

Passing the Torch of Truth About Israel

A few years ago I spoke at a conference plenary session at a prominent Christian university. The preceding speaker was an Arab Christian peace activist. The next day the two of us hosted a Q&A session on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

Although my Arab Christian colleague and I differ on some critical issues, we are friends. What I wasn't ready for was the lack of friendliness behind some of the questions in relation to Israel.

But what was most surprising? The harshest critics were attendees from the student body of this university—ironically, an institution established by one of Israel's staunchest evangelical supporters only a few decades ago.

Among the youngest adult population in North America, a negative view of Israel is becoming the new normal.

A century ago, respected Christian scholars and prominent church statesmen propelled Zionism. But today, a growing anti-Zionism characterizes a younger Christian cohort, in particular, those referred to as "Millennials" (defined by Pew Research Center as those born between 1981 and 1996).

As recently as a decade ago, most evangelicals regarded Israel as a modern miracle and a marker of God's unfolding plan. But today, growing numbers of young people are expressing serious doubts about these assumptions.

Why the gap between older and younger generations?

Older generations of evangelicals were alive during the Holocaust and the subsequent establishment of the State of Israel—or at least close enough that the images remain

imprinted on their minds. Millennials have only read about these distant events.

Older evangelicals grew up watching the underdog Jewish David defeat the Arab Goliath in 1967 in only six days—a feat of such magnitude that only God Himself could have accomplished it. Millennials view Israel’s superior military prowess as a consequence of generous American aid.

Millennials see Israel as a prosperous, high-tech-driven “startup nation,” while previous generations recall how poor and persecuted Jewish immigrants fled Muslim lands only to barely eke out an existence in their new Jewish homeland.

Inundated with digital news bytes, with no time or patience for reasoned commentary, many Millennials make huge leaps of judgment. They read 140 character tweets about Gazan mothers and children fleeing their homes and view it as Israeli “aggression.” They don’t realize that Israel has the moral fiber to warn civilians to flee before they strike the militias who infiltrated their homes to shoot rockets that terrorize nearby Israeli civilians.

The people of Israel are facing one of the greatest wars in their history. Attacks include not only the kidnappings of young soldiers and civilians, as well as thousands of rockets and suicide bombings against innocent civilians, but now also rapid-fire hateful tweets and Facebook posts.

It’s Urgent

As many of us discern signs that we are approaching the return of the Lord, many will believe lies and fall away from the faith (see 2 Thess. 2:1-12). So it’s critically important to get the truth of God’s Word to young people before it’s too late.

Unfair attacks against Israel and siding with her sworn enemies is risky business. God promises blessing to those who

stand with Israel but a curse for those who curse God's chosen people (see Gen. 12:3).

Now is the time to pass on the torch of God's truth about Israel to our young people. So here are some things I believe we should do:

- **Stay focused on Jesus.** As pollster George Barna revealed a number of years ago, younger generations are increasingly distancing themselves from the church, at least as an institution. *But Jesus is still cool.*

So it's important to remind Millennials that their warm embrace of Jesus also demands that they embrace those He embraces—in particular, His own Jewish brothers whom he came to serve and to save (see Matt. 25:31-46).

First Cor. 15:8 tells us that "Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers."

Who are "the circumcision," whom Jesus came to serve? The Jews.

Who are the "fathers?" They were the first Jewish recipients of God's revelation and promises. They are Israel's patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, David and all the great heroes of the faith among all the people of Israel.

And what are "the promises?" There were many. But the promise that is the subject of some of the fiercest debate today is the promise of *land*. Yet I contend that of all the promises Jesus came "to confirm," the land promise is one of those He clearly endorsed as still valid.

God could have sent His Son to Rome, the capital of the great empire in that day. Instead He sent His Son wrapped in Jewish flesh to be crucified, resurrected and ascended from Jerusalem.

If Jesus viewed His coming as having only spiritual significance and confirmed that the promise of *physical* land is now passé, He might have used a generic name like the "Territories." Growing numbers of Christians call this land "Palestine," a term that doesn't exist in the Bible. But Jesus *confirms* that the land is "Judea" (Acts 1:8).

Often forgotten or overlooked by Millennials is the fact that God's promise of a unique land for a unique people was unilateral and unconditional.

God alone entered into this covenant with Abram. Covenants were "cut" in ancient times. So God commanded Abram to cut the flesh of animals and line up the pieces on two sides, forming a corridor. Genesis 15:7-21 reveals that on the momentous occasion of Abram's receiving God's promise of a piece of land, Abram was sound asleep! God walks the length of the corridor all alone. Thus, the promise of land is guaranteed solely on the foundation that the God of Israel is always faithful to His covenants, even if Israel finds itself in spiritual slumber.

- **Get Israel back into biblical theology.** Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum became concerned that Israel plays only a tiny role in systematic theology taught in today's Bible colleges. So he wrote a book called, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*.

Jesus declared that we must be born again. Yet, the concept of the new birth is alluded to in the New Testament only three times.

In the New Testament alone, however, "Israel" appears over 70 times. In the Old Testament, it is found nearly 3,000 times.

Israel is no minor issue.

One of the reasons why so many young people have little knowledge or interest in Israel is the fact that they read the

Bible on a limited basis or not at all.

Another reason is because pastors rarely teach about Israel's key role in God's purposes. The apostle Paul told the Ephesian elders that he taught the "whole counsel of God;" and we see from Paul's epistles that Israel was a key element of his teaching. Perhaps one of the reasons pastors exclude the subject of Israel is the fear that this subject may be offensive to certain congregants.

How can we challenge, engage and educate the Millennials on Israel? Sermons, books and film series are great—but not enough—in our digital-obsessed world.

Today, information is delivered in miniaturized doses through social media. To engage Millennials, we must become active on their own digital turf as well.

- **Re-emphasize the gospel of grace.** Millennials are apparently justice-focused, unlike previous generations. Consequently, Millennials tend to question the legitimacy of Israel based on Israel's imperfect record of justice. And yet, Israel is the only true democracy in the Middle East, and her Arab citizens continue to affirm to the pollsters that they would prefer to remain under Israeli sovereignty even if they were given the option of living in a Palestinian state.

Millennials are increasingly adopting "neo-Calvinism." Yet, Calvin champions the concept of God's sovereign choosing of "the elect." Election is based on grace, not on works of righteousness (justice).

To be consistent, then, Millennial evangelicals need to be careful not to point their finger at Israel's sins, as if Jews are deserving of greater condemnation. Paul gives this warning to self-righteous judges in Romans 2:3: "And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?"

Then Paul says in the next verse: "Do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?" (2:4)

In this light, the God of *grace* and *goodness* may very well be the prime mover of the Jewish people's modern return to the land with God's ultimate purpose, to *lead them to repentance*.

God's gracious initiative is prophesied in Ezekiel 36:22, 24, 25-26. Here, God brings unbelievers back to their Land *before* they return to Himself: "Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord God: "I do not do this for your sake, O house of Israel, but for My holy name's sake, which you have profaned among the nations wherever you went. For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you."'"

Just as God has used Israel as a powerful illustration of the negative consequences for those who rebel and wander from Him, God is now using Israel as a powerful illustration of the goodness and mercy that will follow His lost sheep until they return to His fold.

Hopeful Signs

In spite of a spiritual drift among many evangelical Millennials in the West, in other places in the world like Asia, Africa and Latin America, revival fires are burning among next generations.

Young believers in these regions have a greater love for the Bible than their Western counterparts. And they are becoming fascinated with the fulfillment of ancient prophecies concerning Israel. Even without Darby's and Scofield's dispensational interpretations, they are recognizing the significant role of the Jewish people in God's eternal

purposes. They are seeing that Israel is not just an ancient relic buried under the rubble of history, but a nation with a remarkable present and future.

These newer believers are reading the Bible with a “common-sense” approach. They see how many Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled *literally* in the life of Jesus. These include the detail of His birth in Bethlehem, His exile to Egypt, His return to Judea, His death and resurrection, to name just a few.

These Millennials follow the simple logic that if literal fulfillment is the pattern for much of Old Testament prophecy, then the prophecies concerning Israel’s future will result in literal fulfillment as well.

There are hopeful developments today: Thousands of former Muslims are suddenly seeing visions of Jesus and are joining His ranks. In tandem with this phenomenon is a mysterious new love filling their hearts—for the Jews.

The story of the Jewish people is as a tapestry through which God reveals His nature and His plans. Israel may appear today to be a tangle of threads, but that’s only from the backside of the tapestry.

When we eventually get a glimpse of Israel from God’s viewpoint, we will see that He is making Israel into something stunningly beautiful, whom He calls, “Israel My glory” (Is. 46:13).

Israel is still a work in progress. So let’s not be too quick to critique His creation before He is finished.

Wayne Hilsden *has been the senior pastor of King of Kings Community, Jerusalem, Israel, for 31 years.*