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The Church's Role in the Palestinian/Israeli Conflict: Call for Justice

PETER A. SETHRE

Ixperienced firsthand the current struggle for justice and peace in the Middle East when I spent a semester sabbatical at Tantur Ecumenical Institute, between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, in the fall of 2000. Based on that experience, I see several roles that the church might play in this conflict.

First, the church should seek to discover what is really going on in this troubled region, and why. We should learn about the rise of Zionism, the British Mandate, settlements, and occupation. But let me warn you: the media will not be much help, as its reporting is often superficial and biased. (One reliable source of information that I recommend is the ELCA website: www.elca.org/middleeast.) It goes without saying that there are two sides to this issue, that neither Israelis nor Palestinians are all good or all evil. Both sides have things to repent of; both sides will have to give up some dreams for the future. Nevertheless, there is no excuse for what Israel is doing to the Palestinians through military occupation, illegal settlements, intimidation, harassment, home demolitions, and killing. Though there are innocent victims on both sides, many more Palestinians have died than Israelis. The Western media generally report that Palestinians attack and Israel responds in self-defense, that Israel is only responding to Palestinian violence. But the current policies of the state of Israel are not for security or self-defense; they represent an aggressive policy of military conquest and ethnic cleansing meant to bring the Palestinians to submission.

Second, we need to inform parishioners about these issues and realities. People need to know that there are many Christians—including many Lutherans—in Palestine, all struggling to survive. The demise of the Christian community in the very birthplace of Christianity would be a tragedy. Struggling Christian communities there need our support, and our parishioners should know this.

Third, the church needs to challenge the right-wing fundamentalist Christian movement known as Christian Zionism that sees the modern state of Israel as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy and the key to the end times. Christian Zionists support modern Israel not because they love Jewish people, but because they want to use Israel and the Jews to further their end-times theology and political agenda. Author Hal Lindsey, Congressman Tom DeLay, and the *Left Behind* series of books represent this movement, which has significant influence in Washington. Bishop

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TO FACE

The Church's Role in the Palestinian/Israeli Conflict: Preach the Word

HANS H. WIERSMA

As *New York Times* correspondent Thomas L. Friedman has written, “When it comes to talking about the Middle East, people go temporarily insane, so if you are planning to talk to an audience of more than two, you’d better have mastered the subject.” Since I claim no such mastery, I recognize that I am ignoring Friedman’s advice. On the other hand, as they say, “Fools rush in...”

In regard to the church’s role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it should go without saying that it is no different than the church’s role in any other situation or circumstance: to preach the gospel in its purity and administer the sacraments therewith. By design, such preaching and administration will justify sinners and bring about the “newness of life” necessary for the establishment of authentic and lasting reconciliation, restoration, and peace (or *shalom* or *salaam*). Who knows?—such preaching and administration might even result in inspiring the advent of conciliatory leadership on both sides of the conflict (à la Mandela and De Klerk) to bring about a political miracle (à la South Africa). Those who disagree with Luther’s observation in Thesis 26 of the *Heidelberg Disputation* (see point 4, below) will perhaps regard this view as wishful thinking. On the other hand, Jesus was probably not kidding when he said that “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). The faithful magnification (rather than minimization) of the crucified and risen Christ will accomplish much more than the application of law—even, perhaps especially, in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, some might also expect or hope that the question about the church’s role in the region implies also a question of policy, namely: Which political solution to the conflict should the church support? Or, more to the point, whose side should the church be on, Israel’s or Palestine’s? To these questions one will find a variety of responses among the varieties of Christians. Some will sympathize primarily with Israel and its attempt to establish a secure “Jewish” homeland in the aftermath of centuries of Diaspora, persecution, and genocide. Others will sympathize more with the displaced Christians and Muslims in and around Palestine, those being denied basic human rights, not to mention the “right of self-determination” and the “right of return.”

Nevertheless, despite the divided sympathies among Christians, there seems to be little tolerance for the extremists on both sides. That is, Christians aware of

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Munib Younan of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jerusalem has called Christian Zionism a “sick theology,” a “heresy,” and an enemy of peace in the Middle East. We need to challenge the common view that unconditional support of modern Israel is the only Christian position.

Fourth, we need to encourage parishioners to contact legislators to adopt a more balanced U.S. policy. The United States’ unqualified support of Israel is a scandal, and the entire world knows it. Weapons used by Israel in its assault on Palestinians are all supplied by the United States. Our \$3 billion of annual aid to Israel and requests for additional funding automatically sail through Congress with hardly a question. The Israeli lobby (AIPAC) is very effective and strong; few dare ignore or resist it. Others need to make their voices known.

Fifth, as Lutherans, we need to approach the issue with humility and repentance because of the Holocaust and Luther’s writings regarding the Jews. Although the Lutheran church has officially disassociated itself from those writings and deeds, for many Jewish people “Lutheran” is synonymous with “anti-Semitic.”

Sixth, nevertheless, this does not mean that we have no right to speak out about justice for the Palestinians. Calling for Israel to practice justice is not anti-Semitism. Israel seeks peace with security, and the Palestinians seek peace with justice. The problem is that Israelis will have security *only* when the Palestinians have justice. Christian churches in Palestine represent the last major organized peaceful effort for Palestinian rights, and we need to join our voices to theirs.

Seventh, Christians need to speak against all violence in that struggle, whether that of suicide bombers or that practiced by Jewish settlers and the Israeli army. Violence only breeds more violence.

Eighth, we need to be sure that speaking out about the Palestinian/Israeli struggle does not endanger Jewish-Christian dialogue.

In sum, we need especially to do three things:

- *de-stereotype* images of Palestinians and Israel. Palestinians are not all radical terrorists who only understand force, and Israel is not a helpless nation that is only defending itself.
- *de-Zionize* the Bible. The state of Israel is not the “Israel” mentioned in the Bible. Modern Israel is not the fulfillment of biblical prophecy.
- *de-mythologize* the state of Israel. Israel was born in violence and made possible by the displacement of 700,000 Palestinians. Modern Israel is in reality a harsh militarism disguised in the myth of innocence and victimization.

This is not meant as self-righteous criticism of Israel. It is a call to Israel, the United States, and the world for justice for the Palestinians. The God of Abraham and Sarah, the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ, calls us to do no less. ⊕

PETER A SETHRE is director of continuing education at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.

the facts generally do not support Zionists seeking to drive all non-Jews into surrounding Arab nations on the one hand, nor do they support Islamicists seeking to push all non-Muslims into the Mediterranean Sea on the other. Even more, there can be no enthusiasm among Christians for the toll on innocent life exacted by the incursions of Islamic suicide-bombers or Jewish defense forces. Between the extremes, however, there are plenty of contradicting Christian viewpoints, not only in terms of a fair political outcome, but also in terms of the “road map” needed to reach such an outcome.

The volume of rhetoric surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be overwhelming. Those concerned about accuracy and truth (hence, not everyone) must sort through competing versions of history, competing views of Scripture, competing claims of victimization, competing understandings of political rights, even competing assertions about what is and what is not terrorism—too much to sort through in this short essay, in other words. Therefore, toward the establishment of responsible speech, discussion, and advocacy in the matter, I humbly submit the following suggestions:

1. Read up on the historical, political and religious particulars. Unfortunately, there is no one authoritative author or volume, and recommending one will only betray a bias. Still, Meron Benvenisti's *Intimate Enemies: Jews and Arabs in a Shared Land* (1995) is a good place to start. This work, seen as a betrayal by some Israelis and as a whitewash by some Palestinians, offers sharp analysis and a unique proposal for peace.

2. Understand that desperation cuts both ways. Many attempt to understand—if not also justify—the violence of Palestinian extremism as the “desperate acts of desperate people.” If so, consistency dictates that Israel's subjugation of Palestinians be understood in similar terms. That is, in a country united around the vow “Never Again,” one might expect severe measures toward a population that is perceived to harbor those who sympathize with the eliminationist strategies of the Third Reich.

3. Be careful when speaking as a Lutheran. If you want to lose all credibility among Jews, make official condemnations of Israel from your Lutheran or Lutheran organization's vantage point. Luther's anti-Jewish writings and the fact that many of “Hitler's Willing Executioners” were Lutheran are two strikes against the chances that any distinctly “Lutheran” pronouncement will be taken seriously by at least one party in the conflict.

4. Consider preaching above politics. There is no shortage of “shoulds” here: “Israel should....” “The Palestinians ought to....” “The church must....” But perhaps the solution lies beyond shrill political imperatives. “The law says, ‘do this,’ and it is never done. Grace says, ‘believe in this,’ and everything is already done” (Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, Thesis 26; LW 31:41). ⊕

HANS H. WIERSMA is an ELCA pastor and a Ph.D. candidate in church history at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.

