

Christian Zionism – Implications for Peace and Justice Between the Jewish and Palestinian Peoples

[Rejecting Christian Zionism]

Except from the 2012 Acts and Proceedings of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, pp 289-292.

Introduction

The 134th General Assembly received the following recommendation (A&P 2008, p. 25):

Given that the World Council of Churches has designated this week [June 4-10, 2008] as a Week of Action for Peace in Palestine and Israel, and given that next year [2009] marks the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth, that this Assembly repudiate any version of Christian Zionism that implies a two covenant theology, and that it affirm Calvin's conviction (based on Paul) that, in the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith (VII, 6) "there are not two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same and under various dispensations".

A motion to refer was adopted which stated: "that the additional motion be referred to the Committee on International Affairs to consult with the Committee on Church Doctrine."

The International Affairs Committee decided to respond to this recommendation once the General Assembly had received and considered the report from the Committee on Church Doctrine on Supersessionism. That committee submitted this report to the 136th General Assembly (A&P 2010, p. 290-355).

In its report the Committee on Church Doctrine noted that the Reformed tradition has always affirmed a single covenant of grace, not two separate and parallel covenants, one for the Jew, one for the Gentile, the so-called "two covenant theory..." (A&P 2010, p. 292).

Christian Zionism is a complex and multifaceted approach to theology and biblical interpretation. It is grounded in beliefs which consider the State of Israel to be divinely ordained and scripturally determined with a central role in ushering in the end of history. The International Affairs Committee is concerned about the implications of Christian Zionism on building and achieving peace with justice between Israel and Palestine.

Following the direction of the 134th General Assembly, a working group of the International Affairs Committee met with a working group of the Committee on Church Doctrine in November 2011, and had a fruitful discussion. The contribution drafted by the working group from the Church Doctrine Committee is reflected in the following section.

What Is Christian Zionism?

Christian Zionism, like most theological labels, has a variety of forms and emphases. In general the following summary is true of all shapes of beliefs gathered under the rubric of Christian Zionism. Christian Zionists hold to a view of history called dispensational premillennialism. This view separates history into different ages or dispensations in which different divine covenants are in effect. It also emphasizes that Christ will return prior to

the millennium (1,000 years) as mentioned in Revelation 20, after which history will come to a close with a cataclysmic cosmic battle often called Armageddon.

At the heart of Christian Zionism is the belief that the modern State of Israel is divinely ordained and scripturally determined to have a central role in ushering in the end of history. The pre-condition of Christ's return is that Jews (who have been chosen to do God's work) must return to Palestine in fulfillment of biblical prophecies. They must establish their state in the whole of Eretz Yisrael (the land of Israel), including Jerusalem, which has been given by God to Jews exclusively as an eternal inheritance. The Jewish temple must be rebuilt in order to usher in the second coming of Christ.

Accordingly, since Christian Zionists believe that the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the extension of Israel's boundaries in 1967 are a divine fulfillment of promises to the patriarchs and a precursor to the immediate second coming of Christ, they endeavour to actively participate in bringing what they believe are God's plans to completion by supporting the extension of Israel's boundaries and settlements. They also encourage people to reject any peace process between Israel and Palestinians and the establishment of a Palestinian state because they believe these actions would be contrary to God's will. In this light, all aspirations of the Palestinian people to their own country in parts of the "Holy Land" must be rejected. Christian Zionists also tend to ignore the presence and undervalue the significance of Christian Palestinians.

The working groups of the Committee on Church Doctrine and the International Affairs Committee agreed that this interpretation is at variance with the teaching of Scripture concerning both the general resurrection and judgment. In Reformed theology as expressed in the subordinate standards of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Westminster Confession of Faith and Living Faith, the kingdom of God is not primarily an earthly reign bounded by time, race or geography but is Good News centred in the person and work of Jesus Christ and is directed to all people everywhere. Reformed Christians generally believe that the 1,000 years mentioned in Revelation 20 are symbolic. Furthermore, the events related to and the time of Christ's return, are the sole purview of God. The day of Jesus' return is unknown to us and cannot be influenced through human effort. In the meantime, efforts among all peoples to express love, peace and justice in the world are the clear mandate of those who would follow Jesus faithfully.

Nevertheless, many Christians, especially in the United States, accept the premises of Christian Zionism and believe that the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, and Israel's capture of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza in 1967 as a fulfillment of prophecy. In recent decades, Christian Zionists have supported the settler movement and its Jewish theological supporters, both in Israel and the West as the working out of the Divine Plan, leading to the Second Coming. They play a significant role in influencing public opinion and, certainly in the United States, government policy towards Israel.

Given the implications Christian Zionism has for Palestinians, it is important to hear what leaders in the Palestinian Christian community have said about Christian Zionism and

what this means for peace with justice. This is in keeping with the longstanding practice of the International Affairs Committee of listening to church partners on the ground.

The Voice of Palestinian Christians

The Jerusalem Declaration on Christian Zionism was released on August 22, 2006. The following points are taken from the Declaration. For the full statement, see Jerusalem Testament: Palestinian Christians Speak, Melanie A. May, 1988-2008, p. 123-24.1

Christian Zionism is a modern theological and political movement that embraces the most extreme ideological positions of Zionism, thereby becoming detrimental to a just peace within Palestine and Israel.

The Christian Zionist program provides a worldview where the gospel is identified with the ideology of empire, colonialism and militarism. In its extreme form, it places an emphasis on apocalyptic events leading to the end of history rather than living Christ's love and justice today.

We categorically reject Christian Zionist doctrines as false teaching that corrupt the biblical message of love, justice and reconciliation.

We affirm that all people are created in the image of God. In turn they are called to honour the dignity of every human being and to respect their inalienable rights.

We are committed to non-violent resistance as the most effective means to end the illegal occupation in order to attain a just and lasting peace.

The establishment of the illegal settlements and the construction of the Separation Wall on confiscated Palestinian land undermine the viability of a Palestinian state as well as peace and security in the entire region.

We call upon Christians in churches on every continent to pray for the Palestinian and Israeli people, both of whom are suffering as victims of occupation and militarism.

We affirm that Israelis and Palestinians are capable of living together within peace, justice and security.

The Jerusalem Declaration on Christian Zionism concludes with the following passage from scripture: God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19).

The Declaration was signed by:

Patriarch Michael Sabbah, Latin Patriarchate, Jerusalem;

Archbishop Swerios Malki Mourad, Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate, Jerusalem;

Bishop Riah Abu El-Assal, Episcopal Church of Jerusalem and the Middle East; and

Bishop Munib Younan, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land.

Statements of General Assembly Concerning Israel and Palestine

While The Presbyterian Church in Canada has not commented on Christian Zionism in the past, the church has expressed its clear support for a peace settlement based on the "two state solution" with the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state.

The 109th General Assembly and the 116th General Assembly affirmed support for United Nations Security Council resolutions, particularly Resolutions 242 and 338 (A&P 1983, p. 374 and A&P 1990, p. 395-400, 62-63). Resolution 242 calls for:

The withdrawal of Israel from the territory occupied since 1967 and the recognition by all states in the region of Israel's right to exist;

The right of all states, including Israel and its Arab neighbours, to live in peace with secure and recognized borders; and

The right of the Palestinians to self-determination, including the right to establish their own sovereign state.

Resolution 338 was passed by the United Nations Security Council during the 1973 conflict and called for an immediate ceasefire, the implementation of Security Council Resolution 242 and negotiations to bring about a just and sustainable peace in the Middle East.

Withdrawing from the Occupied Territories means an end to Israeli settlements in the West Bank, all of which must be disposed of or dealt with, within a negotiated settlement. An arrangement must be found so that Jerusalem can be shared by the two peoples and three faiths for which it is a holy city.

Then there is the question of 5 million Palestinian refugees – that is those Palestinian refugees who are eligible for United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) services. One-third of the registered Palestine refugees, more than 1.4 million, live in 58 recognised refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The future of Palestinian refugees needs to be considered in a way that fairly addresses the concerns of both Israelis and Palestinians.

In Living Faith (8.4.3, 8.5.3), we are reminded of our responsibilities as Christians to marginalized and vulnerable people:

Justice involves protecting the rights of others.

It protests against everything that destroys human dignity...

We affirm that God is at work when people are

ashamed of the inhumanity of war

and work for peace with justice.

Conclusion

We rarely hear the voices of courageous Israeli Jews and Palestinians (Christian and Muslim) deeply committed to peace with justice and two states living side by side in peace. These prophetic voices are marginalized in this drama. They strive to maintain a hopeful prophetic presence when there seems to be so little hope. These are voices that need to be heard.

Regrettably, Christian Zionist organizations have not demonstrated a commitment to supporting and working for peace with justice between Israelis and Palestinians. The

present and future consequences of the policies advocated by Christian Zionist organizations are potentially disastrous, not only for Palestinians but also for the Jewish population of Israel itself. The only solution to this conflict that serves the long term interests of both peoples is an honourable peace, a peace that provides security and justice for both peoples.

Recommendation No. 9 (adopted, p. 35)

That with an acknowledgement of the complexity of issues faced by the people of the Middle East and, in particular, by the people of Israel and the Palestinian territories, we, the 138th General Assembly affirm the right of the State of Israel and the people of Palestine to exist in peace and security while we reject Christian Zionism as a doctrinal stance inconsistent with Reformed doctrine and its emphasis on one covenant of grace for all peoples, and that we acknowledge the message of Palestinian sisters and brothers in Christ that Christian Zionism poses a significant obstacle to a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

Resources

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Burge, Gary M. *Jesus and the Land: The New Testament Challenge to "Holy Land" Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010.

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Gushee, David P. and Stassen, Glen H. "An Open Letter to America's Christian Zionists," www.justpeacemaking.blogspot.com. September 19, 2011. The Just Peacemaking Initiative website is hosted by Fuller Theological Seminary. <http://fuller.edu>.

May, Melanie A. *Jerusalem Testament: Palestinian Christians Speak, 1988-2088*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010.

Sizer, Stephen. *Christian Zionism: Road Map to Armageddon*. Leicestershire: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004.

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. <https://www.unrwa.org>.

Endnotes for Christian Zionism – Implications for Peace and Justice Between the Jewish and Palestinian Peoples

1. May, Melanie A. *Jerusalem Testament: Palestinian Christians Speak*, 1988-2088. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010, p.123-124.