

**Why Evangelicals Support Israel: Three Religious Views**  
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Since the late 1970s, American evangelicals have been Israel's strongest supporters. Usually identified with the New Christian Right, they established numerous pro-Israel organizations, held large rallies in Washington, D.C. and elsewhere, aggressively lobbied Congress and the White House, and eagerly supported like-minded candidates. Evangelicals also raised money to help Jews immigrate to Israel or settle on the West Bank, promoted tours to Israel, and sold millions of Bible prophecy books about Israel's role in the Last Days leading up to the Second Coming of Christ.

All this is well known; but it is hardly the whole story. Though they overwhelmingly support Israel, evangelicals espouse different views of Israel and its place in God's purposes. I would like to discuss three such views and how they shape evangelical actions concerning the Jewish state.

**Defining Evangelicals**

But first we must define "evangelical." The word refers to a broad coalition of more-or-less conservative Protestants who believe strongly in the inspiration and authority of the Bible, the need for everyone to accept Jesus Christ as Savior, and an activist approach to evangelism, missions, and some social reform.

There are about 80 million evangelicals in America. In Pew's recent "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey," 26.3% of the 35,000 polled were evangelicals, 23.9% were Roman Catholics, 18.1% were mainline Protestants, and 6.7% belonged to historically Black churches.<sup>1</sup> As the market-share of evangelicals has increased, so has their influence in American education, arts, media, business, and politics. In his recent book *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite*, sociologist D. Michael Lindsay interviewed hundreds of evangelical leaders who eagerly interact with people unlike themselves to find common ground for the common good.<sup>2</sup>

Though many people see evangelicals as monolithic and predictable, they are denominationally, ethnically, and politically diverse. Lindsay and others point out that recently their political and social concerns (especially among younger evangelicals) have expanded beyond the New Christian Right's and include poverty, racism, climate change, religious freedom, and the AIDS crisis. Consequently, evangelicals are getting harder to categorize and are full of surprises. While pollsters and historians regularly place fundamentalists on the evangelical extreme right wing, it is important to remember that while all fundamentalists are evangelicals, not all evangelicals are fundamentalists.

**Evangelical Views of Israel**

Evangelicals are still politically best known for their strong support for Israel. Yet even here, evangelical attitudes vary, according to their biblical and theological views of the place of Christians and Jews in God's on-going redemptive program. Here are the three views:

**1. Replacement Theology.** According to this doctrine, which is more formally called “supersessionism” or Covenant Theology, the church is the New Israel. Most Christians since the second and third centuries of the Common Era have believed that when Jews rejected Messiah Jesus, God transferred all their Chosen People rights and privileges to the church. Karl Barth, a leading Swiss Protestant theologian from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, summarized this doctrine:

The first Israel, constituted on the basis of physical descent from Abraham, has fulfilled its mission now that the Saviour of the world has sprung from it and its Messiah has appeared. Its members can only accept this fact with gratitude, and in confirmation of their own deepest election and calling attach themselves to the people of this Saviour, their own King, whose members the Gentiles are now called to be as well. Its mission as a natural community has now run its course and cannot be continued or repeated.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, Jews may still be saved, but only as they individually trust in Jesus as the Messiah and become part of the New Israel by faith.

Since the Holocaust, many Christians have criticized replacement theology because some Christians have used it to justify anti-Semitism or to target Jews for evangelism. In an age of growing inter-religious sensibilities, replacement theology can be a huge stumbling block. Consequently, some critics—mainly mainline Protestants—have adopted the concept of dual-covenants: God made a new covenant with the church without canceling the old covenant with the children of Abraham. By implication, Jesus Christ is the Savior of the Gentiles, but not the Messiah of the Jews; and because Jews retain their covenant relationship with God, Christians no longer need to evangelize them. Advocates say that the notion of dual-covenants fosters mutual appreciation and respectful dialogue.<sup>4</sup>

While American evangelicals also repudiate anti-Semitic uses of replacement theology, they overwhelmingly reject the dual-covenant view, insisting that if Jesus is not the Messiah of the Jews, he cannot be the savior of the Gentiles. They also continue to affirm the biblical mandate to take the gospel to *everyone*—to Jews as well as Gentiles.<sup>5</sup>

Advocates of replacement theology do not speculate about Israel’s role in the Last Days, defend Israel’s biblical right to the land, or organize to promote political positions concerning the Middle East. Since they tend to apply Bible prophecy to the church, they believe there is no biblical or theological significance to the continuation of the Jewish people after Christ or the restoration of a Jewish state. *Replacement theology is mostly found among evangelicals in the Calvinist tradition. Exact numbers are impossible to determine: but probably no more than 20% of evangelicals hold this view.*<sup>6</sup>

**2. Dispensationalism.** Fiercely opposed to replacement theology, it is an understanding of Bible prophecy that places the modern state of Israel in the center of events leading to the Second Coming of Christ. Dispensationalism is one version of premillennialism, the belief that the Second Coming of Christ will occur *before* the coming of the millennium—a thousand-year period of peace and righteousness.<sup>7</sup>

Dispensationalism originated with John Nelson Darby, a 19<sup>th</sup> century English Bible teacher who made a number of trips to the U.S. in the 1860s/70s. His teachings spread through the more conservative evangelical networks—Bible conferences, Bible institutes, and publications like the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909).

Darby divided history into eras or dispensations to keep track of God’s unfolding plan of redemption. He detected two distinct “peoples of God”—one “earthly” (Israel) and the other “heavenly” (the church). With Israel God established a number of covenants that stretched from Abraham’s call to the Messiah’s coming and beyond. But when Messiah Jesus arrived, Israel rejected him. Contrary to replacement theology, Darby taught that instead of then transferring all Israel’s covenant privileges to the church, God *temporarily* moved Israel into a kind of historical hiatus—what Darby called the “great parenthesis” of prophetic time—during which it suffered the consequences of rejecting the Messiah. In time, however, God will restart the prophetic clock and once again move Israel to history’s center stage. Because Darby believed that God deals with only one chosen people at a time, God must first “rapture” the church to heaven before Israel can realize its destiny.

What exactly does God have in store for Israel? Darby toggled together prophecies from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament to create a remarkably detailed scenario of the Last Days. Sometime after the restoration of Israel and the rapture of the church, the Jewish state will face annihilation by the “kings of the north” and “kings of the south,” believed by dispensationalists to be the Russians and their Arab allies. But before Israel is destroyed, God wipes out the invaders. To ensure its future security, Israel makes an alliance with a charismatic European leader who turns out to be the Antichrist in disguise. After a period of peace, the Antichrist suddenly enters the rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem, demands to be worshipped as God, and unleashes a reign of terror against all who oppose him. This is the Great Tribulation, a new holocaust that surpasses Hitler’s, during which most Jews are annihilated. Those who survive pray for Messiah’s coming.

Finally, the Messiah does come. As the forces of Antichrist and the “kings of the east” (the Chinese) line up for the Battle of Armageddon, Jesus Christ returns with his previously-raptured church and destroys them. The Jewish remnant hails Jesus as their true Messiah and puts him on King David’s throne in Jerusalem, where he reigns for a thousand years. With only a few adjustments, dispensationalists have been teaching this vision of the Last Days since the 1830s. For this scenario to succeed, Jews must return to the Holy Land and stay there. For dispensationalists, everything is riding on the Jews.<sup>8</sup>

Dispensationalists have penetrated popular culture with best sellers like Hal Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) and Tim LaHaye’s 13-volume *Left Behind* series (1996-2007) and a steady supply of prophetic teaching on cable TV. According to historian Paul Boyer, in apocalyptic times, even some secular people tune in the Bible teachers who say they know where history is going.<sup>9</sup>

Dispensationalism is largely responsible for the rise of evangelical pro-Israel political activity since the late 1970s. Given their hard-line prophetic and political views,

dispensationalists are often accused of supporting Israel “no matter what.” They reject George W. Bush’s “road map to peace” with its two-state solution; fiercely oppose Israel trading *any* land for peace; defend Israeli settlements on the West Bank; and repudiate all concessions to the Palestinians. According to one dispensationalist leader, such views constitute “God’s foreign policy.”<sup>10</sup> Some dispensationalists have even allied themselves with certain right wing elements in Israel, including those groups intent on rebuilding the Temple and establishing even more settlements on the West Bank.

Dispensationalists believe that only the Second Coming of Christ can resolve the conflict in the Middle East. Until then, the region will fester and boil with increasing violence and one failed peace process after another. Bible prophecy is the only “road map” that matters; and God’s plans are unchangeable. Therefore, Christians must support Israel, do nothing that runs counter to biblical prophecy, and rejoice that, thanks to the rapture, they will not experience the prophesied horrors themselves.

*Dispensationalists may get all the headlines, but they do not speak for all evangelicals. According to John C. Green of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, only 10% of evangelicals are dispensationalists, while another 20% qualify as “dispensationalists lite”--evangelicals who pick and choose, cafeteria-style, limited teachings from the dispensational system.<sup>11</sup> (This translates to 24 million people.)*

**3. The Evangelical Middle.** If 20% of evangelicals follow replacement theology and 30% accept dispensationalism in whole or in part, what about the other 50%? Despite the popular stereotype that they are obsessed with Bible prophecy, most evangelicals do not have a well developed view of the Last Days: they believe that Jesus is coming back and that the future is in God’s hands, but they are blissfully unclear about the details.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, such folks still overwhelmingly support Israel. Why?

The short answer is that they have a rather intuitive and instinctive understanding of the Bible. In 1948 evangelicals were deeply divided over the significance of the founding of a new Jewish state. Some saw it as the fulfillment of prophecy, while others denied that it had any biblical or theological importance at all. Still other evangelicals took another approach. As Bible-centered people, they grew up hearing stories and sermons of ancient Israel—the call of Abraham, slavery in Egypt, the Exodus, the Conquest of Canaan, the great kings David and Solomon, the division of the tribes, their conquest and exile, and the eventual return to the land. They studied the maps in the back of their Bibles and on their Sunday school walls. They knew that Jesus was a son of the covenant and that Israel was where all the great works of redemption took place. In deeply personal ways, then, evangelicals viewed the story of Israel as vitally related to their own. Without much reflection, most evangelicals made a connection between the new state of Israel and the Israel of the Bible. Instinctively they believed that the new Jewish state was a continuation and confirmation of the biblical narrative. How could such an unlikely and miraculous event occur without God’s blessing and involvement?

Such evangelicals do not appeal to an elaborate prophetic scenario, only a couple of biblical passages: Genesis 12 and Romans 9-11. In Genesis, God made Abraham a

promise: “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” Likewise, in Romans the Apostle Paul stated that Israel’s current “blindness” is only temporary and that in the end “all Israel will be saved.” Since even Paul called God’s plan for Israel after Christ’s coming a “great mystery,” it is unlikely that anyone else can fully comprehend it either. At present, it is enough to know that God has such a plan and that modern Israel *just might be part* of it. God’s promise to Abraham is enough to make Bible-believers pro-Israel.

In recent years, one of the most aggressive pro-Israel evangelical groups has taken this approach. Though its leader John Hagee has written a number of dispensationalist books, he insists that his Christians United for Israel is based on God’s promise to Abraham, not any prophetic view of the Last Days, which is good strategy, since there are many more evangelicals who believe in the promise than the detailed prophecies.

This non-dispensationalist understanding of the Bible also permits other evangelicals in the middle to take a more pragmatic approach to the Middle East. In 2002 sociologist John Green conducted a foreign policy survey for the Ethics and Public Policy Center. He surveyed 350 leaders of evangelical organizations and found that while 60% wanted the U.S. to back Israel over the Palestinians, 52% favored the creation of a Palestinian state. According to Green, “Evangelical elites want to see peace in the Middle East. They believe the Palestinian people have legitimate aspirations to have their own country. These elites would not support a state if it threatened Israel.” Typical of such attitudes are these: “I would argue that nothing could be more secure for Israel than creating a viable, self-sustaining Palestinian state that agrees to live in peace and agrees to suppress terrorism” (Richard Land); and “[On the issue of a Palestinian state,] the question for me is one of prudence, and not of theological principle” (Richard Mouw).<sup>13</sup>

This perspective rarely makes the news because its advocates do not aggressively promote it. Dispensationalists know how to make a splash; but these moderates prefer moderation. They seem adverse to organization, hold poorly attended conferences, and write books read by few. In comparison to dispensationalists, they do not seem to be trying very hard. Their idea of “going public” is sending open letters to the president. In 2002, a few dozen evangelical leaders wrote Mr. Bush that “the American evangelical community is not a monolithic bloc . . . . Significant numbers of American evangelicals reject the way some have distorted biblical passages as their rationale for uncritical support for every policy and action of the Israeli government instead of judging all actions—of both Israelis and Palestinians—on the basis of biblical standards of justice.” Using such a standard themselves, they endorsed Mr. Bush’s two-state solution.<sup>14</sup>

In 2007, many of the same leaders published another open letter to the President in which they voiced firm support for Israel, condemned terrorist attacks on civilians, recognized Palestinian rights, and again encouraged a two-state solution as the best hope for a just and lasting peace in the region. Referring to the biblical promise to Abraham (“I will bless those who bless you”), the letter declared that “perhaps the best way we can bless

Israel is to encourage her to remember, as she deals with her neighbor Palestinians, the profound teaching on justice that the Hebrew prophets proclaimed so forcefully as an inestimably precious gift to the whole world.”<sup>15</sup>

Such letters do get published in the *New York Times*, but their impact is small. Nevertheless, their sentiments may actually represent a very large number of American evangelicals. According to Richard Land, “I would point out that probably the most popular president ever among evangelicals is the first American president to officially make a two-state solution American foreign policy, and a majority of evangelicals support him in that.”<sup>16</sup>

One other group of evangelicals deserves mention here—those who wish Israel well but take the Palestinian side in the current conflict. They reject dispensationalism and the intuitive connection between biblical Israel and the modern Jewish state. Some evangelicals in this group accept aspects of replacement theology, while others do not. They do all agree that ancient Israel’s covenant standing always came with conditions and that modern Israel has failed to live up to them in their treatment of the Palestinians. These evangelicals often take their cues from Palestinian Christians whose experiences provide a radically different view of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Though their numbers are relatively few, these evangelicals have written books critical of other evangelical perspectives on Israel, hold conferences (again, usually poorly attended), and have a small organization of their own, the 2000-member Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding, which sponsors alternative tours of Israel, seeks relationships with Arab Christians, and attempts to educate other mostly resistant evangelicals.<sup>17</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Not all evangelicals think alike. While they overwhelmingly support Israel, they do so for different reasons and envision different futures in the Middle East. Views of Bible prophecy seem to get all the press; but only a minority of evangelicals believes them. For most evangelicals, support for Israel grows out of their intuitive reading of the Bible and some widely held political assumptions about the Middle East. I think Gary Bauer more or less gets it right in the following statement:

Among [evangelical] Christians, there’s just a fundamental religious idea that the Jews are God’s people and the land of Israel is covenant land that God granted them. Beyond that, what drives Christian support for Israel is that Christians tend to see U.S. foreign policy in very moral terms. We believe Israel and the U.S. are facing the same types of totalitarian forces, and we as two countries that share the same values should stand against that.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” (Philadelphia: 2008). It is available at <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>.

<sup>2</sup> D. Michael Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite* (New York: 2007).

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2 (Edinburgh, 1969), 584. Another, more recent explanation of supersessionism may be found in the work of the evangelical Anglican bishop N.T. Wright. See his *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, 1992), 457-8.

<sup>4</sup>For an example of a rather moderate critique of supersessionism and advocacy of dual-covenants, see “A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews” (New York, 1987). For a stronger rejection of replacement theology, see Clark Williamson, *A Guest in the House of Israel: A Post-Holocaust Church Theology* (Louisville, 1993) and James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews* (Boston, 2001). See also Luke Timothy Johnson, “Christians and Jews: Starting Over—Why the Real Dialogue Has Just Begun,” *Commonweal* (January 31, 2003). Johnson’s article may be accessed at <http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resources/articles/johnson.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Craig Blaising, “The Future of Israel as a Theological Question,” *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 44 (September, 2001): 435-50.

<sup>6</sup>For a Calvinist defense of supersessionism, see O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Phillipsburg, PA, 2000). For a variety of evangelical views on supersessionism, see John S. Feinberg, ed., *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* (Wheaton, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> For overviews of millennialism in Christian history, see Frederic J. Baumgartner, *Longing for the End: A History of Millennialism in Western Civilization* (New York, 1999); Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages* (Cambridge, 1999); and Timothy P. Weber, “Millennialism,” *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. by Jerry Walls (New York, 2008), 365-83.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875 to 1982* (Chicago, 1987).

<sup>9</sup>Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Kirkpatrick, “For Evangelicals, Supporting Israel is ‘God’s Foreign Policy.’”

<sup>11</sup> John C. Green is Senior Fellow in Religion and American Politics, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. He provided these observations during a phone interview on June 20, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> This point was forcefully made during a symposium (“God’s Country: Evangelicals and U.S. Foreign Policy”) at the Pew Research Center in Washington, D.C. on September 26, 2006 by Richard Land, President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention; Alan Cooperman of the *Washington Post*; and Michael

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Cromartie, Vice President of the Ethics and Public Policy Center. A transcript of their comments may be found at <http://pewforum.org/events/?EventID=127>

<sup>13</sup> Todd Hertz, "Opinion Roundup: *The Evangelical View of Israel?*" *Christianity Today*, 11 June 2003, accessed at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/123/31.0.html>. See also Jeremy D. Mayer, "Christian Fundamentalists and Public Opinion Toward the Middle East: Israel's New Best Friends?" *Social Science Quarterly*, 85, no. 3 (September 2004):695-712.

<sup>14</sup> "Evangelical Christians and Israel/Palestine," July 12, 2002, may be found at <http://www.cmep.org/letters/2002Ju12.htm>

<sup>15</sup> "Letter to President Bush from Evangelical Leaders," 29 July 2007, New York Times, 29 July 2007, accessed at [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/29/us/evangelical\\_letter.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/29/us/evangelical_letter.html); Laurie Goodstein, "Coalition of Evangelicals Voices Support for Palestinian State," New York Times, 29 July 2007, accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/29/us/29evangelical.html>

<sup>16</sup> "God's Country: Evangelicals and U.S. Foreign Policy" transcript. <http://pewforum.org/events/?EventID=127>

<sup>17</sup> For example, Gary M. Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians Are Not Being Told about Israel and the Palestinians* (Cleveland, 2003); Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2002); Elias Chacour, *Blood Brothers: The Unforgettable Story of a Palestinian Christian Working for Peace in Israel*, expanded ed. (Grand Rapids, MI, 2003). See also Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding ([www.emeu.net](http://www.emeu.net))

<sup>18</sup> See Max Blumenthal, "Born-again for Sharon," Academics for Justice, October 30, 2004. Accessed at [http://www.academicsforjustice.org/pMachine/more.php?id=A1718\\_0\\_1\\_0\\_M](http://www.academicsforjustice.org/pMachine/more.php?id=A1718_0_1_0_M).