

THE LITERAL INTERPRETATION OF PROPHECY

Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

Our whole nation and the world are focused upon the saga of our 2000 election for President. At the time in which I am writing, the matter has not yet been resolved. Currently the two campaigns are in the midst of legal battles that have engaged the Florida and United States Supreme Courts. A ruling by the liberal Florida Supreme Court has many representatives of Bush and Gore talking about how our Federal and State Constitutions should be interpreted. As I observe their discussion, I see many parallels between interpretive philosophies of these legal documents and the hermeneutical approaches to the Bible, especially Bible prophecy.

LEGISLATING FROM THE BENCH

In a much talked about decision by the Florida Supreme Court, they handed down a decision favoring Gore that had no basis in Florida constitutional law. Instead, the Court adopted a belief that every vote should be counted as an abstract principle from which they made their ruling. This set off a swirl of explanations from both sides as to their interpretive approaches.

The traditional and historic approach to interpreting our constitutions are to handle them as literary documents that make specific statements which become the guidelines for deciding contemporary legal issues. Within this approach a judge may look to other sources to enrich their depth of understanding of the legal document. For example, *The Federalist Papers*, are a collection of essays written by the writers of the U. S. Constitution explaining further the intended meaning in our governing document. Within this approach, the role for the judiciary is to interpret the law, not to make up, and thus, legislate new law. The legislation of new law was to be done by congress and sign by the President. "Strict Constructionism" is the label often assigned to the traditional interpretation of our constitutions. It was thought to be the only way to interpret a legal document until about one hundred years ago.

A new way arose for looking at a constitution called "judicial activism." Justices like Oliver Windell Holmes pioneered this approach. This approach is grounded upon the belief that there are no such thing as universal absolutes that are true from generation to generation. Thus, the need for judges to update a constitution through the use of sociological input for each generation. This leads to judges making decisions that are not based upon past law or precedent, but creating out of thin air a decision that then becomes legally binding. This is what the Florida Supreme Court recently did. Even if there were no such thing as universal absolutes (of course, there are because the God of the Bible says so), this would not justify judicial activism, since the legislature should still be the governmental branch to "update" the constitution and laws of the land. This method of interpretation is not really a method of interpretation. Instead, it is a way in which these judges can legislate from the bench. It is a way to bypass the legislative process and impose upon society their values through law. The most infamous example in our lifetime was the Roe vs. Wade decision that legalized the murder of infants in their mother's womb we call abortion. How does this relate to the interpretation of Bible prophecy you may be asking about now?

LEGISLATING THROUGH INTERPRETATION

There are many parallels between interpreting the Bible, especially prophecy, and the current, liberal approach to the interpretation of legal literature. I will examine some of the more important similarities.

The first thing to keep in mind is that interpretation of the Bible, and any literature, should be an effort to find out what the Author intended to say. Proper biblical interpretation occurs when “the interpreter has sought to suppress his own viewpoints regarding what he thinks the passage should mean, so as to allow the exegetical evidence from the passage under investigation to speak for itself.”¹ The oft repeated slogan that a view is “just your interpretation” is a meaningless mantra that has nothing to do with actually trying to find out what a given text is actually saying. The issue should be: Is my interpretation the correct one in light of what the passage is saying in context? One may challenge another’s interpretation and offer a different one. But there is only one correct interpretation because there was only a single intent in what our Lord says.

For anyone to say or imply that the meaning of a passage is unknowable, is to buy into the pagan notion of relativism that dominates the American landscape. It is to act as if the God who made the mouth, has not spoken by giving us Scripture. Since God has spoken, then we can know what He has said, because we are created in His image with the capability of communication. However, Romans 1 teaches that we rebel against the truth that we all know of God. *“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.”* (Rom. 1:18-19)

Any Christian who thinks that any interpretation will do, as long as one is sincere, is like a liberal judge who thinks that he can legislate from the bench. Just as the proper role of a judge is to use his training and knowledge to interpret the constitution, so also the role of any reader of the Bible, God’s inerrant Word, is to seek to understand what God meant. Thus, when any of us misinterpret, even for a supposed good cause, Scripture, the effect is to say that our finite and fallen opinion is what God is saying in His revelation. We are adding to Scripture. This is the very thing that the Apostle John warns about at the end of the Book of Revelation. *“I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.”* (Rev. 22:18-19).

REPLACEMENT THEOLOGY

One of the most common errors down through church history and prospering greatly in our own day are those interpretive legislators who say that the church has replaced Israel in Scripture and history. Reconstructionist Ken Gentry declares, “The people of God are expanded from Israel of the Old Testament to the universal Church of the New Testament, becoming the Israel of God.”² Even though the Bible does not teach what Gentry just stated, he compounds his error by trying to defend such a view when he says, “Christians are called by the name ‘Israel.’” He cites Galatians 6:16 as supposed proof,³ which reads, “And those who will walk by this rule,

peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God." Yet, this passage does not in any way, shape, or form support Gentry's replacement interpretation.

Israel always refers to the Jewish people from Genesis to Revelation. S. Lewis Johnson notes: "There is no instance in biblical literature of the term Israel being used in the sense of the church or the people of God as composed of both believing ethnic Jews and Gentiles."⁴ Arnold Fruchtenbaum notes, "that the church is never called a 'spiritual Israel' or a 'new Israel.' The term Israel is either used of the nation or the people as a whole, or of the believing remnant within."⁵ Gentry is misguided to claim that Galatians 6:16 teaches that the church has replaced Israel.

Simply put, in Galatians 6:16, when Paul speaks of "the Israel of God," he is talking about Jewish Believers in Jesus as Messiah. Fruchtenbaum explains:

A cursory reading of the context reveals that Paul distinguishing between physical status and spiritual status for those in Christ. Although the Judaizers were emphasizing physical qualifications, Paul states that one's position in Christ depends exclusively on spiritual qualification. Notice that Paul does not even talk about the church, but refers to position *in Christ* (Gal. 6:15). Certainly Paul does not seek to demean or eradicate physical differences, he merely states that they have no bearing on whether or not one is in Christ. Just as earlier Paul states that gender distinctives and social status are irrelevant to position in Christ (Gal. 3:28), so in Galatians 6:15 he explains that circumcision also means nothing. And just as physical differences do not keep persons from being in Christ, so physical similarities cannot put them in Christ. All Jews belong to ethnic Israel. And Gentiles do not. So there is no basis for concluding that Paul intends to imply to his readers that Israel can refer to Gentiles, whether or not they are in Christ. . . .

. . . It appears logical to view 'the Israel of God' as believing Jews in contrast to unbelieving Jews called 'Israel after the flesh' (1 Cor. 10:18)."⁶

S. Lewis Johnson documents the blatant insistence of replacement theologians when he notes the following:

In speaking of the view that the term refers to ethnic Israel, a sense that the term *Israel* has in every other of its more than sixty-five uses in the New Testament and in its fifteen uses in Paul, in tones almost emotional William Hendriksen, the respected Reformed commentator, writes, "I refuse to accept that explanation." . . .

. . . It may also be said that biblical scholars often unwittingly overlook their own theological presuppositions, logical fallacies, and hermeneutical errors. What I am leading up to is expressed neatly by D. W. B. Robinson in an article written about twenty years ago: "The glib citing of Gal. vi:16 to support the view that 'the church is the new Israel' should be vigorously challenged. There is weighty support for a limited interpretation." We can say more than this, in my opinion. There is more

than weighty support for a more limited interpretation. There is overwhelming support for such. In fact, the least likely view among several alternatives is the view that “the Israel of God” is the church.⁷

One scholar, C. E. B. Cranfield makes an uncommon confession in a rare moment of candor in his commentary on Romans:

It is only where the Church persists in refusing to learn this message, where it secretly—perhaps quite unconsciously!—believes that its own existence is based on human achievement, and so fails to understand God’s mercy to itself, that it is unable to believe in God’s mercy for still unbelieving Israel, and so entertains the ugly and unscriptural notion that God has cast off His people Israel and simply replaced it by the Christian Church. These three chapters emphatically forbid us to speak of the church as having once and for all taken the place of the Jewish people. But the assumption that the Church has simply replaced Israel as the people of God is extremely common. . . . And I confess with shame to having also myself used in print on more than one occasion this language of the replacement of Israel by the Church.⁸

CONCLUSION

Just because a majority of respected judges in our day believe that judicial activism is the right approach to reading constitutional documents does not make it so. In the same vein, just because it is common for all too many to engage in allegorical interpretation of Scripture does not make it right. Errors like replacement theology will persist unless we begin to put a premium upon “handling accurately the word of truth.” (2 Tim. 2:15) This especially applies to the handling of the prophetic word. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Robert L. Thomas, “A Critique of Progressive Dispensational Hermeneutics,” in Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, editors, *When The Trumpet Sounds: Today’s Foremost Authorities Speak Out on End-Time Controversies* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), p. 417.

² Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), p. 57.

³ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, p. 167.

⁴ S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. “Paul and ‘The Israel of God’: An Exegetical and Eschatological Case-Study,” in Stanley D. Toussaint & Charles H. Dyer, editors, *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), p. 189.

⁵ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, “Israel and the Church,” in Wesley R. Willis, John R. Master, & Charles Ryrie, editors, *Issues In Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), p. 126.

⁶ Fruchtenbaum, “Israel and the Church,” p. 123-24.

⁷ Johnson, “Paul and ‘The Israel of God,’” p. 182.

⁸ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The International Critical Commentary, The Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. II (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), p. 448.