

Calculated blessings: A visit to John Hagee's church

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [October 7, 2008](#) issue

As I pulled into the parking lot of John Hagee's Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, I noticed that the person parking next to me was dressed in a purple African-print tunic. The crowd that streamed into the church seemed as racially and ethnically diverse as San Antonio, with a mix of blacks, whites and Latinos. The presence of Africans from newer immigrant communities was especially noticeable. When I reached a seat in the balcony, I observed that the woman next to me was resplendent in a flowing black robe with embroidered poinsettia leaves offset by silver sequins. She wore a tall silver head wrap and had a habit of completing any speaker's quoted Bible verses in her African-inflected English.

I had come to Pastor Hagee's church seeking a better understanding of his version of Christian Zionism. Hagee, who founded Cornerstone Church in 1975, is best known for his passionate support of Israel. His organization, Christians United for Israel (CUFI), meets every summer in Washington to mobilize support for Israel. I was prepared to encounter at Cornerstone the special concerns of Christian Zionism; I had not anticipated encountering the energy of worldwide Pentecostalism.

The guest preacher on this day was E. A. Adeboye, head of an organization of Pentecostal churches called the Redeemed Christian Church of God, headquartered in Lagos, Nigeria, but with 283 parishes in the U.S., including 58 in Texas. For Adeboye's visit, RCCG members had apparently traveled to San Antonio from all over Texas and beyond. Hagee and Adeboye shared the podium—with the Israeli flag on one side and the U.S. flag on the other.

Hagee made headlines in late February when he was one of the first leaders on the Christian right to endorse John McCain for president. He continued to make headlines in ways that made the McCain campaign uneasy. William Donohue of the Catholic League brought to light Hagee's record on Catholicism, citing video clips, viewable on YouTube, in which Hagee seemed to call the Catholic Church the "whore

of Babylon.”

Next came scrutiny of Hagee’s statements on the Holocaust, which included the notion that in murdering 6 million Jews Hitler was indirectly doing the will of God, since the Holocaust laid the groundwork for the modern state of Israel. Critics also pointed to clips of Hagee ranting against “radical Islam” in tones that could easily be interpreted as broadly anti-Muslim. (Hagee has since had all such video clips of his preaching removed from the Internet.) McCain, who had hoped that Hagee would help him win the support of America’s evangelicals, in May rescinded his acceptance of Hagee’s endorsement.

Though the media flurry was over, Hagee’s particular blend of Christian Zionism and Pentecostalism still intrigued me. I wondered who attended his church and where he fit in the world of American religion. The more I learned, the more I realized that Hagee is one of a kind—a unique mixture of televangelist, dispensationalist and Pentecostal Zionist.

Many conservative Christians see the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 as a sign indicating the imminent return of Jesus Christ. This belief has been prominent among Pentecostals, who believe that the final outpouring of the Spirit is happening in our time and are primed to see world events as signs of the end of time. While Hagee adheres to this version of Pentecostalism in books like *Jerusalem Countdown*, he is just as likely to emphasize the biblical imperative to safeguard Israel without any reference to the second coming. Here, for example, is how CUFI’s Web site lays out its agenda:

The Bible commands us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem (Psalm 122:6), to speak out for Zion’s sake (Isaiah 62:1), to be watchmen on the walls of Jerusalem (Isaiah 62:6) and to bless the Jewish people (Genesis 12:3).

These and so many other verses of the Bible have one overriding message—as Christians we have a biblical obligation to defend Israel and the Jewish people in their time of need.

In July, CUFI drew 3,000 people to its third annual Israel Summit. Speakers included former presidential candidate Gary Bauer and former senator Rick Santorum. The keynote address was by senator Joseph Lieberman, who acknowledged that he did not agree with Hagee on everything, but said he considered him an unfailing friend of Israel.

Hagee frequently denies any connection between his support for Israel and his eschatological beliefs. At a press conference in Washington in 2007, Hagee said: “Our support for Israel has absolutely nothing to do with end-times prophecy. It has absolutely nothing to do with eschatology. We support Israel because we feel that Israel is in greater danger than at any time in statehood.”

While some critics take this remark to be disingenuous, it does make some sense when one understands another side of Hagee’s Pentecostal tradition: an emphasis on the prosperity gospel, the material blessings that flow to believers. According to scholar Kate Bowler, the prosperity gospel operates with a “calculus of blessing.” Believers are constantly seeking to allow God’s blessings to shower on them. Unlike most prosperity gospel preachers, Hagee takes a more corporate than individual approach to calculating blessings: blessings come to nations, not only to individuals. His most often quoted line of scripture is Genesis 12:3, in which God says to Israel, “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse.” Hagee believes that in order for the U.S. to prosper and to remain within divine favor, it must bless Israel.

The “blessing” of Israel in the form of \$2.4 billion in annual aid is an insufficient blessing, in Hagee’s view. He says that the Bible mandates that Israel should include not only the land it currently occupies and the disputed regions of Gaza and the West Bank, but what is now the nation of Jordan. Hagee’s organization opposes ceding any territory to the Palestinians and opposes a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is why many observers in both the U.S. and Israel question whether Hagee is truly interested in Israel’s peace and security.

Hagee’s “calculus of blessing” separates him in other ways from traditional dispensationalists. For centuries, mass Jewish conversion to Christianity has been for Christian Zionists one of the most anticipated signs of the end times. Evangelical missions to Jews formed a significant part of Christian Zionist activity well into the 1930s. But for Hagee, Jews are already God’s people. They will recognize Jesus as their Messiah when he comes again at the end of time, but meanwhile they continue to experience God’s favor and blessing.

Within the evangelical world, Hagee has been criticized for his “two-door” salvation doctrine (gentiles come to salvation through Christ, Jews through Moses.) Indeed, Hagee frequently sounds like a person who wants Christians to become more like Jews than the other way around. Combining his passion for Israel with prosperity

gospel vocabulary, his ministry offers a Jewish prayer shawl (for \$45) “imported directly from Israel.” Hagee claims that such a shawl is “designed by God” and “carries the power to energize your prayer life.”

Of most concern to Hagee’s critics has been his escalating rhetoric on Iran. In his view, the U.S. should strike Iran because of the threat it poses to Israel. In short, the U.S. can “bless” Israel by attacking Iran. At the CUFI summit, all the workshops directly or indirectly dealt with this topic.

Hagee is not one to make distinctions between various kinds of Muslims, and he frequently refers to Christians and Jews as united against an “enemy” that can only be Islam. As CUFI’s conference brochure put it: “The enemies of Israel are the enemies of America. They are the enemies of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These enemies have drawn the battle lines. If a line has to be drawn, then draw that line around Christians and Jews.” The implication is that the enemy is Muslim and that America and Christians fit together as seamlessly as Israel and Jews. In Hagee’s rhetoric, Iran’s president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is the new Hitler, and we are “living in 1938” all over again. With such rhetoric, Hagee is more than the typical defender of Israel and more like a proponent of war in the Middle East.

In style and context, Hagee is something of a loner among preachers of the prosperity gospel. He creates his own conferences, publishes his own magazines and sells his own books—and makes few connections to other famous preachers. Cornerstone Church boasts more than 19,000 members and is ranked by *Outreach Magazine* as Number 31 on its list of the 100 largest churches in the U.S. on the basis of attendance.

On the bright summer day I visited Cornerstone, Hagee welcomed Adeboye and conducted the service in a folksy, easygoing manner. The music combined traditional hymnody, big-band sound and gospel. Hagee drew a laugh almost every time he spoke, creating a family atmosphere in the 5,000-seat auditorium. He warned about the downfall of the U.S. in one sentence and in the next invited the congregation to a massive July 4 picnic, complete with an inflatable waterpark and a fireworks display meant to rival the show put on by the city of San Antonio.

With Adeboye’s presence, the emphasis of the day was far more on the prosperity gospel than on dispensationalist fervor. Israel was mentioned only briefly in an announcement about the upcoming CUFI summit.

Adeboye began his sermon by stating that God is in charge. When God is on his throne, he is in control. When God arises, his enemies scatter. When God moves, he shakes the earth. When he passes by, you can sneak a miracle from him. When he stays with you, you can be safe from all trouble. Adeboye pointed to threats of economic recession and terrorism and gave assurances: “The whole nation can say, ‘We are suffering,’ but you will not know lack. You will only hear about it. It will not come near you at all.”

Like other prosperity gospel preachers, Adeboye was keen to show that his own blessing had reached a high level—“from glory unto glory.” He introduced his entourage, which included the “president of bankers” in Nigeria, the head of Nigerian airlines and the president of Adeboye’s own Redeemer University. “So you see,” he said, “I have them from all sides: academic, economic and legal. I am sure this is why people are afraid to attack me.”

In the Pentecostal world, the teaching that faith in God is rewarded with material prosperity frequently sits in tension with a traditional end-times theology that sees a world dominated by evil and apostasy and headed for destruction. Prosperity gospel preachers often offer an individualistic resolution to this tension, much as Adeboye did in his sermon: though nations may tumble, faithful individuals will thrive.

That theological route is harder for Hagee to take, given that he emphasizes God’s blessing of nations and peoples. Hagee does not so much resolve this tension as play upon it. For example, he concluded his remarks on this particular day by referring to the California Supreme Court’s decision to allow gay marriage: “If this happens, it will be the death knell of the nation. God will not sanctify that relationship.” In the divine economy of blessing, as Hagee presents it, America can do two things to lose favor with God: accept homosexuality and hesitate in its support of Israel. If the U.S. makes those missteps, God will certainly allow terrorists to overtake us.

Between services, I listened to Steve Sorenson, Cornerstone’s director of pastoral ministries, give a PowerPoint-aided class on holiness to about 500 people in the sanctuary. When I arrived, Sorenson was insisting that we must not be afraid to offend someone in the name of Jesus. “Wouldn’t you like to offend someone right into the kingdom of God?” he asks. “What if you said, ‘I think we should bomb Iraq, take out all the oil and then turn it into a parking lot for the Middle East’? Now that doesn’t sound very godly, does it? But sometimes you have to say things that offend

people if they are true.”

Sorenson’s message on the price paid for speaking truth and being on the side of holiness seemed distinctly at odds with Adeboye’s message of prosperity. Sorenson urged self-denial in the name of holiness instead of success as a sign of righteousness. He pointed out that the disciples could hardly be called blessed, and he talked a great deal about coming persecution.

“How many of you are afraid to step up? Christianity is the target of choice. They can’t say anything against Muslims. They can’t say anything against anyone else. But they are going to blast you. You are going to be the ones persecuted, and it is going to happen sooner than you think. This will be your chance to show what you are made of.” Again it appeared that Muslims played the role of the threatening other along with the vague “they” who will assault Christians, according to a classic Pentecostal scenario of Christians being besieged by the world.

Drawing from roots in dispensational theology and Pentecostalism, Hagee’s ministry adds elements of the global prosperity gospel and combines it all with a special passion for the defense of the state of Israel. These concerns may not all fit together smoothly at all times, but for the 19,000 members of Cornerstone Church, Hagee’s ministry appears to be an effective appeal to hope, desire and fear.