

'Fire on the Earth': God's Dealings with the West

by David Orton

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The malaise of the 21st century Western church, in an increasingly hostile secular culture, urges us to penetrate its cause and radically re-cast the Christian vision for the 21st century.

What is required is nothing short of the recovery of the biblical vision for a kingdom-shaped *ecclesia*; designed and destined by God to transform entire cultures and disciple nations. Even so, until God's people repent of the scandal of their sectarian divisions – albeit in the name of orthodoxy or pragmatics – the world will not listen. Only when we stand in the revelation of the unity of God (Deut 6:4-5; Mk 12:29; Eph 4:4-6), and thus, functionally as one body, in one Spirit and one faith, will the imprimatur of heaven entrust to us the spiritual authority requisite for the full harvest of the nations.

For this to occur much will need to change—in fact, it cries out that “*fire fall on the earth!*” (Lk 12:49). These words of Jesus described his mission. As one sent to the “*lost sheep of the house of Israel*” (Mtt 15:24), they allude not only to his role as Messiah, but also as *the* Prophet, climaxing the long succession of prophets sent to Israel, calling them back to covenant fidelity—to purity of heart before the Lord, and thus, to her calling as a missionary nation to the whole earth:

5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; 6 and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.

Exodus 19:5–6 ESV

Jesus ministry, as the final prophet to Israel, was to presage the judgement (restorative discipline) that was about to befall her. This was culminating the long history of biblical prophets who consistently called God's people back to the *stipulations* of the covenant—that is, to “... *love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind*” (Mtt 22:37 ESV, cited by Jesus from Deut 6:5).

However, a covenant not only has stipulations, but also *sanctions*. It was of these that all the prophets warned. And so, Jesus follows the declaration of his mission to “*cast fire on the earth*” with the challenge that they do not “... *know how to interpret the present 'time' [kairos]*” (Lk 12:56 ESV, author's emphasis). This begs the question as to what they should have been observing so as to understand their “time” (*kairos*)—very simply, the *sanctions* of the covenant; that is, the covenant consequences of their disobedience. Israel was wilfully blind to the fact that Roman occupation was exactly that! In line with the touchstone of Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26 – that *disobedience* produces *dispossession* – the prophetic interpretation of Israel's predicament was that they were under a judgement of God, albeit designed for their ultimate restoration (see Rom 11). The fire that was about to fall on the “earth” (literally *land*, alluding to Israel as the Promised *Land*) was the fall of Jerusalem, the predicted destruction of the temple, and their expulsion from the ‘land’ in AD 70—a mere 40 years on; significantly a biblical generation, in fulfilment of Jesus' Olivet discourse and prophecy (see Mtt 24).

My conviction is this: *we, in the 21st century West, are under a similar judgement as 1st century Israel*. Despite the historical fruits of Christian theism in the West, the West could now be described as apostate and neo-pagan. Like Israel of the 1st century, despite its long history of divine visitation and privilege, we too – because of *our* disobedience – are rapidly approaching the climax of a long line of incremental judgements. This last century, in spite of significant spiritual movements (Pentecostal Revival early century and Charismatic Renewal mid-century), witnessed two catastrophic world wars and a major depression without a demonstrable recognition – from either the church or wider culture – of “the present time (*kairos*)”; that is, that we are living in the consequences of violating God's covenant with humankind; made first in the Garden, then through Israel, and finally in Christ and to the nations that receive him (historically the West); wars and economic decline are included among these consequences, or *curses* (see Deut 28 and Lev 26).

To whom much is given, much is required (Lk 12:48). Also like Israel, the ‘previously Christian’ West – in fact, the product of the gospel’s cultural impact – privileged with the revelation of God and the covenant blessings (including prosperity and freedom) has “... *forsaken ... the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water*” (Jer 2:13 ESV); and thus, is now weighed in the balance and found wanting. Turning to the false gods of humanism and statism – exposed in the 20th century as “broken cisterns” – the West has come under a divine discipline. Interpreting Israel’s present predicament as covenant consequences (see Rom 9-11), it is time to heed Paul’s application, warning the Gentile church:

Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen [Israel], but God’s kindness to you [Gentiles], *provided you continue* in his kindness. *Otherwise you too will be cut off.*

Rom 11:22 ESV, (author’s emphasis)

What has happened to Israel – her *temporary* dispossession – can also happen to us!

The Western church’s fall – dramatically displayed in its humanist and existential theologies on one hand, and its market driven agendas on the other – has invited covenantal consequences, and like Israel, unless she turns, is about to be “cut off”—that is, *dispossessed*.

As Jesus warned:

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.

Matt 5:13 NASB

Our espousal of false gods and value systems has invited the ire of God. As a church and culture we are in the process of being expelled – under the discipline of God – from the ‘land’ of kingdom authority and power—of cultural and global influence. And this will escalate – through a neo-pagan post-Christian culture, war, economic recession, and radical Islam – until we fall on our faces. No amount of triumphalist ‘dominion’ or ‘faith’ posturing will override the dealings of God. Not until we own our corporate sin will we see the spiritual breakthrough and kingdom advance for which we labour and pray.

The call, therefore, is for radical repentance *and* reformation—a rending of our hearts *and* a mending of our ways; the dismantling of false belief systems and idolatrous power structures that resist the knowledge of God. It cries out for false theologies and the scandal of denominationalism to be addressed.

This then demands real changes as to *why* and *how* we do ‘church’. It can only begin in the epiphany of a moral universe under the government of God—of God’s covenant dealings with humankind, first with the church and then the culture. Judgement always begins in the household of God (1 Pet 4:17). As the church goes, so goes the world.

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