

BETHLEHEM BIBLE COLLEGE
CHRIST AT THE CHECKPOINT
 Theology in the Service of Peace & Justice



By Rev. Alex Awad

The focus of my presentation is *Palestinian Christians in the Shadow of Christian Zionism*. I will reflect on my personal experiences to demonstrate the impact of Christian Zionism on Palestinian Christians and on the Church of the Holy Land. To highlight the significance of this theme, I want to give three illustrations:

1. John Hagee, a well-known Evangelical leader from the United States said recently, and I quote:

“The United States must join Israel in a pre-emptive military strike against Iran to fulfill God’s plan for both Israel and the West...a biblically prophesied end-time confrontation with Iran, which will lead to the Rapture, Tribulation, and Second Coming of Christ.” (John Hagee).

2. “One Sunday afternoon in July 2000, many members and pastors of local Evangelical congregations from the Palestinian territories and Arab East Jerusalem had gathered at the Bethlehem Hotel in Bethlehem in order to celebrate the formation of a new council. An American woman who was present at the meeting approached one of the pastors and asked permission to say a few words to the desiring to show courtesy to the unknown guest, likewise a Palestinian pastor, if the lady could say moderator, totally unaware of what the woman nonetheless agreed to let her talk. When the lady neither I nor the others present could believe the of her mouth! She declared to the Palestinian Christians assembled that she had a “word from the “God,” she said, wanted them all to “leave Israel and countries.” She added that they must leave to make chosen people, the Jews. Moreover, she warned the



Rev. Alex Awad is pastor of the East Jerusalem Baptist Church and a Professor and Dean of Students at Bethlehem Bible College.

audience that if they did not listen to the instructions through her, God would pour out his wrath on them. outrageous agenda became clear, one of the pastors away from the pulpit, but not before she had assembly a dose of what many Palestinians regard as propaganda.”¹

assembly. The pastor, asked the emcee, her few words. The might say, took the microphone, words that came out Evangelical Lord” for them: go to other Arab room for God’s pastors and the

which God had given As soon as the lady’s came and whisked her delivered to the whole Christian Zionist

3. Film clip: Reverend Nihad Salman’s experience.

What causes these some Evangelical leaders and followers to hold to such positions? This is what we wish to humbly and prayerfully discuss in this conference. Before I go any further, let me give a short definition of the term ‘Christian Zionism’; **Christian Zionism is a movement within the church that supported and continues to shore up political, economic, and military assistance to the State of Israel on the basis of the belief that the current State of Israel is a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy.** Christian Zionists also believe that by supporting the State of Israel, they curry favor with God and they speed up the second coming of Jesus Christ. I wish to clarify that while one may find more Christian Zionists among Evangelicals, Christian Zionism has **spread her tentacles** through various media outlets to many Christians in 1 From Palestinian Memories the US and else where in the world, even among denominations that do not classify themselves as Evangelicals. I want to also clarify that while many Christians **hold to aspects** of Christian Zionism, most Evangelical Christians would not wish to be labeled as Christian Zionists, and if

one would ask them the question **"Are you a Christian Zionist?"** they wouldn't know what one is talking about.

Christian Zionism **came to existence** through the influence of a theological school called dispensationalism and it has spread among western Christians via publications and religious media networks. **A dispensationalist believes that God divided history into dispensations (periods of history) and that the Jewish people will be gathered into the Holy Land during the last dispensation.** Dispensationalism has been and continues to be **the theological vehicle that leads many Christians into the bosom of Zionism.** Therefore one cannot challenge Christian Zionism on political grounds without dealing with the theological bases of dispensationalism. We have with us, in this conference, capable theologians who will be addressing the teachings of dispensationalism (both pro and con) in greater details. I will briefly discuss the impacts of these teachings on me, my people and my church.

Effect of War of 1967 and its challenge

My first significant encounter with dispensationalism and with Christian Zionism took place immediately after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War when I was a student at my own denomination's Bible College in Switzerland. The denomination and the college held to and taught the dispensational point of view and both believed that Israel must take over all the land of Palestine and much more before the second coming of Jesus. At first, these theological concepts did not worry me much as long as they were just theories for theological speculations. After the war, I began to take these theories seriously. What concerned me and infuriated another Arab Christian student from Syria, who also attended the same College, is that our professors and our colleagues were excited at the end of the war because Israel defeated three Arab nations and seized the West Bank from Jordan, the Golan Heights from Syria and the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt. Their exhilaration was due to their belief that God miraculously stood with Israel and helped Israel in order to fulfill Biblical prophecies and to speed up the return of Jesus. The victory of Israel over three Arab nations was also a confirmation for them that the theories we were studying in class were true. While my friend and I were grieving the death and the destruction that the bloody war caused on many innocent people, our friends were celebrating what they thought was a fulfillment of Biblical prophecies. They were totally indifferent and insensitive to the ravages of war and its toll on human life. That experience caused me to wake up and start to ask my self hard questions:



1. Did God really give my country to the Jewish people?
2. Were the wars of 1948 and 1967 acts of God? Did God actually intervene on behalf of the Zionists? Is God also excited over the devastation inflicted on Palestinians and Arabs (both Muslims and Christians?)
3. Are modern secular Jews and Zionists who created the state of Israel God's chosen people?
4. Are my friend and I and our people on the wrong side of prophecy?
5. Are we wrong to be indignant while our friends were so jubilant?
6. Is the Bible--the book that I love so much and the book that revealed God's love to me through Jesus Christ and the book that I came to study at this Bible College—behind the suffering and the humiliation of my people?

All of these conflicting thoughts caused me quite a spiritual crisis. But that crisis drove me to study the Bible diligently. Now I was motivated to find out for my self if the current State of Israel is an extension of Biblical Israel. I wanted to find out for myself if prophecies uttered by prophets in the Old Testament over 2500 years ago address what is happening in the Middle East today. The more I studied the Bible, both the Old and the New Testaments, the more I realized that these concepts and assumptions advocated so strongly by hard-line dispensationalists and Christian Zionists are just theories of interpretation that belong to an older covenant and can't withstand the winds of genuine biblical exegesis. My studies caused me to doubt dispensationalism and yet have greater faith in and love for the Bible and the God of the Bible.

At Lee University

Because of the occupation of Bethlehem in 1967 by Israeli forces, I was not allowed to return to Palestine after I finished my studies in Europe. However, by an act of divine providence, I received a scholarship to attend Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee. In the States I was overwhelmed at the spread of Christian Zionism. At an occasion during Christmas 1968, I was asked along with other international students to present a program for the student chapel where each international student would speak about how Christmas is celebrated in his or her country. When it was my turn to share, and the student body realized that I was coming from Bethlehem, there was a hush in

the auditorium. Every one wanted to hear what I had to say about Christmas in Bethlehem. I began with the positive and spoke about how the heads of the churches and other VIP's and dignitaries travel in a great procession with pomp and circumstance to Bethlehem's Manger Square on Christmas Eve. I then shared about the midnight mass at the Church of the Nativity. I also spoke on how Palestinian Christian families celebrate Christmas Day by visiting each other, exchanging gifts, etc. Finally I came to speak about the challenges faced by the Christian community in Bethlehem as they celebrated the birth of Christ under military occupation and asked the student body to pray for peace and to pray for an end to the oppression of the Christians in Bethlehem. To my surprise, at that moment, there was a stirring among the thousand students in the auditorium and a 'boo' that filled the auditorium told me that the students did not like my comments on the Israeli occupation of Bethlehem. I would probably have had a similar reaction had I shared in most evangelical Bible Colleges or Seminaries in the USA at that time.

At Seminary in Missouri

After college, I went to a Baptist Seminary in Missouri. One day the students were invited to see a film on the Holy Land at a nearby church. The name of the film was "Apples of Gold." The film celebrated fulfillment of Biblical prophecies and cited Israel's victory over the Arabs in 1948 as a miracle and as a sign of the end times. I had heard this before in evangelical circles and by now I was used to it, even though I was never comfortable with it. But what disturbed me most about the film is that in the introduction it showed a Bedouin caravan on camels traveling through the desert and the film narrator expressed regret that these nomads who had roamed the

wilderness for so many years, had to leave their lands for the victorious Israelis who were returning to their homeland and are turning the desert into a Garden of Eden. When I heard this, I immediately moved out of my seat and found my way through the dark of the church's aisles to the front where the pastor was sitting. I told him that I was from Jerusalem and I wished to make a comment when the film was over. The pastor was kind enough to agree. I told the people that I am a Palestinian Christian born in Jerusalem and that I felt insulted by the film that depicted the Palestinian peoples as wondering nomads on camels. I explained that Palestinians have cities and a culture in Bible Lands that go back at least 6,000 years. I told them that I was one of the 800, 000 Palestinians who lost their land and became refugees in 1948 and that my family was living in a house in West Jerusalem and not in a Bedouin tent. Regretfully I thought, after I left the church, how many thousands of times this film would be shown in churches across the United States with no one to stand up to challenge its false and damaging propaganda.

Revival Meetings at a Church in Kansas City

A few weeks after that, I was invited to a church for a special revival meeting. The speaker took verses from the book of Isaiah and other Bible passages to prove that Gamal Abdul Nasser, then president of Egypt, was the "beast" of the book of Revelation. At the end of the service, when I spoke with the evangelist and expressed my disagreement with his interpretation, he profusely apologized to me. Not because I convinced him his interpretations were wrong, but rather because his sermon offended me. That kind of preaching must have offended untold number of Arab Christians and Muslims who visited churches or heard sermons via radio or TV in the USA.

On TV in Kansas City

In Kansas City I was invited to appear on a TV program hosted by Campus Crusade for Christ for a live debate with an Israeli representative. After the debate the lines were open for people to ask questions or make comments. What astonished me at that point was that when I expressed my opinions in rebuttal, many who watched the program, called the station and commented that since I held such views, I could not be a Bible believing Christian and certainly I shouldn't be a pastor in an Evangelical Church. Such experiences are not only mine; every Arab Christian that attends an evangelical church, around the world, will sooner or later confront similar experiences.

Global influence of Zionism on the Church

1. Brazil

I once was invited along with a Messianic Jewish believer to speak at a Christian conference in Brazil while at the same time making preparations for a visit of the Bethlehem Bible College choir to travel on tour a year later. At the conference near Sao Paulo, I was shocked upon entering the conference hall to see that there were no Christian symbols at all--not even one cross. But there were huge round posters with the Star of David printed on them. They were placed on the walls all around the auditorium and there was a huge Menorah (candle sticks) right on the stage. At the outset of the service they had a procession. Men who dressed up as Old Testament Jewish priests carried a replica of the Ark of the Covenant and paraded towards the stage. Along with them were women who also dressed in long white robes and marched as they sang hosannas and waved palm branches. Seeing all of this, I was totally disturbed. I went to the leader who invited us and I told him I am ready to go home. He innocently asked, "What is wrong?" I said, "I thought I was coming to a Christian meeting. But everything around me here tells me that I am at a Jewish festival." He apologized with much humility and said, "Alex, you are here to teach us. Tell us what you want to us to do." I

responded, "Next time I come to the auditorium, I do not wish to see the Star of David all over the place and please remove the Menorah from the stage and stop the Ark of the Covenant procession and see if you can place a cross somewhere." He did! And I stayed.

2. Canada

About five years ago, World Vision Jerusalem, invited me to speak at a workshop for an Evangelical Conference in Canada called *Mission Fest*. The head of the Christian Embassy in Jerusalem was invited to be a key note speaker at that conference. World Vision thought it would be good for the people at the conference to get a Palestinian Christian point of view for the sake of making balance. I arrived in Toronto, Canada before the conference with much excitement about the opportunity to share. But a couple of days before the conference began, a representative of World Vision in Canada called me and asked me if I would consider uninviting my self from speaking at the Conference. The reason given was that one of the major sponsors of the conference threatened that he and his people would pull out if my speech stayed on the program. Of course, I did not want to force my way and speak at a conference where I was not welcome and I agreed to attend the conference but not to speak. At that conference the people heard only one view. You can imagine which one.

3. In New Zealand

On another personal note, I can talk about the time when my wife, Brenda and I were invited to teach and preach in many cities in New Zealand by two organizations--Tear Fund, NZ and the Bible College of New Zealand (now called Laidlaw College). My message was welcomed by most folks who heard us. However a few Christian Zionists staged a stiff opposition and tried their best to stop us from sharing. By the end of my Sabbatical in New Zealand, a circular email was going around which attributed to me the title "Wolf in Sheep's Clothing." My experiences in New Zealand, Canada, and Brazil taught me that wherever one finds Evangelicals in the world, one also finds advocates of Christian Zionism among them. The good news, however, is that in all these countries, Christian Zionists are a minority among Evangelicals and their influence on the church worldwide is declining.



Bethlehem Bible College was founded in 1979 by local Arab Christians.

What is my message that outraged so many Christian Zionists?

Here is a summary of what I teach:

We are all God's chosen people through faith in Jesus Christ whether we are Jews or non-Jews. We are all equally favored by God because of the Cross of Christ.

The Kingdom of God, as Jesus has taught us, is no more limited to specific geographical boundaries such as Jerusalem, Judea or Samaria. God's Kingdom is in the hearts of men and women who put their trust in Christ regardless of where they live. We do not have to fight in the name of God and gain territory to usher the Kingdom God.

The body of Christ is called to engage in peacemaking. We seek to reconcile Israelis with Palestinians rather than use our Holy Bible and our theological speculations to stand with one side of the conflict against the other. I am not anti Jewish and I never called for the destruction of the State of Israel. I do not advocate replacement theology; meaning that God has rejected the Jewish people and replaced them with the church. I espouse a theology of inclusion. The apostle Paul introduced this theology of inclusion 2000 years ago when he said to the Galatian Church: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." Gal 3:26-29 (NIV). The Apostle was echoing what John the Evangelist writes in his Gospel: "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." John 1: 11-13 (NIV)

Beyond Personal or Emotional Harm

I have shared with you experiences that are illustrations of the religious and emotional effects of Christian Zionism

on Palestinian Christians. However, these challenges go deeper than these personal encounters. It will take years of research to calculate the harmful effects of Christian Zionism on Palestinian Christianity, the Palestinian people in general and Arab Christianity throughout the Middle

East. Let me illustrate:

The uncritical support of Christian Zionist leaders for the Zionist project in Palestine did not **only hinder a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict**, but it endorsed the **most radical Israeli positions**.

Christian Zionist leaders stood firmly with Israel during every war against Palestinians and Arabs. They saw modern Israel as the new Joshua liberating the Promised Land in preparation for the second coming of Christ.

Through the years, Christian Zionist leaders did not only shower Israel with billions of dollars to bring Jews from around the world and settle them in the West Bank, but they also stood against US presidents who were considering exerting pressure on Israel to stop building Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Religious leaders such as the late Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and John Hagee often threatened US presidents to turn 40 million American Evangelicals against them if their administrations moved to pressure Israel to withdraw its troops from the West Bank. TV evangelist Pat Robertson was openly critical of President George W Bush for supporting the Israeli pullout from the Gaza Strip. He considered the devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina as a direct punishment from God against the US for pressuring Israel to withdraw from Gaza. When Ariel Sharon fell in coma, Robertson publicly declared to his TV audiences that this was a punishment from God on Sharon for withdrawing Israelis from Gaza. This uncritical support for the Israeli war machine and the settlement policies and the strong support for the war against Iraq and all the following US wars based on theology is what I consider the spiritual captivity of the Evangelical Church. Due to their eagerness to fulfill Biblical prophecy and their zeal in support for the secular State of Israel, many evangelical leaders slid off their God-given tracks. Another side effect of this uncritical support of many, although not all, Evangelical leaders to the radical policies of the State of Israel is the cultivation within the many evangelical and some other Churches of a strong anti Islamic culture. After September 11, many evangelical leaders began openly preaching messages of hate against Muslims and Islam. I am glad that



The Gaza Baptist Church is on the main street in Gaza, Omar Mukhtar Street, next to a Mosque

Brother Andrew and Colin Chapman are with us in this conference and they can address this issue with the attention it deserves. But what I want to briefly say is that Zionist evangelical leaders have contributed to a culture of hate against Muslims and Islam through their TV shows, radio and publications. Islam, in their opinion, has replaced communism and became the new enemy of God. One Evangelical pastor told me recently that Christians are destined to fight with Muslims until the second coming of Jesus. Our Bible teaches us that Christians are called to love Muslims until the end of time.

Global Harmful effects of Christian Zionism

I choose to reject and expose the teachings of Christian Zionism not only because of their harmful effects on Palestinian Christianity, its hurtful effects on my people and its destructive effects on the possibility for peace in the Middle East, but also because of its harmful effects on the Evangelical church world wide. What are these harmful effects?

- 1. Militarizing the Church. Making the Church stand for war and aggression in the Name of God.**
- 2. Cultivating a culture of hate against Muslims, Arabs and Palestinians.**
- 3. Promoting an anti-peace culture and agenda within the Church.**

It does not make me happy to be critical of the Evangelical Church. To point to the short comings of my church is like pointing to the negative characteristics of members of my family. It is like being critical of my own son or daughter. I am so thankful for the evangelical church and its influence on my life. I do not want my church to slide off its God given tracks. However, when it does, it is the responsibility of every God fearing Evangelical to steer the church back on its tracks. I wish to see an evangelical church preaching the gospel of God's love and salvation, as well as peace and reconciliation.

Can you imagine what would be the condition of the Church in the Middle East today had 40-60 million Evangelicals in the United States been taught to be committed to the gospel of peace?

Can you imagine the volume of death, destruction and suffering that could have been avoided had evangelicals, in the last few decades, used their energies and zeal to stand with the gospel of peace?

Can you imagine what would happen in the next 5 years, if Evangelicals heed the message of Christ and engage in bringing the blessings of the Gospel of peace to this troubled area of the world?

I call on my evangelical brothers and sisters to take another look at the Bible and discover a theology regarding this land that is in harmony with the loving character of God as revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ. I call on my church, the Evangelical church, to be a peacemaker. Take my hand, a Palestinian, and take the hand of my Israeli neighbor and put them together. I call on my church, to take hands of Christians and place them in the hands of Muslims across the great divide thus promoting a culture of peace. From Bethlehem the birthplace of the Prince of Peace, I call on Evangelicals to exert all effort on leaders in the United States and elsewhere in the world to use their influence to promote an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict. This is why we are here. This is the message and hope of this conference, *Christ at the Checkpoint: Theology in the Service of Peace and Justice*.

Rev. Awad made this presentation to the Christ At The Checkpoint conference in 2010. For information about the upcoming conference in March, 2012 go to: <http://www.christatthecheckpoint.com/>