

If my people...

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America's propensity to see ourselves as God's new chosen nation has often led us to claim scripture directed at Israel (or Judah) as promises for ourselves. While such thinking generally makes me squirm, I can re-apply such interpretations to see how they apply to the modern world. Granted, such direct application is woefully historically inaccurate and the nationalistic (and narcissistic) assumption that the good ole US of A has magically replaced Israel as God's chosen people seemingly ignores the sacrificial act of Jesus on behalf of all nations - but I can still see how it works. I trust in the words of the prophets, and can believe that the principle of their commandments transcends culture even as they were originally situated in particular cultures themselves. So while I have trouble reading passages that talk about requirements of or blessings for God's people as applying to the citizens of the USA, I have no problem applying such commands to the church as the new representations of God's people.

That said, I do find it curious which passages those who see the USA as God's new chosen nation see fit to claim as applying directly to us. For many years the theme verse for the National Day of Prayer was 2 Chronicles 7:14 *"If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land."* In context, the passage refers to God helping heal the land from drought and swarms of locusts, but it more often these days is a request for God to rid our land of abortion and liberals. But whatever the context, I find it most intriguing that this verse suggests only personal piety (prayer and repentance) as the required acts that God will reward. This promise of "If we pray, God will heal" fits nicely into the modern Evangelical culture that stresses piety as the

necessary work of the people. Many churches shy away from acts of charity or justice due to the fear that they might become acts of "works righteousness" or distract us from personal habits like prayer and worship (as if such things are an either/or).

Choosing such passages of promise involves direct acts of selection and interpretation. The Bible is full of other such promises to Israel - telling them what is required of them in order for God to bless them - but those aren't often selected. For instance, take Jeremiah 7:3-7 -

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord." For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

If we do justice and take care of the immigrant and the poor and the homeless, and if we refrain from violence, and if we refrain from seeking after the idols of our age then God will be with us in our land. Why don't we hear church leaders applying those words to America? Why don't we have Evangelical churches mobilizing for National Days of Justice or Peacemaking or Welcoming and Caring for Immigrants? If we claim other words of worship requirement and blessing that were directed at Israel as mandates for ourselves in the modern church, then why aren't we claiming these words as well?

Our acts of worship and sacrifice - of taking our lives and making them holy by giving them to God - define our relationship with God. There should be nothing divisive or political about the decision to worship with acts of prayer or with acts of justice. God seemingly requires both of us. But we have allowed our politics to guide our interpretation of scripture - even to the point of which passages we claim as our own. We, like those Jeremiah calls out, seem to trust in

the deceptive words "The Temple of the Lord." Instead of listening to all of God's words about worship and acting rightly, we assume that our group's interpretation is correct and holy. We hide behind the name of "biblical Christian", or "compassionate Christian", or "progressive Christian" or whatever other deceptive mantra we choose to repeat as a way to drown out the voice of God.

I really don't care about God healing or blessing America - God is far bigger than the petty boundaries of a nation. But I do care about the church following the path God has called us to - a path that listens to all of God's commands and doesn't run away from the acts of worship required of us. Which is why I think we should listen to whenever God says "If my people..."

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