

PASTOR'S NOTES. What was (and is) a Jew? – Part 3

When I was a child, it was expected that the preacher would preach about current events; in fact, a lot of what I learned about the world I first heard on Sunday mornings. Today, we live in an over-informed age; we are bombarded with information, combined with opinion and personal agendas, to the degree that hardly any of us can trust what we hear, see, or read.

When I started as a pastor, I tried to include current events as much as possible in the worship service. Over time, I did this less for the following reasons:

- Today, people are no longer just getting news from the major newspaper and network television; people typically come to church with as much or more information on an event than me, and a lot of what they “know” comes from suspect sources I cannot verify;
- I find that focusing on national and international events tends to increase our feelings of helplessness; most of what happens in our world is way beyond our control.
- I reflect on how Jesus, Who surely knew about events happening all over the world, spent His time focused on the lives of individuals He could physically touch; we are not unconcerned about events in the wider world, but our first task is to love and minister with the people right in front of us.
- It is important that the opinions I express from the pulpit are not just another person's opinions; they must carry a stronger credibility, and not just what I believe or want to convince others. Therefore, unless I have special information regarding a current event, it is better to not take a side in reporting it.

With all that being said, I have said little about the current conflict in the Middle East, in Israel and Gaza. I have led prayers for the situation, and I have read many articles from different perspectives on the conflict. It is unlikely that I have information others do not. Now, our West Ohio Conference has sent several pastors to the Holy Land, and those persons have a perspective that is worth hearing. They have talked personally with both Israelis and Palestinians, and while they don't all agree about how the sides move forward, they have opinions that are based on wider information than the rest of us.

So why write about this at all? All my information is secondhand, and I have never been to the Holy Land. But I can share some history that has not been part of the conversations. This study of history has led me to these three articles on what was and is a Jew. I have argued that the term “Jew” appears to have come from outsiders, and it became attached to the leader class of Israelites. Paul identified as a “Jew” only when he was speaking to Gentiles (Acts 21:39; 22:3). Eventually Israelites displaced all over the world accepted this identification for themselves, and it carried a strange ethnic-religious character.

Israelites were displaced from Israel many times, starting back in 721 B.C.E. But in New Testament times the key events were when the Temple was destroyed in the year 70, and the Bar-Kokhba revolt that ended in the year 135. The result of this last war was that the Romans killed up to 600,000 Israelites in Jerusalem and the surrounding area, making the land desolate. Emperor Hadrian took further action, barring Jews from entering Jerusalem, and renaming the region Syria Palestine. In other words, the Romans took as many steps as they could think of to eradicate Israel, the Jews and any memory of them.

In what was now called Palestine, Israelites continued to live, primarily in Galilee, but over time they began to move back to the area near Jerusalem. After the year 138 some of the restrictions began to loosen, and in the year 438 the ban on praying at the temple site was removed.

The result of this is that, despite efforts to destroy or displace them, the residents of what was now called “Palestine” remained largely Israelite. Over the centuries, some of them would convert to Christianity, and later some to Islam, but ethnically they were still Israelites.

So what does this mean today? Some Christians believe that the church is the new Israel, that all of the still-unfulfilled promises in the Bible toward Israel apply to Christians. But Paul didn’t share that attitude. In the letter to the Romans, chapters 9-11, he struggles with the issue:

For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

(Romans 9:3-5, NRSV)

Though most Israelites rejected Paul’s message, he still believed that the promises of God for his people would hold true, and at the conclusion of this argument, he writes:

*So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. **And so all Israel will be saved**; as it is written, “Out of Zion will come the Deliverer; He will banish ungodliness from Jacob.” “And this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins.”*

(Romans 11:25-27, NRSV – quoting from Isaiah 59:20-21)

Many Christians today believe that God still has a plan for Israel. When the nation was re-established in 1948, many thought the end-times were upon us. This is still likely the case, but we need to consider two things: 1 – we cannot know for sure that this current establishment of Israel is the one that will reap God’s final blessings; and 2 – based on our history (and Emperor Hadrian) we call Israelites who were displaced from the land as “Jews” and we call those who were able to remain “Palestinians” but God would not recognize such a division; they are all Israel to Him. So “all Israel being saved” will require bringing them all together.

So as we “pray for the peace of Jerusalem.” (Psalm 122:6), we know that His people will always have a special place in God’s heart. But the peace He wants for them is essentially the same peace He wants for all of us, if we are willing to yield to Him and accept it.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ken' written in a cursive, flowing style.