

Christian Zionism & Social Justice

Examining the issues behind the 'Christ at the Checkpoint' Conference in Bethlehem

By Rev. Malcolm Hedding - March 6, 2012

A new initiative

Certain segments of evangelical Christianity are being drawn away from the movement's traditional support for Israel by those claiming the moral high ground in advocating for "social justice." Many of these liberal, anti-Israel Evangelicals are showing up at the "Christ at the Checkpoint" conference in Bethlehem this week. They invariably view Israel as an occupying power oppressing the Palestinians. They use Israel's security "Wall" as a prominent symbol of the "injustices" being committed against the Palestinians. One has to admit that the imagery is powerful and it takes well informed minds to counter them.

The lack of information has started to dupe many Evangelicals, who are being shamed into abandoning Israel because they are supposedly uncompassionate and blocking peace. Indeed, this new initiative aims to totally discredit pro-Israel Evangelicals with clever lies and distortions! As David Solway recently observed in this paper, "The usual understanding of Israel as an aggressive, colonial, apartheid state robbing the Palestinians of their heritage is quite possibly the greatest political scam of modern times. It is the outcome of a mixture of historical amnesia, ideological prejudice and reflex hostility, which keep it mind-proof."

An old story

Social justice must be built on the truth, and sometimes the truth hurts, as Newt Gingrich recently demonstrated. The fact is that the Jewish people have a four thousand year-old claim and connection to the Land of Israel. No other people in history have ever built a nation here - including the Palestinians. Yet you would never know this if you listened to the narrative promoted by these Evangelicals now demanding social justice for the Palestinians.

The truth is that the Jews came back to their ancient homeland in peace, and when Arab leaders launched a war against the re-born nation of Israel in 1948 in order to "drive the Jews into the sea," the Palestinians lost the battle and a whole lot more. Does the aggressor deserve social justice in such an instance?

The truth is that when the PLO was founded in 1964, its charter focused primarily on eliminating the state of Israel, rather than laying out the framework for building a Palestinian state. Again, does the aggressor deserve social justice in this case?

The truth is that Israel has made repeated offers for peace, most notably with the Oslo initiative of the 1990s, but Palestinian leaders rejected these overtures and again escalated the conflict, resulting in more losses. Israel demonstrated its commitment to justice by offering risky and painful concessions involving lands crucial to its security and central to the Jewish people's historic identity. But PLO leader Yasser Arafat proved to be a dishonest peace partner who never intended to keep his side of the Oslo agreements. This he clearly stated in a Johannesburg mosque in 1994, a mere five months after he had shaken Yitzhak Rabin's hand on the White House lawn. Instead, he prepared his people for an even deadlier intifada against Israel. Once more, should this pattern of aggression be rewarded under the rubric of social justice?

Rather, given this Palestinian duplicity, it is the Israelis who are more deserving of justice! The same can also be said in the case of Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005. For the sake of peace, thousands of Gush Katif residents were uprooted and are still struggling to recover, yet the Palestinian response has been 12,000 rockets on the western Negev! Does this not cry out for social justice?

Yet sadly, these stark truths are denied, distorted and conveniently ignored because far too many still harbor old hatreds and toxic ideologies against the Jews and their re-born nation.

The fact is, the Palestinian leadership has time and time again robbed their own people of justice and should be held accountable. By now they could have had a state with a share of Jerusalem as its capital, but they do not - all because they could not embrace justice, courage and honesty.

The new reality

That a people now exist called the Palestinians is a reality. Three generations have brought this people to a place of widespread recognition. No one can or should deny it. The current generation remains trapped in the never-ending campaign to destroy Israel, and yet it will surprise many to learn that today Palestinians in the West Bank enjoy a higher standard of living, education and economic prosperity than their counterparts elsewhere in the region. Why is this? Because their economy is intertwined with that of Israel's successful economy. Given the chaos of the "Arab Spring," the West Bank is an island of prosperity! This sounds like economic justice to me!

More justice could be done, but Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas seems more content to continue the plotting of Israel's destruction, as seen in his renewed efforts to cement a unity pact with Hamas. There can be no mistake about the significance of this, as it puts the Palestinians on a collision course with Israel once again. This partnership with "jihad" would affirm their commitment, as always, to Israel's annihilation. So Israeli leaders have little choice but to tighten security to protect their citizens from harm. Aggression against Israel will continue and the Palestinian people will pay the price in having to be continuously subjected to

checkpoints, searches, general security measures and barrier walls. We should all weep over this human tragedy and truly Jesus does weep at the checkpoint, but not for a twisted brand of social justice.

The need for compassion

So where should the Church be in all of this? Social justice will take hold when leaders are transparent, honest and really committed to peace. No wonder the Apostle Paul exhorted us to place leaders in authority at the very top of our prayer lists.

Secondly, we need to recognize that there are real men, women, boys and girls trapped in this conflict on both sides and they need help, care, love and compassion. In Jesus' day, whole communities of one type or another were caught in the conflict that Rome brought to the region. Jesus almost exclusively ignored the conflict but healed the sick, fed the hungry, loved the stranger (even the Roman one) and lifted up the broken-hearted. He blessed the children, sat with sinners and taught the multitudes about God.

So our hearts should break as we witness ordinary Palestinian people confronting the hard reality of having to live behind walls and impeded on a daily basis by security checks. We should also weep for Jewish families that have had their children brutally murdered and torn from them. This is no way to live!

Thus, while some Evangelicals gather to reinforce their distorted narrative and lay blame for everything at Israel's door, let us ask them how many millions of shekels they have invested in the social uplifting of Palestinians? I am the erstwhile leader of one of the largest Christian Zionist organizations in the world, and I can testify that we have invested considerable sums in humanitarian relief on both sides of the divide. We have cared for everyone, just as Jesus did and still does. This is social justice on the move! It is not selective but gives "voice" to the biblical truth that Jesus loves all people the same.

The Christian message demands that we hold to the truth, that which is biblical and historical, and that we bring to all the peoples of the Middle East a message of love and hope. When we do this we will be mediators of social justice.

Rev. Malcolm Hedding is Vice-Chairman of the ICEJ's International Board of Directors and served in Jerusalem as the ministry's Executive Director from 2000-2011. This article was first published in The Jerusalem Post on March 6th, 2012.