

Christian Zionism and Israeli Congregations

I heard a story, one that is really supposed to have happened. The incident took place during Operation Desert Storm, in Saudi Arabia. It seems that an officer had been promoted to the rank of General and had been assigned to an office. He went to his new office, sat behind the desk, and was basking in his own importance, when he heard someone approach his door and knock. He quickly picked up the telephone receiver and, pretending he had been interrupted, he said something like this, "Come in and have a seat. I won't be but a minute." He then continued into the telephone, "Excuse me, General Schwarzkopf, you were saying?" (pause) Well, General, my wife and I were glad to have you and your lovely wife in our home last night, and hope you can come again soon." (pause) "Yes sir, I would be happy to brief you on that at your convenience." (pause) "Very well, sir. I'll see you then. Good-bye." Then, turning to the young private who had been waiting patiently he said, "Now, private, what can I do for you?" The private answered rather nervously, "Sir, I've been sent to connect your telephone."

I do not want to be presumptuous, and I can save myself a lot of embarrassment by acknowledging at the beginning, that many of you could address this topic with a great deal more incisiveness than I. Indeed, John Ross, Walter Riggins, and others of your membership have already written on related subjects. But if this paper can further stimulate our thinking along these lines, then the effort will not have been in vain. Please also understand that my perspective has been influenced by my American background and Israeli ministry.

CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND JEWISH EVANGELISM

The topic, of course, has been selected for me, and is to be considered under the conference theme, "Christian Ethics and Jewish Evangelism." I don't suppose the meaning would be changed greatly were we to switch the terms so that it read, "Jewish Ethics and Christian Evangelism"...except, of course, that most of our Jewish adversaries would assert that any attempt to change their minds about Jesus is, ipso facto, unethical. The point is, however, that we are dealing primarily with ethical considerations in our evangelistic encounter with the Jewish people.

Perhaps we would do well to begin by defining our terms. I want to begin with the conference theme, for reasons which will become clear later. What do we mean by "evangelism"? Although the concept is a biblical one, the usage of the English word is relatively recent. In fact, the word, "evangelism," began to appear in published works around the mid-nineteenth century (Taylor, p.19). In 1918, the Archbishop of Canterbury appointed a special committee to work out a practical definition. So, the official Anglican definition is as follows:

To evangelize is so to present Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit that men shall come to put their trust in God through Him, to accept Him as their Saviour, and serve Him as their King in the fellowship of His Church (as quoted by Taylor, p.21).

In the United States, an inter-denominational gathering of protestant ministers convened in 1946 to draft a definition that would be meaningful and challenging to American churches. They arrived at the following:

Evangelism is the presentation of the Good News of God in Jesus Christ, so that men are brought, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to put their trust in God; accept Jesus Christ as their Savior from the guilt and power of sin; follow and serve Him as their Lord in the fellowship of the Church and in the vocations of the common life (as quoted by Taylor, p.21).

"Ethics" has to do with behavior. A dictionary definition would say, "the study of standards of conduct" (Guralnik, p.480). Furthermore, sin consists not merely of acts of commission, but also of omission. If a man on the deck of a ship at sea, watches a drowning man cry for help, and he does nothing, he is morally accountable. For example, it really does not matter whether the neglect of evangelism is due to fear or to defiance, it is still calloused disobedience and a hard-hearted disregard for the fate of others. Especially is this the case when this neglect is justified and promoted as an acceptable alternative to obedience.

CHRISTIAN ZIONISM AND ISRAELI CONGREGATIONS

Now then, we come to the subject, "Christian Zionism and Israeli Congregations." How shall we define our terms here? Let's start with the easy one: Israeli congregations. Technically, this would refer to all congregations of believers in Yeshua which are found in Israel; whether Jewish, Arab, Russian, or English-speaking. These congregations are trying to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace, and enjoy fellowship together in inter-congregational retreats and other activities. Nevertheless, I presume that the intended frame of reference is to the predominantly Jewish, Hebrew-speaking congregations of Israel.

The Encyclopaedia Judaica defines Zionism, historically, as, "the movement whose goal was the return of the Jewish people to Eretz Israel" ("Zionism," vol. 16, p. 1031). The real trick comes in defining Christian Zionism. If Zionism is the movement to return the Jewish people to the land of Israel and to secure their survival as a nation, then is Christian Zionism a movement of Christians who share this Zionist concern? or should there be more? We will return to this subject later, but for now we will give attention to the common understanding of Christian Zionism.

For example, the editors of the Jerusalem Post (March 24, 1992; p.6) define Christian Zionists as, "those who are committed to Israel and its people with no hidden agenda." Paul Peterson, although not an official spokesman for the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, writing as one who, "know[s] the Embassy's heart," says:

Christian Zionism could be defined as the belief by many Christians that the Bible teaches God will fulfill His promises to the Jewish people to restore them to the Holy Land, and establish a Jewish state that will never be destroyed. Christian Zionists also believe that as Christians, they should take an active part in this restoration. (Mishkan, 16, p.78)

Rev. Ed Steele, one of the American organizers of the first Annual National Christian Zionist Conference (held March 5-6, 1992, in San Antonio, Texas), answers the question, "What is Christian Zionism?" by saying: "Christian Zionism is a rock-solid belief in, and commitment to, the Book [i.e., the Bible] and the People of the Book [i.e., the Jewish People], with no hidden agenda" (Christians and Israel, p.7).

There are several elements which are common to most such definitions:

1. A loyal commitment to the State of Israel and her people;
2. A belief that, in the State of Israel, God has begun, and will continue, to restore the political fortunes of the Jewish people;
3. A belief that, as Christians, we should take an active role in this restoration; and
4. A belief that this Christian involvement in the restoration of Israel should be without any hidden agenda.

This last element, "no hidden agenda," is to be understood as "no evangelistic intention." To be sure, several speak of a variety of "witnesses," such as "the witness of the Land" and "the witness of love," but the kind of "witness" which they promote will never bring anyone to the Lord (e.g., cf. Peterson, Mishkan 16, pp.78 ff).

Were we to adopt a different definition of Christian Zionism, all of us, I am sure, would classify ourselves as Christian Zionists. But the term, as it is being used today and as I have defined it above, would exclude each and every one of us.

With the conference theme, "Christian Ethics and Jewish Evangelism," and this paper specifically addressing "Christian Zionism and Israeli Congregations," it is logical to assume that there must be an ethical issue involved in the relationship. What is the problem?

SECONDARY ISSUES

The answer may not be as simple as you might at first suppose. It will be my position that there is one, central, ethical issue, but before it can be isolated and addressed specifically, the ground must be cleared of secondary issues which frequently get in the way. Some require only a comment, others slightly more.

1. The charge that there is an ethical problem here is not a thinly-veiled criticism of Christian Zionism's generally right wing political position, although some have raised this as an issue. Many of their critics are also on the conservative end of the political spectrum. This is a side issue.

2. Neither is it a criticism of Charismatic theology, nor of Dispensationalism. In the first place, although many of the Christian Zionist groups are Charismatic in theology, so are many of the Israeli congregations which they have eschewed. In the second place, although most of the Christian Zionist groups are Dispensationalist, their forebears of the previous century, who both preceded and assisted Theodore Herzl, believed not only in the political restoration of Israel, but also in her spiritual restoration - through active evangelism and the planting of congregations in Israel.

In this connection, I should note that although we are indebted to John Ross for an excellent survey of the Reformation and Puritan roots of "evangelical pro-Zionism," and to more recent "evangelical affirmation," the history of dispensationalism is also replete with examples of a balanced and evangelistic Zionism. Thomas Ice, himself a dispensationalist writer, says:

J.N.Darby, the father of modern dispensationalism, developed the system in the 1820s and '30s by saying that God's plan for history included two peoples, Israel and the church.... Because of the rise of the dispensational viewpoint, "premillennialists were able to stress the evangelization of the Jews, while at the same time, they supported Jewish nationalistic aspirations" (Timothy Webb, Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming, Zondervan, 1983, p.141, as quoted by Ice).

Following Darby were others such as Arno Gaebelein and W. E. Blackstone, who also maintained a balance between the political and the spiritual. David Baron was not only the founder of the Hebrew Christian Testimony to Israel, but attended 9 or 10 Zionist World Congresses and was a friend of Theodore Hertzl. It is important to remind our dispensational friends that dispensationalism teaches that Israel and the Church are distinct, not separate.

3. Another issue which has been raised is that of misrepresentation. Some claim that Christian Zionist groups have presented

themselves to gentile Christian supporters as if their purposes were evangelistic, while denying any evangelistic intent to Jewish community leaders and/or Israeli officials. Christian Zionists would counter with a denial and with the argument that, in spite of their best efforts to communicate clearly, "some will always misunderstand." Of course, to those for whom "friendship" has replaced evangelism - to those who speak of "the witness of love," it is easy to see how a false and misleading impression could be left in the minds of the unsuspecting.

4. Finally, we must not take offense at the programs of social assistance, in themselves. Compassion for the physical needs of people has always accompanied the gospel. Many acts of charity are to be commended, although some expressions of goodwill, such as building Orthodox synagogues in Israel, have drawn sharp criticism.

CHRISTIAN ZIONISM AND JEWISH EVANGELISM

All of the above are, to a greater or lesser degree, significant, but they are secondary issues. In fact, I would be so bold as to suggest that the title of this assignment is also inadequate. The real issue is not the relationship of Christian Zionism to Israeli congregations, but to the proclamation of the gospel that Yeshua, the Messiah, died to atone for the sins of Israel. The topic, therefore, should be, "Christian Zionism and Jewish Evangelism."

In defense of this proposal, two points should be made:

1. At least one Christian Zionist organization claims a serious desire to support and work with Israeli congregations, and is presently distributing benevolence through several local congregations. Thus the force of the original topic is weakened. And, should strong relationships be forged between Christian Zionist organizations and Israeli congregations, without a corresponding change in the perspective on Jewish evangelism of these organizations, nothing would have been gained.
2. Until these organizations clarify their stand satisfactorily in regard to the gospel, many Israeli congregations will not value a closer relationship with them. In fact, the Christian Zionists' public statements will continue to undermine the position of Messianic Jews in Israel.

The issue is not that they turn a blind eye to Israeli congregations, but that almost all of them turn a blind eye to the gospel of our Lord. Certainly, Christian Zionist organizations could be of assistance to Israeli congregations. They could establish a loan fund to help local congregations buy or build facilities in which to meet. They could use their fiscal and political clout to build a wall of legal protection around local believers and congregations - perhaps a sort of "Messianic Civil Liberties Union." But they will never agree to these proposals until they

change their minds regarding Jewish evangelism.

One of the early books specifically on evangelism, was written in 1888 by Arthur T. Pierson. In this book, Pierson sounds a note of warning concerning the evangelistic responsibility of the Church:

So far as she [i.e., the church] fails to bring the gospel to the knowledge of the unsaved, she disobeys the last command of her Lord, declines in spiritual life, forfeits her commission, and risks the removal of her candlestick out of its place (as quoted by Taylor, p.20).

In other words, "Christians are involved in evangelism to the degree that they are truly Christian" (Taylor, p.20). Rabbi Moshe Porush, an anti-missionary activist says:

Whoever declares that he is a good Christian, but is not a missionary, either is lying or isn't a good Christian. Whoever is familiar with theology knows that, in their eyes, mission is an obligation" (newspaper interview, January 1984, as quoted by Willmington and Pritz, p.32).

Although Mr. Porush and I might disagree regarding the definition of a missionary (among other things!), his understanding of our evangelistic mandate is accurate.

THREE TYPES OF CHRISTIAN ZIONISTS

It is important that we understand three types of Christian Zionists which are not interested in Jewish evangelism: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

A. First is the "good." These are the naive, sentimental Christians who have been swept off their feet by the Zionist idea. As James Reapsom has said:

It is dangerously possible to be so enamoured with the land, and to be so taken up with Israel's cause, that one can forget the desperate spiritual blindness engulfing Israel today" (as quoted by Byron Spradlin in "We Can Love Israel Too Much," Mishkan, Vol.8/9, p.136).

There are many tourists to Israel who are interested primarily in Israel's Biblical and archaeological past ("The acts of the Biblical past took place here"). There are also many who are interested in Israel's prophetic future ("The acts of Bible prophecy will take place here"). But their sentimentality seldom allows them to consider the present work of God among His faithful remnant. In this connection, recovering the Jewish root of our faith is important, but it is more important to seek the Jewish fruit of our faith. I call these folk "good" only in comparison to the other two types.

B. The "bad" are the ones who have bought into the dual covenant theology. They are bad because they have denied the faith. It is useless to encourage these people to proclaim the gospel to the Jewish people, for one can not share what he does not have. Yeshua is not just a good way to be saved; He's not even the best way to be saved; He's the only way to come to know God. Yeshua said, "I am THE way, THE truth, and THE life."

A couple of Israeli believers who were committed to the promises of God with regard to Israel, but equally committed to the gospel, were arrested for preaching about Yeshua near the Western Wall, in the Old City of Jerusalem. Prior to their release the next day, they were told that, though they were free to give aid to the handicapped and to assist other social causes, they were...

...not to speak or teach at all in the name of Yeshua. But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:18-20).

C. The "ugly" are the ones who emphasize the sovereignty of God to the exclusion of human responsibility, because this is an ugly perversion of Biblical truth. While the dual covenant fantasy is attractive to "nominal" Christians, it is not an attractive option for evangelicals. For evangelicals, the principle retreat is to a perversion of the sovereignty of God (which is also sometimes linked to a superficial understanding of Romans 11:26 - "All Israel will be saved").

For example, Paul Peterson says, "Nowhere in the scriptures are we instructed to convert anyone. This is the exclusive work of the Holy Spirit" ("To Witness or Not to Witness," Mishkan, 16, p.81. For other such examples, see my review of Marvin Wilson's book, Our Father Abraham, Mishkan, 11, p.).

Several things need to be said in response:

1. God is sovereign, but this fact does not cancel our commission.

2. The proclamation of the gospel is not a hidden agenda. Yeshua, Himself, has not only placed evangelism on the agenda of the Church and of every individual believer, but He has given it the central position. It is not merely an option, a mitzvah, or one of 613 commandments; rather, it is at the heart of our purpose on earth. We must face the fact - evangelism is our agenda. We ignore it to our loss; we hide it to our shame; or we fulfill it to His honor and glory.

I do not mean to suggest that the primary role of every organization in which believers are involved must, of necessity, be evangelistic. I do not believe there would be objection if a

group were to say, "The role of our organization is not evangelistic. Nevertheless, we believe that the Jewish people (and all other nations) stand in need of the salvation which is only available through Yeshua, Jesus. We bear personal witness to Him as individuals; and as an organization we support the rights of our messianic brothers and sisters and stand in solidarity with them." The problem comes when there is not such a willingness.

3. There is a glaring inconsistency in this position. These people are willing to consign the spiritual restoration of the Jewish people to the sovereignty of God, but they are working feverishly to support and to accomplish the physical restoration of Israel. They need to be reminded that "He who keepeth Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps."

4. William Carey dealt with this argument two hundred years ago. There were those in his day who opposed sending missionaries to the heathen. They said to Carey, "If God wants the heathen saved, He'll do it without your help." These Christian Zionists are now saying the same thing about the Jewish people.

CONCLUSION

It is my contention that these three forms of Christian Zionism are basically rationalizations - they are manifestations of unbelief. One of the clearest lines of evidence for this assertion is their misuse of scripture. There is a marked difference in the hermeneutical integrity of the evangelicalism from which they sprang, and the distinctively sloppy hermeneutics of Christian Zionism.

Frequent mention is made of their mission to "comfort" Israel, even as the prophet Isaiah spoke in Isaiah 40:1-2. However, the comfort of which Isaiah spoke is clearly brought to Israel through a verbal proclamation which has to do with the pardon of her iniquity. They speak of the need to "bless" Israel on the basis of Genesis 12:3, but the way to bless Israel is through the announcement that her redemption has come! Blessing for Israel may consist in more, but not less, than a proclamation of the good news.

Do you remember the account, in Numbers 22-24, of Balak, King of Moab, who wanted to stop Israel's immigration? He hired Balaam to curse Israel. But a strange thing happened - every time that he tried to curse Israel, he blessed Israel. Not only could he not curse Israel, but he could not bless Israel without speaking of the Messiah (cf. Numbers 24:17)! Some contemporary Christian Zionists are trying to "bless" Israel without reference to the Messiah, but in their futile attempts, they have lost the only possibility of truly blessing the people of Zion. Every time they try to bless, they curse.

Their misuse of scripture and their attempts to curry favor

with non-believers at any cost, reveal that their real reason for neglecting Jewish evangelism is not rational. They have been seduced.

What is the difference between persuasion (which is good) and seduction (which is bad)? Persuasion is an appeal to the mind in order to affect a man's will. Seduction is an appeal to the emotions and desires to affect the will. James (in 4:4) says:

You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

That is a sobering warning. In the context of our encounter with Jewish people, "the world" is the world of Jewish unbelief. To be friends with this world, is not to be equated with a love for the Jewish people.

The dialogue movement, however, has obviously played a part in such an identification. Some Jewish leaders have approached dialogue with a hidden, ulterior motive: first, to separate Christians' political support from their commitment to evangelism, then, and then to strengthen the former and eliminate the latter.

You see, these Christian Zionists made a critical mistake. They thought that they were fishermen, but when fishermen don't fish, they become - in this case, at least - the prey of others.

Don't you see the irony? They deny having a "hidden agenda." They speak about "hiding the hook," as though they were the fishermen, but in actual fact, they have been the unwitting objects of a very real "hidden agenda," and they themselves have swallowed the hook.

They have been seduced by the possibility of acceptance by the non-believing Jewish community. They have denied the priceless treasure of the gospel seed out of a fear of rejection and of opposition. Friends, it is better to be divided by the proclamation of the truth than to be loved for a deceitful silence. It is better to be divided by the truth, than to be united with a lie. We need to commit ourselves to giving a reason for the hope which is in us - in season and out of season.

One ship sails east,
And one ship sails west,
Regardless of how the wind blows.

It is the set of the sail,
And not the gale,
That determines the way we go.
(Swindoll)

Evangelism is a commitment. It is not a choice which is affected by the winds of adversity or public opinion, but a determination which is set by an inner compass.

Works cited :

Christians and Israel: A Quarterly Publication from Jerusalem,
Vol.1, No.2 (Spring, 1992).

Encyclopaedia Judaica. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd.
(N.Y.: Macmillan Co.), 1971.

Guralnik, David B. (Editor in Chief). Webster's New World
Dictionary of the American Language (Second College Edition).
N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1984.

Ice, Thomas. Dispensational Distinctives, II:1 (January/February,
1992)

Swindoll, Charles. Untitled poem heard on Insight for Living.
Criswell Broadcasting Network. KCBI, Dallas, Texas. 9
September 1992. [Based on "The Winds of Fate" by Ella
Wheeler Wilcox in Best Loved Poems of the American People,
selected by Hazel Felleman. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday,
1936, p.364.]

Taylor, Mendell. Exploring Evangelism: History, Methods, Theology.
Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press, 1964.

Willmington, H. L. and Ray Pritz. Israel at Forty. Wheaton,
Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1987.