

God Loves Arabs, Too

God's love is so much wider than our narrow political boundaries.

Many Christians in this country are head-over-heels in love with Israel. We pump millions of tourist dollars into the Israeli economy every year. We pray fervently, and often, for the peace of Jerusalem. We conduct Passover seders in our churches, sing Messianic Jewish choruses, wear Jewish prayer shawls, blow shofars and celebrate all things Jewish.

Meanwhile, Jewish leaders in Israel are grateful for our money and our concern—even though they are nervous about our evangelistic motives. They don't want us converting Jews to Christianity, but they've learned to tolerate our prayer walks and our Feast of Tabernacles parades because they know there is a big difference between compassionate Christians who witness in the streets and fanatical Muslims who blow up shopping malls.

I love Israel too, and I am not going to suggest that we stop supporting the strongest democracy in the Middle East. It is my duty to defend Israel. But I need to call a quick timeout to ask an awkward question—and I hope I won't be crucified for it.

Has anybody noticed that there are Arab Christians in Israel who also need our support?

It seems if anyone dares to call attention to the plight of Palestinian Christians, he is immediately branded a heretic or a land-for-peace turncoat. "God gave Israel to the Jews!" some of my friends insist. "God curses those who don't support

Israel!" others cry. Their feeling is that if I care about Palestinians, I might as well bulldoze Jewish settlements or give rocket-launchers to Hamas.

I never said we should betray Israel. We must denounce terrorism—whether it is operating from Iran or through the insidious organizations plotting to overthrow Israel from within.

But Christian solidarity with the Jewish people should not deprive another group of God's love and acceptance. God does not show favoritism (see Acts 10:34). He loves Jews and Arabs alike.

When I made my first and only pilgrimage to Israel in 1994, I found myself in the ancient town of Bethlehem after only three days. I don't know what drew me there, except that I was curious to see the 1,500-year-old Church of the Nativity. What I found in that foreboding place was a Palestinian Christian brother who teaches at a local Bible college. He has suffered persecution not only from militant Muslims but also from Israeli soldiers.

This man, like so many Arab believers in Jesus, is caught in a crossfire. Both Muslims and Jews hate him because of his faith.

I'll never forget what that dear brother told me that day: "It really hurts us," he explained, "when Christians come to Israel and they just go to Jerusalem. They visit the sites and march in the festivals. They even visit Jewish synagogues or meet with Jewish government leaders. But they never come to see us."

I was heartbroken. After all, it is Arab Christians who have maintained the historic biblical sites in Israel for centuries. They get little thanks for that today. Many have fled the Middle East because of persecution. Those who remain in Israel have been muffled in a hostile land where the loudspeakers on the mosques are turned up full-blast.

When Jesus lived in Israel 2,000 years ago He did not support the religious racism of His day. He healed a Roman centurion's servant, ministered to a Canaanite woman's daughter and ventured into Samaria. He showed the Jews that God's love is so much wider than our narrow political boundaries.

My plea is simple: When you pray, remember that Israel's population includes Arab Christians as well as Ethiopian and Russian refugees and 1 million Muslims who desperately need the gospel. When you support Israel, as you should, do it based on a biblical mandate—not with a naive nationalism that ignores injustice.

And when you visit Israel, don't just hang out with your friends while you pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. Spend time with the Jewish Christian ministries that need your support—like the ones we have profiled in this issue beginning on page 48. And please befriend the lonely Arab believers who need to know that you love them too.

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