

Robertson Apologizes for Sharon Remarks

The Christian broadcaster said his January statements were 'inappropriate and insensitive'

Amid a hailstorm of criticism, Christian broadcaster Pat Robertson apologized for suggesting that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's stroke was divine punishment for withdrawing his nation from the Gaza Strip.

"My zeal, my love of Israel, and my concern for the future safety of your nation led me to make remarks which I can now view in retrospect as inappropriate and insensitive," Robertson wrote in a letter to Omri Sharon, the prime minister's son. "I ask your forgiveness and the forgiveness of the people of Israel."

During a Jan. 5 broadcast of his 700 Club show, Robertson implied that Sharon's illness was God's retribution for his role in "dividing God's land."

"Woe unto any prime minister of Israel who takes a similar course to appease the [European Union], the United Nations or the United States of America," Robertson told viewers. "You read the Bible and [God] says, 'This is My land,' and for any prime minister of Israel who decides he is going to carve it up and give it away, God says, 'No, this is Mine.'"

The comments prompted Israeli officials to cut ties with the televangelist on a project to build a \$50 million Christian retreat center in Galilee near historic Christian sites such as Capernaum and the Sea of center, financed by a group of

prominent Christian leaders, is expected to draw 1 million visitors annually when it opens within two years, the Associated Press (AP) said.

Daniel Ayalon, Israel's ambassador to the U.S., said Israel "respects Rev. Robertson and accepts his apology," the AP said. But it was not clear at press time whether Robertson would rejoin the project.

Robertson's remarks about Ariel Sharon were the latest in a string of awkward comments the televangelist has made in recent months. In August, Robertson found himself in the national hot seat when he called for the assassination of Venezuela's president, Hugo Chavez. He later apologized.

In November, when residents of Dover, Penn., voted out eight school board members for their support of the intelligent design theory, Robertson advised townspeople not to call on God in times of crisis. "I'd like to say to the good citizens of Dover, if there is a disaster in the area, don't turn to God," Robertson said on his show. "You just rejected Him from your city."

Later that day he issued a statement to clarify his remarks. "God is tolerant and loving, but we can't keep sticking our finger in His eye forever," he said. "If they have future problems in Dover, I recommend they call on Charles Darwin. Maybe he can help them."

Ted Haggard, president of the National Association of Evangelicals and a participant in the retreat center project, said the controversy was a "blow to evangelical-Israeli relations."

"It is my sincere hope that this project move forward," Haggard said. "To successfully do this, the leadership of the evangelical community must exercise sensitivity and grace toward the people and leadership of the nation of Israel."

At press time, Ariel Sharon remained in serious but stable condition in Hadassah Hospital, the AP said. Hospital officials said the 77-year-old leader is comatose and shows no signs of regaining consciousness.

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