downplay confessional boundaries in favor of experiential pietism. It is one thing to argue that the elaborate prophecy charts of the Bible conferences were theologically misdirected. It is quite another to argue that they were theologically averse.

¹¹ For a discussion of this development within the dispensational tradition, see Russell D. Moore, “Till Every Foe Is Vanquished: Emerging Sociopolitical Implications of Progressive Dispensational Eschatology,” Paper presented at the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Danvers, MA, 17 November 1999.

evangelical thought and practice. The Old Testament has proven especially controversial as evangelicals seek to apply its teachings to the realm of sociopolitical engagement.

Even for the most covenantal of Reformed theologians, the Israel of the Old Testament is understood to be a political body, not just a “church” of worshippers. The Old Testament reverberates with the passion of Israel’s covenant God that His theocratic government should reflect His righteousness in decidedly political terms. Israel was to be not only a kingdom of priests, but also a holy nation (Ex 19:6). The justice found in Israel was to be a “light to the peoples” (Is 51:4). They were to be marked out in terms of their relationship to the Davidic king, whose administration of justice was to be an approximation of the righteous justice of Yahweh Himself (Ps 72; Ps 89). Spirit-anointed prophets such as Amos and Jeremiah did not simply chastise individuals for their personal sins, but also indicted the nation for its failure to display social and political righteousness.

Alongside the debates over whether to equate Old Testament Israel with the New Testament church, popular evangelicalism has faced the question of whether to equate Old Testament Israel with the United States of America. Of course this is not a new phenomenon. Early Baptists such as the exiled Roger Williams and the horsewhipped Obadiah Holmes discovered the political implications of a Puritan church/state that applied Old Testament mandates of political righteousness to the “New Israel” of the American colonies.¹²

In recent years, an entire evangelical generation has grown accustomed to Old Testament texts on the Israelite theocracy being applied to the United States. Although such interpretations often come from evangelical pulpits (including some which are unyieldingly

¹² “Obsessed by Old Testament patterns and Reformed theology, they felt obliged to establish a kind of theocracy,” writes Baptist historian H. Leon McBeth of the colonial New England Puritans. *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 255).

dispensationalist), they are also heard from the bully pulpits of the national civil religion. Jimmy Carter, for instance, intended to cite II Chronicles 7:14 (“If My people, which are called by My name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”) in his inaugural address until “after some second thoughts about how those who did not share my beliefs might misunderstand and react to the words ‘wicked’ and ‘sin,’ I chose Micah 6:8.”¹³ Similarly, Ronald Reagan famously referred to the United States of America as a “shining city on a hill”. In 1992, Bill Clinton enraged some conservative evangelicals by dubbing his political program “the New Covenant.” Church/state scholar Stephen Carter points to Israel’s handling of the David and Bathsheba scandal to argue that the United States Congress should not have impeached Clinton following his sex and perjury scandal.¹⁴ Even more recently, some commentators have compared the current national confusion and litigation over the outcome of the 2000 presidential election to the period when Israel was ruled by the judges and “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25).

Taking seriously the biblical narrative, the evangelical theological consensus has little difficulty in opposing the appropriation of Old Testament Israel as a model for the American civil religion. Articulating theologically how the political realities of Old Testament Israel are to be understood and applied, however, may prove more difficult.

Reformed evangelicals have faced this most recently in the challenge of theonomic Reconstructionism. Theonomists and Reconstructionists have rightly noted that the Old

¹³ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam, 1982), 19.

¹⁴ Stephen Carter, *God’s Name in Vain: The Wrongs and Rights of Religion in Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 28-29.

Testament does not present the purposes of God as wholly spiritual and otherworldly. The Old Testament people of God represent the righteousness of God not only spiritually and communally, but also politically and structurally. The debate over theonomy has been healthy for Reformed theology, as covenantal theologians have been forced to investigate some of the implications of their understanding of the church as the “new Israel.”

Reformed theologians have mounted a vigorous response to the Reconstructionists, arguing that they do not believe Old Testament Israel is without contemporary sociopolitical application. They suggest that the political structures of Israel serve as a model of what the Westminster Confession calls “general equity.” Reformed theologians such as John Muether have suggested that the “theonomic attraction” is more informed by the lure of geo-political utopianism than by the mandate of Scripture.¹⁵ Muether further asserts that, when it comes to the political application of Old Testament texts regarding the political structuring of Israel, theonomists and Reconstructionists share a common hermeneutic with leftist social activist Ronald Sider, because both focus simplistically on the Old Testament as a politico-economic textbook¹⁶ Muether also finds a “low view of the church” in movements that focus on finding “biblical blueprints” for economic policy and national defense without giving nearly so much attention to the “biblical blueprints” for the church.¹⁷ Reformed theologian Meredith Kline

¹⁵ John R. Muether, “The Theonomic Attraction” in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, ed. William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 245-59.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 254-55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 255.

charges theonomy with taking a low view of Israel by seeing its theocratic government as simply that which is demanded of all nations.¹⁸

More significantly, however, has been the move within Reformed theology to explore more fully the relationship of both Israel and the church to the Kingdom of God, along with the implications of this for current political activity. Edmund Clowney sets forth this concept in his important essay, “The Politics of the Kingdom.”¹⁹ Seeing the church as a “new Israel,” Clowney argues that the church witnesses to the watching world by displaying Kingdom righteousness in its own internal “political” structures. For Clowney, the “political” relationships within the church are not coercive, but are focused on the discipline of the local congregation. Clowney points to I Cor 5:12-13 to prove that the church is not called to judge the nations, but must judge those who are within the Body, often dealing spiritually with matters of temporal (or “political”) concern. “For example, a church could require a Christian storekeeper to refund purchases that had been gained by misleading advertising, but if the member refused, the church’s final earthly sanction would be excommunication, not economic boycott,” Clowney explains.²⁰

Development on this point within dispensationalism may prove even more significant for the construction of an evangelical public theology. With the onset of progressive dispensationalism, the seismic theological changes within dispensationalism cannot be

¹⁸ Meredith Kline, “Comments on an Old-New Error,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 41 (1978): 177.

¹⁹ Edmund P. Clowney, “The Politics of the Kingdom,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 41 (1979): 291-310.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 303.

overestimated.²¹ Progressives have rejected the rigid polarization between Israel and the church, as maintained by previous generations of dispensationalists. Progressives contend that the church and Israel compose one people of God, participate in one unified plan of salvation, and share in the eschatological blessings of one new covenant.

Progressive dispensationalism marks out a place for Old Testament Israel in the sociopolitical activity of the church by claiming for the church the most prominent political structure of the theocracy: the rule of the Davidic monarch in the person of the ascended Lord Jesus Christ. As explained by progressives such as New Testament scholar Darrell Bock, Jesus' current messianic activity initiated at His coming is not coercive, national, or geo-political. By the sending of the Spirit, by the defeat of the demonic powers, and by forgiving the sins of His people, Jesus asserts His regal authority as the heir of the Davidic covenant.²² Progressives are quick to note that Jesus' invisible present rule from heaven is over His new community, those who voluntarily submit themselves to the sovereignty of Jesus through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit.

Thus, even though the church is ruled by the Davidic king promised to Old Testament Israel (in II Samuel 7 and repeated throughout the Hebrew canon), the political witness of the church cannot simply pick up where Israel left off. The church, as a multinational Spirit-body, has been forbidden the power of the sword by the Son of David Himself (John 18:11). The

²¹ For an overview of the debate between traditionalist and progressive dispensationalists, see Herbert W. Bateman IV, ed. *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999).

²² Darrell L. Bock, "The Reign of the Lord Christ," in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 37-67. See also Bock's treatment of this issue in "Current Messianic Activity and OT Davidic Promise: Dispensationalism, Hermeneutics, and NT Fulfillment," *Trinity Journal* 15 (1994): 85-102, and "The Son of David and the Saints' Task: The Hermeneutics of Initial Fulfillment," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (1993): 440-57.

church cannot therefore apply the slaughter of the Canaanites to a campaign to bomb abortion clinics. Instead, the sovereignty of the Davidic king in this present age is seen through the persuasive power of the preached word, as repentant abortionists, for example, are regenerated and thus “rescued from the domain of darkness” (Col 1:13).

Closely linked to this is the developing progressive dispensational emphasis on the church as the initial manifestation of the coming Kingdom. Like Clowney, an emerging cadre of dispensationalist scholars is suggesting that the church is a Kingdom community, providing a “sneak preview” to the rest of the world of the way in which the coming Kingdom will be governed. The church, argue progressives such as Bock and Craig Blaising, is not equal to the Kingdom, but is to be a “workshop of kingdom righteousness” in which the nature of the coming kingdom is revealed through its internal ministry, by its external pronouncements, and even by its very makeup as a multicultural Spirit-created entity. As such, the church maintains a distinctively political witness to the powers-that-be without seeking to take over the structures of society.

Old Testament Israel is crucially important in the developing dispensational understanding of the church as Kingdom community. While the Old Testament witness regarding the Israelite theocracy is an impetus for Reconstructionists to seek to bring the structures of society under the sway of the church, progressive dispensationalists discover the exact opposite lesson in the text. Pointing to the social condemnations of the prophets, Bock argues that Old Testament Israel is a warning against believing “the raw exercise of political power will improve society.” He notes that “Israel had the best law heaven could provide, and

yet at points her society was also thoroughly corrupt.”²³ All attempts at Christian political engagement must look to Old Testament Israel, Bock counsels, in order to remember “that without a transformation of the heart a new law risks being a dead letter.”²⁴

The developments within both of these theological traditions have taken seriously the place of ancient Israel in constructing an evangelical public theology. On the one hand, they reject the Marcionite temptation to dismiss the value of Old Testament Israel for constructing a theology of evangelical engagement. On the other hand, neither do they uncritically claim the example of the Hebrew nation as a model for establishing a latter-day theocracy.

Evangelical public theology can benefit from the ways in which covenantal and dispensational theologians are examining the political role of Old Testament Israel in the flow of redemptive history. A concept of “general equity” as handed down by the Westminster tradition is helpful here. Evangelicals do not have to become theonomists to appreciate the ways in which the Israelite civil law reflects the sociopolitical priorities of their God. For example, as Old Testament theologian Paul R. House has noted, only in the Old Testament civil code do we find clearly in special revelation the horror with which God views the sexual abuse of children.²⁵ Likewise, while the laws Yahweh gives to the theocracy on the treatment of aliens and strangers should not necessarily become a blueprint for United States immigration policy, they should give evangelical citizens and policymakers pause when they are tempted to treat the issue with xenophobia and raw nationalistic jingoism. After all, passages such as Deuteronomy 10:17-19

²³ Darrell L. Bock, “Why I Am a dispensationalist with a Small ‘d,’” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41 (1998): 394.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 393.

²⁵ Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 143.

root Israel's mandate to show compassion to the alien, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow in the compassionate nature of God Himself and in His acts in redemptive history.

While the enactment of the death penalty in alignment with the Israelite civil code would be an unfortunate misapplication of the biblical text, the death penalty statutes do give evangelicals a clear picture of the seriousness with which God takes such crimes as the taking of innocent human life. This, along with the Old Testament witness to God's advocacy for the vulnerable and the fatherless, should by itself serve as an impetus for evangelicals to resist the "culture of death" advertised in the public relations campaigns of Planned Parenthood and the Hemlock Society. In short, Old Testament Israel may prove to be most valuable to an evangelical public theology not by providing easy answers to every sociopolitical question, but instead by helping to define biblically for evangelicals what justice looks like. This is no small contribution, given the current chaos among secular political philosophers, who have defined justice as everything from "enlightened self interest" to the subjugation of the individual to the interest of the state.

As both covenantal and dispensational theologians embrace some understanding of an initial fulfillment of the Davidic covenant, the *polis* of Old Testament Israel may likewise serve to inform the church of the kind of corporate righteousness it is to mirror before the watching world. If the church is ruled by the resurrected and exalted Messiah, members of the church have the obligation to examine the features of their political relationships in light of the characteristics of their messianic king, revealed clearly in the Old Testament covenant promises. Because the Davidic king rules with justice and wisdom (Ps 72:1-2; Jer 23:5), believers are given an authoritative standard by which they may condemn global tyranny. Believers cannot have the option of inaction against judicial abuses (either within the context of church discipline or in the

case of a church member serving within the legal system) since they are presently ruled by One the Scriptures describe as judging His subjects with fairness and equity (Is 11:3-4).

As an evangelical consensus on the church as Kingdom community seems to be emerging, Old Testament Israel may serve as a model of Kingdom righteousness in terms of the internal social and political relationships of the church. Whatever differences may exist among evangelicals on the relationship between Israel and the church, New Testament texts do offer the (usually poor) example of Old Testament Israel in ordering the internal life of the new covenant *ekklesia*. In I Corinthians 5:9-13, for example, the apostle Paul cites the political structuring of Old Testament Israel from Deuteronomy in his admonition for the church to maintain internal purity. While the apostle uses political language to command church discipline, he simultaneously restricts the church's power over the political structures (I Cor 5:12: "For what have I to do with judging outsiders?). This is consistent with the teaching of Jesus, who used standard of justice from the law code of Old Testament Israel when speaking of principles for congregational disciplinary practices (Matt 18:16).

Some evangelicals, such as progressive dispensationalist Robert Saucy, refuse to speak of "political" righteousness within the church because they contend that this seems to equate the church with the Kingdom of God.²⁶ Such concerns are valid, especially if the word "political" is taken to mean the coercive power of the nation-state, as in the case of the Israelite theocracy. This does not necessarily have to be the case, however. All evangelicals believe in some form of church *polity*, the church is governed either by the congregation or through

²⁶ Saucy also differs with progressive dispensationalists such as Blaising and Bock on the inaugurated Davidic reign of Christ and the nature of the church as an initial manifestation of the Kingdom. See Saucy's *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

appointed or elected leaders carrying out what they consider to be the biblical imperatives for the ordering of church life. As such, it may be said that the church does indeed engage in “political” relationships by virtue of its existence as a community. In the context of church discipline, the apostle Paul does not simply mention individual vices. Instead he points to matters with profound social and relational implications (swindling, adultery, et al) as demanding the action of the community.

The church does not claim from Old Testament Israel the right to stone child molesters to death. The Body does, however, claim a mandate from Old Testament Israel that the people of God are to reflect His righteousness in their relationships. Therefore, the congregation is exercising a concern for social (and even political) justice when they expel the unrepentant child molester from the membership of the church. This is not a novel concept. Just as the theocratic code was essential in distinguishing Israel from the idolatrous nations of the world, church discipline was seen in centuries past (at least by those in the Free Church tradition) as essential in distinguishing the church from the world. Baptist historian Gregory A. Wills’ examination of nineteenth century Baptist congregational discipline notes that such activity did not mean the exercise of coercive force. “Baptists championed the rights of conscience and private judgment in the interpretation of Scripture, but people had these rights, they believed, as citizens of the state, not as members of the churches,” he argues.²⁷

As the church deals internally with matters of justice, it witnesses to the political powers-that-be the kind of Kingdom righteousness the gospel demands. The church with a slumlord as chairman of deacons has no right to engage the city council regarding economic justice for the

²⁷ Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 87.

poor (James 5:4). The congregation that refuses to offer assistance to the wife abandoned by her adulterous husband has no right to demand that the President address the decline of family values. In this, the church does not necessarily identify itself as the Kingdom of God, but it does identify itself as a witness to the eschatological Kingdom. An evangelical public theology can make a place for Old Testament Israel without surrendering either to theonomy or to a spiritualizing hermeneutic. The canonical witness to Old Testament Israel therefore can inform evangelical public theology not only by reminding evangelicals that the call for sociopolitical righteousness is biblical, but also by reminding the church that such righteousness begins in the internal structures and relationships of the people of God.

The Politics of Israel Present: Toward a Theology of Prophetic Fulfillment

Conservative Christianity has been linked to the question of the modern state of Israel since well before its establishment in 1948. As historian Martin Marty notes, Protestant liberals during and after World War II (such as the editorial board of *The Christian Century*) received talk of Zionism with ambivalence, if not outright hostility. He notes, however, “Protestant fundamentalists, who backed Zionism, gave a theological interpretation of events that was friendly to Israel but that no Jew could accept.”²⁸

Thus began a longstanding alliance between conservative American Christianity, heavily influenced by dispensationalist prophecy conferences, and the state of Israel. As Timothy Weber has argued, the American support for an Israeli state has been fueled by the activism of dispensationalists such as William Blackstone as early as the 1880s.²⁹ This prophecy-laden

²⁸ Martin Marty, *Modern American Religion*, Vol. 3, *Under God, Indivisible* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 63-64.

²⁹ Timothy P. Weber, “How Evangelicals Became Israel’s Best Friend,” *Christianity Today*, 39-49.

support for Israel was not limited to fundamentalists, but included key figures in the founding generation of the postwar evangelical coalition as well.

Harold J. Ockenga, for example, proclaimed at a Jerusalem prophecy conference organized by Carl F. H. Henry, that the “restoration” of national Israel was the fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy of the budding of the fig tree (Luke 21:29-34). Thus, the establishment of the Israeli state paved the way for the return of Christ. “If the fig tree represents Israel, as we believe it does, then the return of Israel to Palestine, in fulfillment of many passages of Scripture, is the putting forth of shoots by the fig tree,” he said.³⁰ Ockenga, hardly an exemplar of reckless apocalyptic speculation, represented in this viewpoint a broad number of evangelicals nationwide.

Evangelical political support for Israel found further theological anchoring in the flurry of end-times interest in the 1970s and 1980s, led by popular writer Hal Lindsey. Lindsey applied Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 24 that “this generation will not pass away until all these things take place” to mean that the “Countdown to Armageddon” began with the establishment of Israel in 1948. “A generation in the Bible is something like forty years,” he argued. “If this is a correct deduction, then within forty years or so of 1948, all these things could take place. Many scholars who have studied prophecy all their lives believe that this is so.”³¹ The doctrinal roots of Lindsey’s support of the Israeli state led him to accuse covenant theology of a dangerous anti-Semitism replete with terrifying geo-political consequences.³²

³⁰ Harold J. Ockenga, “Fulfilled and Unfulfilled Prophecy,” in *Prophecy in the Making: The Jerusalem Conference on Biblical Prophecy*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1971), 308.

³¹ Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 53-54.

³² Hal Lindsey, *The Road to Holocaust* (New York: Bantam, 1989). It should be noted that this polemical volume was published one year after the biblical “generation” from the founding of Israel had passed.

Support for Israel became a key component of the political agenda of the religious right. Though Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority attempted to make clear that their movement rested on "no common theological premise," the organization acknowledged that many Moral Majority members supported the Jewish state "because of their theological convictions."³³ Under siege from opponents ranging from the Palestinian Liberation Organization to the United Nations, the Israeli government was happily accepted evangelical support regardless of its theological foundation, especially in light of the influence the religious right had on American political leaders such as Ronald Reagan. The Israeli government bought tourism advertisements in *Christianity Today* and other evangelical publications while Israeli Prime Ministers such as Benjamin Netanyahu met with evangelical leaders such as Falwell and Robertson.

American Jewish leaders have seemed ambivalent to evangelical support for Israel. Some, such as the signatories of the recent *Dabru Emet* statement on Jewish-Christian relations, hail evangelicals for recognizing that the Palestinian land is part of an eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people. "Many Christians support the State of Israel for reasons far more profound than mere politics," they note. "As Jews, we applaud this support."³⁴ Other American Jews have charged pro-Israel evangelical political leaders with an ironic anti-Semitism, pointing to, among other items, Jerry Falwell's suggestion that the antichrist would be Jewish, Pat Robertson's cryptic writings about a conspiratorial cabal of international bankers, and former

Reconstructionists Steve Schlissel and David Brown responded to Lindsey with a counter-polemic, *Hal Lindsey and the Restoration of the Jews* (Edmonton: Still Water Revival Books, 1990).

³³ Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 37-38.

³⁴ "Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity (paid advertisement), *New York Times*, 10 September 2000, 23.

Southern Baptist Convention president Bailey Smith's (out of context) declaration that "God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew."

Critics of Christian political activism, such as Karen Armstrong, warn that dispensational support for Israel masks "genocidal tendencies," which are equally informed by the dispensational prophecy charts. "At the same time as Protestant fundamentalists celebrated the birth of the new Israel, they were cultivating fantasies of a final genocide at the end of time," she notes. "The Jewish state had come into existence purely to further a Christian fulfillment."³⁵ Others object that prophetic support for Israel is counterproductive because it fuels the already apocalyptic religious tensions in the Middle East.³⁶

Israel's American critics on both the left and the right of the political spectrum have been frustrated by what they consider to be the political *carte blanche* given by evangelicals to the Israeli state. Former United States Congressman Paul Findley (R-Ill.), for example, in a critique of the powerful American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), blames the prophetic beliefs of evangelicals for helping to make support for Israel the untouchable third rail of American foreign policy.³⁷ As conservative commentator Patrick J. Buchanan attacked the Israeli "amen corner" in the United States for "beating the drum" for war in the Persian Gulf in 1990, he must have realized that much of that "amen corner" was composed of conservative

³⁵ Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 218.

³⁶ Daniel Wojcik, for example, gives the rather extreme example of premillennialist support for renegade Israeli groups bent on destroying the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem in order that their prophetic expectations regarding the Jewish Temple might be expedited. See Wojcik's *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 146.

³⁷ Paul Findley, *They Dare to Speak Out: People and Institutions Confront Israel's Lobby* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1985), 238-64.

evangelicals whose support he would court in the next three primary campaigns for the Republican presidential nomination.

Although a number of politically engaged Reformed evangelicals have given full support to the Israeli state, it is rather obvious that contemporary evangelical support for Israel draws its theological grounding from the dispensational/Bible conference tradition, not from the Reformed/Princeton tradition. From the beginning of the contemporary evangelical movement, covenant theologians have maintained that the church, not any current geo-political entity, is the “new Israel,” the inheritor of all Israel’s covenant promises. At the 1971 Jerusalem Conference on Biblical Prophecy, for example, Reformed theologian Herman Ridderbos expressed “embarrassment” with the conference since the evangelicals gathered there were focused on Israel’s place in prophecy, rather than on an evangelistic endeavor to convert the Jews to Christ.³⁸

While evangelical dispensational and covenant theologians may have moved closer to each other on other points of doctrine, the movement on the question of modern Israel’s relationship to biblical prophecy has been decidedly one-sided, with Reformed theologians unmoved. “The modern Jewish state is not a part of the messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ,” contends Reformed theologian O. Palmer Robertson. “Although it may be affirmed that this particular civil government came into being under the sovereignty of the God of the Bible, it

³⁸ Herman Ridderbos, “The Future of Israel (View I),” *Prophecy in the Making: The Jerusalem Conference on Biblical Prophecy*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1971), 321-22. Ridderbos’ replacement theology was placed alongside John Walvoord’s dispensationalist defense of a future for national Israel.

would be a denial of Jesus' affirmation that his kingdom is 'not of this world order (John 18:36) to assert that this government is a part of his messianic kingdom.'³⁹

Traditional dispensationalists, of course, would counter Robertson by noting that they have never claimed that the modern Jewish state is "part of the messianic kingdom," only that it is an ingathering of the Jews in preparation for the arrival of the messianic kingdom.

Nonetheless, the ongoing doctrinal development within dispensationalism has transformed the terms of the debate on this issue. Timothy Weber sees in the new generation of dispensationalists a "toned down" rhetoric, which minimizes the "excesses and sensationalism of its predecessors" since the progressive dispensationalists are "less inclined to engage in map drawing and categorical predictions."⁴⁰

Weber's assessment is borne out in the writings of the progressives themselves. They have refused to grant enthusiastic support to the modern Israeli state, at least not on the basis of biblical prophecy. Craig Blaising, for example, marvels that contemporary dispensationalists could overlook Israeli human rights abuses when the Old Testament prophets explicitly condemned similar injustices.⁴¹ Surely if Yahweh were willing to indict Old Testament Israel (which everyone can agree represented the elect nation of God) for mistreating the aliens among them, then American evangelicals cannot turn a blind eye when a thoroughly secularized nation of Israel implements similar policies toward Palestinian Christians and Muslims.

As evangelicals attempt to engage theologically with sociopolitical concerns, they must be careful not to import uncritically the questionable conclusions of popular apocalyptic

³⁹ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2000), 194.

⁴⁰ Weber, "How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend," 49.

speculation. This does not mean that evangelicalism erred by listening to its dispensational tradition. In fact, it may be argued that equating the modern Jewish state with prophetic fulfillment was an ironic contradiction of dispensationalism. After all, dispensationalists have maintained that Israel is not only an ethnic category, but also a religio-political designation inextricably related to the Davidic monarchy. One cannot, therefore, christen a secular state as recipients of the Abrahamic covenant (as some popular dispensational teachers have been prone to do) when that state does not recognize the promised Seed of Abraham, through whom all nations are to be blessed (Gal 3:16).

Similarly, evangelical confusion about the modern state of Israel might have been avoided if evangelicals had heeded dispensational teaching that the eschaton is sudden and imminent. In their haste to equate the formation of postwar Israel with the “budding of the fig tree,” some dispensationalists and other evangelicals acted remarkably similar to the postmillennialists of generations past. Dispensationalists would be the first among evangelicals to insist that prophetic fulfillment can only be interpreted by prophetic authority. A quick perusal of cessationist articles of faith such as those adopted by Dallas Theological Seminary might have chastened evangelicals that no continuing extrabiblical revelation exists to confirm the contemporary state of Israel as a fulfillment of prophecy.

Evangelical public theology would be in error, however, if it sought to remedy past errors by abandoning support for Israel. American evangelicals should not expect their government to act as the Amorites and Canaanites with “hearts melted” at the thought of Israel’s national presence (Josh 5:1-2). But neither should they overreact by canonizing the Palestinians as God’s “new Israelites” in bondage to a rather ironically cast Pharaoh.

⁴¹ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 296-97.

Next to the standards of peace and justice defined by the activity of the messianic King, the tyrannies-in-waiting of Palestinian terrorists such as Yassar Arafat should be repugnant to Christians. As such, current developments in evangelical theology will probably not alter evangelical support for Israel. But it will ground such support in a quest for geo-political stability and peace in the Middle East, not in the “Thus saith the Lord” of the prophecy charts.

The Politics of Israel Future: Toward a Theology of Eschatological Expectation

Of course, a refusal to equate modern Israel with the chosen nation of God does not resolve the perennial debate over a possible future for the nation of Israel. Because of the nature of evangelicalism as a parachurch coalition rather than as a confessional ecclesiastical structure, there is an inborn tendency to maximize areas of doctrinal agreement while minimizing areas of controversy such as the mode of baptism, the extent of the atonement, and the future of Israel (or lack thereof). Nonetheless, a consideration of the sociopolitical implications of evangelical theology will be poorer for ignoring the biblical and theological issues wrapped up in this topic.

As the influence of Reformed theology has increased at the popular level of contemporary evangelicalism, so has the tendency to dismiss a future for Israel as a long-discredited chestnut from the notes of the Scofield Reference Bible. “We believe the answer to ‘What about the Jews?’ is, ‘Here we are,’” writes Reformed apologist R. C. Sproul Jr. “We deny that the church is God’s ‘plan B.’”⁴² In a more scholarly treatment of the issue, O. Palmer Robertson asserts, “The future messianic kingdom will embrace equally the whole of the newly created cosmos, and will not experience a special manifestation of any sort in the region of the ‘promised land.’”⁴³

⁴² R. C. Sproul Jr. “Coram Deo,” *Tabletalk*, December 1998, 2.

⁴³ Robertson, *The Israel of God*, 195.

This is not to say that there has been no doctrinal development on this issue within contemporary Reformed theology. As covenant theologian Vern Poythress contends, the emphasis on progressive revelation and biblical theology in the work of Reformed theologians such as Geerhardus Vos, Herman Ridderbos, and Richard Gaffin have sought to recognize the uniqueness of the biblical covenants without sacrificing the unity of the covenant of grace. Poythress argues that this greatly reduces disagreements between covenantalists and dispensationalists on the unity and diversity of the covenants.⁴⁴

Reformed theologians such as Anthony Hoekema have further developed this “progressive covenantalism” by taking seriously the “realistic” nature of the Kingdom promises of the Old Testament, although Hoekema finds fulfillment of these promises in the New Earth rather than in a restored Israelite nation.⁴⁵ Poythress argues that disagreement between dispensationalists and covenantalists on the question of a future for Israel are largely overstated, since the newer covenant theologians also embrace an earthly, this-worldly eschatological Kingdom in which redeemed Israel (and the redeemed of all ages) will rule with Christ.⁴⁶

For dispensational evangelicals, however, the future of Israel as a nation-state is indisputable from them not only because the nature of the Old Testament promises, but on the basis of New Testament passages such as Romans 11, which seem to reconfirm the national and political character of these promises. As such, progressive dispensationalists do not hesitate in joining with more traditional dispensationalists in affirming an earthly millennial reign of Christ, centered on a reconstituted national Israel upon whom the covenant God will lavish the geo-

⁴⁴ Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, Second Edition (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), 40.

⁴⁵ Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 274-87.

political promises He pledged to them in the Old Testament. The newer progressive dispensationalists further maintain that such a future for political Israel is vitally important to the construction of a Christian political philosophy. For progressive dispensationalists, the restoration of Israel as a political body is the crucial “not yet” pole of inaugurated eschatology. On the one hand, the very existence of a political rule of Christ over Israel repels any notion that the gospel is unconcerned with politics or that redemption is concerned simply with private “spiritual” matters.⁴⁷ To the contrary, in the dispensational prophetic hope, history is moving toward a stunningly political climax.

The alien gatherings of the church are not “political, if by “political” one means that they act as a nation-state vying for power with the other kingdoms of this world. The church is ruled, however, by the same Davidic king who will one day exercise indisputable political sovereignty from the locus of a reconstituted Israel. This means the church cannot be concerned simply with apolitical “spiritual” matters. But it also means that the coercive power to enforce solutions to political problems does not belong to this present age. While postmillennialists and historic premillennialists also hold to a “not yet” vision of Christ ruling the nations with a “rod of iron,” dispensational premillennialists can claim continuity with the specific politico-redemptive purposes initiated with Israel past. Thus, for progressive dispensationalists, the bookends of an imperfectly ruled Israelite theocracy and a perfectly ruled Israelite Christocracy can further provide a standard of political righteousness by which to judge current claims to political justice.

⁴⁶ Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 132-33.

⁴⁷ Progressive Craig Blaising, for example, has contrasted the political nature of millennial hope with the mystical “spiritual visionary hope” of Augustinian amillennialism, which reduces Christian expectation to inward spiritual blessing rather than historical political resolution. Craig A. Blaising, “Premillennialism” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 162-63.

While progressive dispensationalists have shown that a restored eschatological Israel *can* focus attention to the geo-political nature of Kingdom promise, they have not demonstrated that such attention *must* include a dispensational restoration of the Israelite theocracy. Indeed, is not *any* global Christocracy by definition geo-political? Further investigation at this point is warranted, as both dispensationalists and covenantalists explore precisely how the NT Scriptures point to the fulfillment of the hope of Israel in the identity and mission of Messiah Jesus.

An evangelical theology that considers seriously the future for Israel cannot help but address apologetically the socio-political objections to Christianity registered by Jewish unbelievers worldwide. The Jewish signatories of the *Dabru Emet* statement acknowledge that both Jews and Christians believe “God will ultimately redeem Israel and the whole world.”⁴⁸ Yet many Jews point to unfulfilled Old Testament prophecies of a politically peaceful messianic kingdom as confirmation that the Christian embrace of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah is ill informed, particularly in light of the ongoing turmoil in Palestine. Although rejecting a dispensational understanding of a future for Israel, Carl Henry confronts these Jewish objections both by pointing to a future gathering of the Jewish people to their Messiah and to the “already/not yet” nature of messianic fulfillment.⁴⁹

Whether covenantal or dispensational, however, evangelical theology must set forth the eschatological place of Israel in terms of union with Christ. Both dispensationalist and Reformed streams of evangelical theology can agree with Henry’s assertion that nowhere in Scripture does Jesus “contemplate a future restoration of Israel that is independent of his own

⁴⁸ “Dabru Emet,” 23.

⁴⁹ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, Vol. 3, *God Who Speaks and Shows- Fifteen Theses, Part Two* (Reprint, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 118-46.

messianic role.”⁵⁰ The covenant theologian might point the politically troubled Jewish unbeliever to the ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant in the cosmic restoration of the New Earth. The dispensational theologian might point him to the reconstitution of the Davidic monarchy under the rule of Messiah Jesus. Nonetheless, neither can accept a dual-covenant understanding of Jewish salvation. If Israel has a national future, its beneficiaries will be those who seek refuge in the atoning work of the Son of David.⁵¹

Conclusion

A theological understanding of Israel is pivotal as evangelicals seek to construct a theology of social and political engagement. The evangelical witness in the public square will be greatly impacted by how evangelicals understand theologically the relationship of Old Testament Israel to the church, the relationship of the church to modern Israel, and the relationship of all three to the end of history. Even as evangelicals of competing theological traditions have achieved remarkable consensus on various theological issues, significant divisions remain on issues concerning the state of Israel. As evangelicals debate and seek consensus on this, they may also gain a clearer and more biblically coherent understanding of ecclesiology, soteriology, and eschatology.

The issues raised in seeking a theological understanding of Israel have clear implications for evangelical politics. After all, the existence of Israel as a political entity- whether in the biblical past, the possible present, or the debatable future- means that the people

⁵⁰ Ibid., 120.

⁵¹ On this, progressive dispensationalists disagree further with their traditionalist interlocutors. Contra previous understandings of the restoration of Israel, progressives argue that a Jew who becomes a Christian in the

of God are to concern themselves not only with the revival tent, but with the public square as well. Such considerations are a helpful start as future generations of evangelicals seek to answer the kinds of questions uneasy consciences ask.

present dispensation does not lose his inheritance in the eschatologically restored Israel. See Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 50-51.