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Work is worship and ministry, Baylor professor says

By Ken Camp

FLOWER MOUND, Texas (ABP) -- People who think they'll have nothing to do in heaven but sit on a cloud and play the harp might be in for a surprise. A Baylor University professor believes there will be work in heaven, and he thinks that is a good thing.

Work isn't just something people do to earn a living; it is a blessing from God, says Blaine McCormick, assistant professor of management in Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business.

"We are created by a worker, created in a worker's image and created to work," McCormick told the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission during an April 18-19 meeting near Dallas.

McCormick said work was cursed in the Fall but isn't a curse in and of itself. Rather, he views it as part of the creation of which God said, "It is good."

McCormick said heaven holds the promise not of freedom from work, but of eternity spent in meaningful labor that is free from the curse of original sin. "Why go to heaven? Because the work is so good there," he quipped.

McCormick, a layman in the Church of Christ, discussed faith in the workplace with both the governing commission and advisory board of consultants for the Baptist General Convention of Texas ethics and public-policy agency.

McCormick said work is a blessing to parents because it teaches children self-discipline, the value of a good reputation, financial responsibility and other life lessons. It is a blessing to communities because it brings security. "The safest places on earth have the strongest industrial bases," he observed.

Christians worship through their work, he said, when they recognize their job as a "celebration of individual gifts" and the opportunity to "feel God's pleasure" as they use their gifts and talents.

Most Christians see vocational church work as ministry, but McCormick said every honorable vocation is a potential place of ministry.

He noted that Jesus called two tax collectors -- Matthew and Zacchaeus. One, Matthew, he told to leave his tax tables. But he called Zacchaeus to return to work and perform his duties justly. "The calling to stay can be really holy, just as the calling to go can be," McCormick said.

McCormick criticized popular entertainment for often portraying businessmen as villains. "A manager, by definition, is a minority," McCormick said. He said society would not allow Hollywood to scapegoat and stereotype other minorities as it does business leaders.

He said business can be an honorable ministry when a Christian recognizes opportunities to create jobs, improve lives and help people change their behavior. For instance, McCormick cited drug screening as an opportunity for Christian employers to offer meaningful intervention for substance abusers.

"I know some businessmen who are quitting committee involvement at church because they think they can get more good done at work," he said.

Preachers and Bible teachers should challenge Christian business leaders to "leaven" the workplace with Christ-like traits that move beyond other principle-centered businesses, McCormick said.

For example, a business leader, while holding to productivity as the standard, might commit the workplace to a Sabbath rest, he said. While rewarding talent as a general hiring practice, a manager might also employ a person with mental disabilities.

Recognizing that "spiritual values complicate matters," businesses traditionally have tried to build a wall of separation between faith and the workplace, according to attorney John Castle, who responded to McCormick's presentation.

"One of the characteristics of our culture has been the way we divide our lives into separate sectors. The way we organize work is the way we tend to organize our lives. So we have fragmented lives -- disconnected lives," observed Castle, a former top executive at EDS.

But that attitude is changing, he added. "We are organizing work differently. Life is coming into the workplace."

For example, during Castle's tenure at EDS, the company began allowing workers to gather for a prayer service on the National Day of Prayer, and the language of prayer and spirituality has become much more common in the workplace.

Castle also noted that many employers are encouraging and modeling volunteerism. "People want to connect," he said. "To live disconnected lives is not what God intended."

George Mason, pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, responded to McCormick by focusing on the church's role in the matter of daily work.

"We need to learn to talk of faith as full-life experience in the world," he noted.

A pastor who wants to call church members to be good and faithful workers must model a good personal work ethic, Mason said. Church leaders demonstrate workplace ethics by treating employees with respect, dealing redemptively with personnel problems that arise. And vocational church workers can demonstrate what it means to be responsible managers by the way they relate to volunteers on committees.

Churches also teach about workplace ethics by the example of how they handle job crises in their membership. And the appearance of facilities teaches what the church believes about "the God of creativity and beauty," he said.

Mason encouraged churches to "celebrate various vocations as gifts for life in the world."

Texas congressman has history with two schools he criticized

By Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- U.S. Rep. Tom DeLay, a "longtime supporter" of two Texas schools he recently criticized, has a longtime history with them, too. He was "asked not to re-register" at one after playing "pranks" at another.

DeLay angered alumni of Baylor and Texas A&M universities when word spread that he told a Baptist group not to send their children to the schools.

Talk radio across Texas zeroed in on DeLay April 18, after a copyright Houston Chronicle article reported he said: "Don't send your kids to Baylor. And don't send your kids to A&M."

DeLay made his remarks April 12 during a meeting at First Baptist Church in Pearland, Texas. A questioner, lamenting that creationism is not taught at major Texas universities, prompted the congressman to wave young people away from the two schools, the Chronicle reported.

After telling parents not to send their children to Baylor and A&M, historically known as two of the nation's most conservative major universities, DeLay said: "There are still some Christian schools out there -- good, solid schools. Now, they may be little. They may not be as prestigious as Stanford. But your kids will get a good, solid, godly education."

He particularly focused on A&M, where his daughter, Danielle, graduated in 1995 and was repulsed by students who had sex in dormitories. "Texas A&M used to be a conservative university," the Chronicle reported the congressman as saying. "It's lost a lot of its conservatism, and it's renounced its traditions. It's really sad. My daughter ... had horrible experiences with coed dorms and guys who spent the weekends in the rooms with the girls, and all this kind of stuff went on there. It's just unbelievable."

As House majority whip, DeLay is the third-highest-ranking Republican. His remarks to the audience of about 300 people were taped without his knowledge, the Chronicle said.

Shortly after his comments became public, DeLay issued a statement regarding his relationship to the two Texas schools.

"My response to a concerned parent has created a misunderstanding," he said. "I was giving advice for the specific type of education they were seeking for their child."

"Let me make it clear: I've been a longtime supporter of Baylor and Texas A&M. My daughter went to A&M, and in Congress I've worked hard to help fund these two prestigious universities."

"I apologize for any misunderstandings my comments may have caused."

DeLay may get a chance to clarify those misunderstandings at Baylor in person, according to university spokesman Larry Brumley.

"Apparently Congressman DeLay's perceptions of Baylor have been influenced by people who are uninformed or misinformed about the Christian character and mission of Baylor University," Brumley said. Baylor has asked DeLay to visit the Waco campus "and see firsthand the nature of this university, its students, faculty and staff."

"He will find an institution ... that is seeking to enter the top tier of American universities, while reaffirming and deepening its distinctive Christian mission."

DeLay spokesman Jonathan Grella said the congressman's remarks reflect his sentiments about a narrow issue, not the universities in general.

"He was responding to a specific comment at the event, and he gave (parents) frank advice," Grella told the Baptist Standard. "He said, 'If you're seeking a Christian education for your children, this is what you can do.' It was in relation to this specific context."

Grella also confirmed DeLay's specific early relationship to both Baylor and A&M.

DeLay attended Baylor from 1965 to 1967 before graduating from the University of Houston in 1970. But DeLay ended his student relationship with Baylor because of something that happened on the A&M campus.

"He was asked not to reregister" at Baylor, Grella acknowledged. "When the congressman was younger, his extra-curricular activities got him in trouble. He had a vigorous social life and accepts the consequences of his actions."

Asked if those actions took place at A&M during DeLay's student days, Grella told the Standard: "Yeah. ... They played some pranks."

Baylor's disciplinary action turned out well, Grella reported. "He has said they did him a favor."

DeLay became friends with Baylor Vice President W.C. Perry, who expelled DeLay but later supported his run for Congress, Grella said.

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Texas budget shortfall means ministries go without funds

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- A budget shortfall in the Baptist General Convention of Texas is translating into unmet needs and forcing institutions and ministries to seek other sources of income.

Churches were initially slow to accept the BGCT's adopted budget, which redirected a portion of theological education funding away from Southern Baptist Convention seminaries and toward Texas-owned institutions.

As a result, church gifts to the BGCT budget through the Cooperative Program totaled \$40,857,987 in 2001, 14.1 percent under budget.

That hit doubly hard at places like Hispanic Baptist Theological School, said Royce Rose in the BGCT institutional ministries section. Not only did the school not receive an anticipated windfall in new funds, the budget shortfall cost them the equivalent of one faculty member. That comes at a time when the school is trying to add faculty to keep up with growing enrollment and accreditation standards.

Hispanic Baptist Theological School is "between a rock and a hard place" in trying to meet the standards for accreditation as a Bible college at a time when financial resources are being cut, according to Albert Reyes, president of the school.

"We've recently gone through the budgeting process for this next year. We had planned for three new faculty, and we had to eliminate one," he said.

South Texas Children's Home in Beeville depends on the BGCT Cooperative Program for about 23 percent of its budget. Last year, the children's home received \$124,500 less than the previous budget year.

"The result of the decrease in giving to the Cooperative Program this past calendar year means the South Texas Children's Home received less this year than we did six years ago," said Jerry Haag, president and CEO. "Coupled with the increased number of children and families in our care and the tremendous need of children throughout the state, it has made our ministry more difficult."

This year's BGCT budget was set at 90 percent of the previous year's budget. That means \$120,605 dollars less for the Center for Strategic Evangelism, \$142,660 less for the Church Starting Center and \$410,373 less for Bible Study/Discipleship.

The reduced budget also means \$1.7 million less for educational institutions, \$392,500 less for child and family services, and \$185,000 less for health care institutions.

And those losses are based on the assumption that this year's receipts will meet budget requirements. Year-to-date BGCT Cooperative Program receipts at the end of the first quarter of 2002 were 6.7 percent below the same period in 2001.

South Texas Children's Home is projecting a loss of up to \$200,000 this year, compared to the anticipated budget last year, Haag noted.

"What a \$200,000 decrease in giving to the South Texas Children's Home means is two less cottages of children that we will be able to care for. The result is 16 little boys and girls who will go without a loving home provided by Texas Baptists."

Meanwhile, through the first quarter of 2002, gifts to the Mary Hill Davis Offering for state missions were running 8 percent behind last year. That follows a 6 percent decline last year.

Because Texas Baptists fell short of last year's \$5.75 million offering goal, some ministries received no funds. They include Women Reaching Texas, community ministries for families in crisis, and churches of refuge for ministers and their families who experience forced termination.

Decreased funding from the offering is severely hampering other ministries. A new ministry providing youth evangelism and discipleship teams for Hispanic Baptist churches could suffer, according to Rick Davis, director of the Center for Strategic Evangelism.

Another victim of the shortfall is Inmate Disciple Fellowship, a partnership between the BGCT, Texas Baptist Men and Southwestern Seminary. The ministry provided discipleship materials for more than 30,000 prisoners in Texas. Of the \$45,000 in anticipated revenue from the Mary Hill Davis Offering, the ministry received only \$3,000 last year.

"What will happen? Our people will continue to go and attempt to disciple prisoners," said Jim Furgerson, executive director-treasurer of Texas Baptist Men. "But local churches and individual donors will have to pick up the cost for the ministry. And it will cease to be a ministry that all Texas Baptists share in supporting."

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History a common weapon in Israel's politics, scholars say

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- If it's a matter of who got there first, the Israelis have a case against the Palestinians.

If it's a matter of who has controlled the land most recently and for the longest time, the Palestinians have a case against the Israelis.

And if those were the only two questions, the Middle Eastern conflict between Arabs and Jews still would be a tough nut to crack.

By some accounts, the current conflict in the Middle East is about land -- a relatively small piece of real estate bordered by Egypt, Syria, Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea. Palestinians and Jews both claim the land as theirs. And history can be cited to support both claims.

Both Israel and the Palestinian Authority are "using history like a stiletto," said Christian historian Tim Weber, dean at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Illinois.

"The land has been contested for thousands of years," Weber said. "The different parties point to different historical periods, but ignore the rest, to make their case for ownership."

Both sides agree the land's history begins with early civilizations thousands of years ago. The first known inhabitants were the Canaanites, a collection of Semitic people who developed complex societies administered through city-states.

The Canaanites, according to biblical and historical records, worshipped fertility gods and used sex and mystical wizardry in their religious rites. The Old Testament condemns those practices as "detestable to the Lord."

The Bible says the children of Israel, acting on the promise of God, took possession of the land from the Canaanites. For the next 500 years, Israel flourished and expanded under the leadership first of judges and later kings such as Saul, David and Solomon. David made Jerusalem Israel's capital around 1000 B.C., and Solomon built the first temple there around 960 B.C.

By 720 B.C., however, Israel had been crushed by the Assyrians, and 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel were lost in the ensuing dispersion. The remnant of Jewish people held on to parts of the land for several more centuries, suffering under the rule of Babylonians, Greeks, Hasmoneans and Romans.

Israel held together in some form through the time of Christ until 70 A.D., when Roman troops destroyed Jerusalem and scattered the Jewish people far and wide in what is known as the Diaspora.

For the next 900 years, control of the Holy Land went back and forth between various occupying forces, including the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Christian Crusaders, the Mamluks and the Ottoman Empire.

Muslims were the third major religious entity to lay claim to the land, arriving as a distinct faith group in the seventh century A.D. Their founding prophet, Mohammad, was born in 570 A.D. and wrote the Koran in 610 A.D. By 691, Muslims had built the Dome of the Rock on the site of the destroyed Jewish temple. This is the third-most-holy site in Islam because according to Islamic tradition it is the site from which Mohammed ascended into heaven.

Jews and Muslims claim a common heritage through the patriarch Abraham, with Jews tracing their lineage and faith through Abraham's son Isaac and Muslims tracing theirs through Abraham's son Ishmael. Jewish Scripture records Ishmael as the child of Abraham and his wife's servant, Hagar. Islam, however, considers Hagar Abraham's second wife.

Jews and Muslims co-existed in the land, although Muslims had the upper hand through most of the latter half of the first millennium after Christ. They coexisted largely because of outside domination and because the Jewish people had not yet begun returning to the land in large numbers.

Four hundred years of rule by the Ottoman Empire ended in 1917 with a British conquest, and the British prime minister pledging support for a "Jewish national home in Palestine." That never fully materialized, however, until after World War II and the Holocaust. European and American sentiment for a Jewish state led to concrete action. And that, imposed by the United Nations in 1948, set the stage for conflict that has raged between Arabs and Israelis until the present.

With consent from the British, the victors of World War II carved out a new Israeli state, hoping to create a place of refuge for persecuted Jews worldwide. To do this, however, they made hundreds of thousands of Palestinians homeless.

So whose land is it anyway?

Jews claim historical rights to the land and a divine mandate given to Abraham to possess it. Muslims claim more recent possession of the land and a divine mandate as well.

"There are two types of reality going on," explained Paula Fredriksen, professor of Scripture at Boston University.

While the Israelis claim the land was theirs first, the Palestinians claim they have the latest revelation from God. In their view, Fredriksen said, "Mohammed trumps Jesus or Moses."

The Muslims have no basis to claim they were there first, because Islam wasn't founded until after the Holy Lands had been occupied by both Jews and Christians, she explained. "They know perfectly well that Islam is sort of the third-comer into the neighborhood."

Nevertheless, some Palestinian leaders have attempted to draw a connection between themselves and the Canaanites from whom the Jews originally captured the land. This rhetoric says, "Just as Joshua seized the land from the people who were the original natives, so the Jewish people are trying to do it again," Fredriksen said. "It's very clever rhetoric."

But it doesn't wash with history, she said. "The Palestinians are no more or less related to people in that area than Jews are. By referring to biblical narrative and identifying themselves as Canaanites, they are making a political claim to prior ownership, and those are two different things."

Nevertheless, the Palestinians make a strong argument on the point of most recent possession, argued Weber, who sees the Jewish demand to reclaim its land as unprecedented in world history.

"Are you aware of another people group that returned to ancestral land centuries after losing it and succeeded in establishing its rightful claim?" he asked. "I'm not. Western support and sympathy, often fueled by particular readings of biblical prophecy, made it all possible."

"Of course, few worried about the 700,000 Palestinians who were displaced to make the new state. Few worried about the long-term consequences of Israel trying to occupy and control Gaza and the West Bank after the 1967 war."

Fredriksen, who was raised a Roman Catholic but converted to Judaism, noted Christian dispensationalism, an end-times theology that places great emphasis on the restoration of Israel, has played a large role in American support for Israel as a state. But that's not the only form of Zionism within Christianity, she added.

Guilt over the events of the Holocaust sparked another kind of Zionism, combined with guilt over other mistreatment of the Jewish people at the hands of Christians through the centuries, she said. "It's owning that and being responsible for it that feeds that kind of interest in the state of Israel."

That argument is lost on the Palestinians, however, she explained. "You have Arabs saying, 'Look, that's a European problem. Just because Europeans killed Jews doesn't mean we have to have them in our neighborhood.'"

Of course, the Jews have been in the land all along. The difference today is the large numbers of Jews who have returned to the land the shift in the balance of power that has occurred in the region since 1948.

Within Israel's borders, 80 percent of the population is Jewish, 15 percent is Muslim and 2 percent is Christian. In the West Bank, largely controlled by Palestinians, the population is 75 percent Muslim and 17 percent Jewish.

With 6 million people in Israel and 3 million in the West Bank and Gaza, Israel currently has the upper hand in numbers. But the number of Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem is growing rapidly. In that region, Palestinians are predicted to outnumber Jews by 2050.

Yet still, the arguments boil down to differing perspectives on history. And that reminds Weber of a favorite saying of one of his own history professors.

"History," the professor said, "is an argument without end."

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Scholar says theology drives U.S. policy on Israel, Middle East

By Mark Wingfield

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP) -- When Ed McAteer watches current events unfold in the Middle East, he sees the fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

These things must come to pass, he believes, in order for Jesus to return and bring world history to its end. That's why he was saddened but not surprised when the United Nations recently voted against Israel, in his opinion, on a resolution on the Middle East conflict.

"When the nations gather against Israel, I believe at that time the Scriptures will be fulfilled," said the retired sales executive who now devotes himself full time to conservative Christian causes.

McAteer is a leader among evangelical Christians in support for Israel. He hosts an annual prayer breakfast for Israel attended by both Jewish and evangelical Christian leaders. He recently chaired an international committee that created sufficient public pressure to stop the construction of a mosque near Christian holy sites in Nazareth.

From his Memphis, Tenn., home, McAteer frequently speaks by phone with key Israeli leaders who seek his counsel or support.

Ed McAteer loves Israel, because he believes the Bible tells him to. He often cites God's promise to Abraham, "I will bless them who bless you and curse them who curse you."

From the perspective of this Baptist layman, the mandate to support Israel without equivocation runs all the way from Genesis to Revelation.

Although more articulate and passionate about the subject than most other American evangelicals, McAteer represents a stream of theological and political thought that has driven United States policy toward Israel for more than 50 years.

"No one in the U.S. outdoes fundamentalists in their support of Israel, not even American Jews," said Tim Weber, a Christian historian and dean at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Illinois.

"Since Menachem Begin, all Israeli leaders have seen American fundamentalists as important shapers of American foreign policy toward Israel. What many people do not understand is that most fundamentalists support Israel because they believe it will play a key role in events leading up to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ."

While this theological view of the end-times -- known as premillennial dispensationalism -- is not the majority view among Christians worldwide or even nationwide, it strongly shapes Americans' views of Israel, Weber said. "The influence of such ideas extends way beyond the tight community that nurtures and studies them.

"The dispensationalist scenario is imbedded in the fundamentalist subculture, has much greater influence in the more expansive world of American evangelicalism and even reaches into the larger secular population. These ideas matter, and not just for those who believe and understand them."

Need proof? Look at book publishers' bestseller lists, where the "Left Behind" series has held sway for months.

To date, the nine-book series has sold more than 50 million copies. In 2001, the latest installment, "Desecration," beat out John Grisham for top annual sales of hardback fiction, with 2.9 million copies sold.

The eighth book in the Left Behind series, "The Mark," was the No. 2 bestseller in 2000, and the seventh book, "Assassins," was No. 3 in 1999.

These books are fictionalized accounts built out of a dispensationalist view of the end times. And more significantly than most people realize, this worldview influences American thought on Israel, Weber contends.

Dispensationalism, articulated as a distinct theology by John Nelson Darby about 1830, teaches that shortly before the return of Christ, the nations will gather for war in the Middle East against a restored Jewish state.

Weber explains: "Dispensationalists patch together prophecies in Daniel, Ezekiel and Revelation and predict that a northern confederacy made up of Russia and her allies will join forces with kings of the South, usually identified as an Arab/Muslim coalition, to launch a sneak attack to annihilate Israel once and for all. Though Israel's doom seems certain, God intervenes and destroys the invaders."

But that's still not the end. "Relieved but still shaky, the Jews then make a security pact with the charismatic, peace-promising leader of a 10-nation European confederation, a revived Roman Empire. After securing the peace of Jerusalem for three and a half years, this leader suddenly reveals himself to be the Anti-Christ. Working closely with a demonic false prophet, Anti-Christ enters the restored Jewish temple in Israel, demands to be worshipped as God and then launches a genocidal war against all who refuse to acknowledge him. In response, the kings of the East send a 200-million-man army to fight Anti-Christ's forces on the plains of Megiddo, northwest of Jerusalem. This is the battle of Armageddon.

"Before the armies can annihilate each other, Jesus Christ breaks out of the clouds with his warrior saints and destroys the assembled armies. The surviving Jews then acknowledge him as their Messiah, and King Jesus restores David's throne in Jerusalem, near the purified Jewish temple where priests perform the ancient blood sacrifices. Jesus reigns in peace and justice for a thousand years."

All this, however, hinges on restoring and preserving a Jewish state in Palestine.

McAteer agrees that the existence of Israel as a nation is "very important" to his view of Christian theology. "Jesus said when these things come to pass, lift up your head, your redemption draweth nigh."

In the early days of dispensationalism, Christians were content to wait for the prophesied events to unfold on God's own timetable. But since the late 19th century, some evangelicals have attempted to speed up the clock by ensuring certain things come to pass -- specifically the restoration of a Jewish state.

One of the first advocates of this brand of Zionism was William Blackstone, an Illinois businessman who wrote the bestseller "Jesus is Coming" in 1878. "Blackstone did not want to wait around for a new Jewish state," Weber explained. "He did what he could to make it happen."

When the modern state of Israel finally was created in 1948, "dispensationalists hailed its founding as the most significant prophetic fulfillment of the age, the undeniable proof that they had read the Bible correctly," Weber said.

Since 1948, dispensational theology has pushed for expansion of Israel's borders on prophetic grounds.

"Dispensationalists understood the Israeli-Palestinian conflict not in terms of international law or the rights of self-determination, but as a modern expression of the ancient biblical rivalry between Isaac and Ishmael for their father Abraham's birthright and blessing," Weber said. "Thus dispensationalists did not see any way to reconcile the two warring parties.

"The divine die was cast. Jews win; Palestinians lose."

Indicative of this view, McAteer believes there's "no such thing as the land of Palestine. That's something that's been manufactured. That piece of geography was given by God to Israel."

Where should the Palestinians go, then? Anywhere else in the Middle East, McAteer said, so long as they leave the Jewish nation alone. "The Arabs have 485 times as much land as do the Jews."

This is where McAteer and others who are consistent in applying their theological beliefs to politics find discomfort with some of the Republican leaders they have helped elect.

When President George W. Bush indicates that perhaps Israel should give up some of its land and be more conciliatory toward the Palestinians, McAteer and company are not pleased.

"I'm not in lockstep with a number of my religious Christian brethren, even those in the Southern Baptist Convention, in their endorsing and wrapping their arms around everything George W. Bush says about the Middle East," McAteer said. "One day, he says one thing; the next day, he says another."

McAteer especially bristles at Bush taking a hard-line stance against terrorists attacking the United States but not against Palestinians, who he believes are terrorists attacking Israel.

"Find me one time in all this that Israel has initiated a conflict with the Palestinians," he said. "I'm not saying everything Israel has done has been right, but they have not initiated the conflicts."

But even so, the bottom line for him remains the Bible, not politics.

"I believe without any reservation whatsoever that every grain of sand on that piece of property called Israel belongs to the Jewish people. It's not because I happen to think that. It's not because history gives a picture of them being in and out of there. It's because God gave it to them."

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Another Christian view of Israel sees church as new people of God

By Mark Wingfield

NORCROSS, Ga. (ABP) -- The main theological underpinning behind evangelical support for Israel hinges on one pivotal notion -- that the Jewish people are God's chosen people.

But not all conservative Christians believe that way.

"National Israel's rejection of Christ meant forfeiture of God's covenant blessings and that the true people of God today are Jews and Gentiles who have put their trust in Christ," according to Paul Copan, a member of the Ravi Zacharias International Ministries team who is an authority on Jewish-Christian relations.

Copan holds degrees from Columbia Bible College, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Marquette University and is a well-published scholar. His books include "Who Was Jesus? A Jewish-Christian Dialogue."

"Any theologically significant future of ethnic Jews is bound up in their embracing Jesus Christ, which is not a national and political future," Copan said.

Copan, who said he speaks only for himself and not the evangelistic ministry he works with, sympathizes with those who see a future for political Israel, but he also finds "good scriptural reason to hold that this is not so."

Here's why: "The inter-ethnic church has replaced national Israel as the people of God. . The promises to Israel have been fulfilled in Christ. The New Testament uses the same language of the church that the Old Testament does about national or theocratic Israel, and there is very good reason to believe the New Testament people of God in Christ, the church, are the fulfillment of the people of God."

Copan cites numerous Scriptures to make his case, including Luke 19:44, where Jesus tells the Jews "your house is forsaken," and Matthew 21:44, where Jesus says the kingdom of God will be taken away from the Jews and "given to a people who will produce its fruit."

"Christ threatened judgment upon Israel as though there would be no hope at all of restoration," Copan said.

This view runs counter to the teaching of dispensational premillennialism, which has heavily influenced Baptist thought in the South since the mid-19th century. According to this worldview, not only will God restore political and national Israel; it is essential to the end times that God do so.

"Read the Old Testament prophets," said Ed McAteer, a Baptist layman in Memphis, Tenn., and a staunch supporter of Israel. "God whipped the daylights out of them, scattered them. . His constant call is 'I will bring them back again.'"

"He allowed them to go into captivity; he sent them there. . God put the lash on them, but he did not reject them forever. . They did crucify your Savior and my Savior, but God is a forgiving God."

God will redeem Israel in the end times and bring the Jewish people to faith, according to McAteer and others who share his theological views.

Copan and other non-dispensationalists see it differently. "God's covenant blessings are presently enjoyed only by those who are in Christ," he said. "A Jew's enjoyment of covenant blessings will come only through being joined to Christ."

This requires a distinction between ethnic Israel and political Israel.

"Not one clear New Testament passage mentions the restoration of Israel as a political nation," Copan asserted. "Romans 11:16-24 simply speaks of the conversion of Abraham's physical offspring; it says nothing of the restoration of the Davidic kingdom."

What, then, do non-dispensationalists think of the modern conflict over the existence of Israel as a state?

"We should be quite cautious about reading into the events of the Middle East what may not be there," Copan suggested. "Even if these happened to be the outworking of biblical prophecy, we must be careful about being fatalists -- thinking it's going to happen whether we try to get involved or think contextually or not. We must be a people who seek peace, reconciliation, mediation and human flourishing wherever we can because of the cultural mandate God has given us."

That doesn't mean Christians must favor the Palestinians over the Israelis, but that Christians should take an informed perspective on both sides, Copan said.

While he is concerned about the Palestinians' refusal to denounce terrorism, they should be allowed to create a Palestinian state if they renounce terrorism and acknowledge the right of Israel to exist, he said.

At the same time, Israel has a right to protect itself, he said, but sometimes has overstepped its boundaries.

It is not enough for evangelical Christians to assume Israel can do no wrong, Copan declared. "Even though I am sympathetic with Israel's concerns and its actions of self-protection and even pre-emptive strikes against terrorist threats . . . evangelicals should also decry Israel's actions when it goes too far."

Still, the notion that American Christians should see Israel with a preferential view exists widely even beyond dispensational premillennialists.

"Paul says clearly that God's promises to the Jewish people are irrevocable," said Paula Fredriksen, a theology professor at Boston University and author of numerous books on ancient Christianity. Fredriksen is a nationally known scholar who was raised Roman Catholic but converted to Orthodox Judaism.

The "unmaking of Israel as a Christian theological position" emerged in the first and second centuries as part of the debate over whether Gentile Christians should have anything to do with the Jewish synagogue, she said. And by extension, this line of reasoning leads to anti-Semitism, she suggested.

Wherever Christians fall on the status of Israel as the people of God, they should be willing to think critically about the current issues rather than merely assuming nothing can be done, said Tim Weber, a history professor at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary.

"Does believing in Bible prophecy absolve them of grappling with issues of right and wrong?" Weber asked. "Does knowing how everything is going to turn out justify turning a blind eye to injustice? Do the ends justify the means just because the ends have been prophesied?"