

Protagonist Corner

The Danger of Christian Zionism in the U.S.

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In an article “*Mixing Prophecy and Politics: Christian Zionists Are Growing in Influence*,” Jane Lampman tells the story of Ray Sanders and his wife Sharon who grew up on a farm in the American Midwest. They now live in Israel and raise millions of dollars from American churches to support the illegal Israeli Jewish settlements in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza.

Ray Sander’s change of heart began in the late 1970s when he read Hal Lindsay’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*. This best seller of apocalyptic visions led Sanders to sell his farm and go to a Bible college in Texas. Lindsay’s book, says Sanders, “awakened our understanding of Israel and its prophetic role in the Last Days.” Sanders, sitting in his spacious Jerusalem office, tells Lampman that this understanding of Israel “was a real paradigm shift in our lives.” As a consequence Sanders helped found a Christian Zionist organization called “Christian Friends of Israel.” Lampman explains the theology and political vision of Christian Zionists: “For Christian Zionists, the modern State of Israel is the fulfillment of God’s Covenant with Abraham and the center of His action from now to the second coming of Christ and final Battle of Armageddon, when the Antichrist will be defeated. But before this can occur, they say biblical prophecy foretells the return of Jews from other countries.” According to this apocalyptic vision, Israel must possess all the land between the Euphrates and the Nile rivers and must rebuild the temple in Jerusalem where the Muslim Dome of the Rock now stands.¹

All preachers of the Christian gospel must challenge this theology that is taught and preached in many fundamentalists, independent, and Pentecostal churches. It is not an indifferent matter but one of utmost theological and political urgency. Most Christian broadcast networks in the U.S. and Christian television evangelists like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell hold to this end-times scenario. The Left Behind series, fostering this dispensational view, is selling by the millions each year. My questions to pastors are very simple. “Do you know what Zionism is?” “Do you know what Christian Zionism is?” “Have you struggled with the critical theological and political implications of Christian Zionism and its apocalyptic visions?” “How can your preaching help the issue of justice in the Israel-Palestine conflict?”

As a means of understanding this issue, let me suggest the following books for your reading, study, and research:

1. *Christian Zionism, Roadmap to Armageddon?* By Stephen Sizer
2. *Whose Promised Land* by Colin Chapman
3. *What Land? Whose Promise?* by Gary Burge
4. *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique* by Michael Prior
5. *Dying in the Land of Promise: Palestinian Christianity from Pentecost to Present* by Donald Wagner

The 216th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) meeting in Richmond, Virginia, July, 2004 stated that Christian Zionism is neither biblical nor

Reformed. The Presbytery of Chicago originated this resolution having seen that Christian Zionism as a doctrine and movement is becoming a dangerous part of American Christianity and religious culture. For the purpose of this article, I want to add to the definition of Christian Zionism given by Lampman and challenge readers to begin thinking seriously about the danger of Christian Zionism nationally and globally. Thoughtful pastors and theological professors need to begin doing some focused writing and in-depth research on this issue for local congregations and denominational use.

In order to address Christian Zionism, some attention must first be given to Zionism itself. Zionism has been defined as, “The national movement for the return of the Jewish people to their homeland and the resumption of Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel.”² The term *Zionism* was first used in 1892 by Nathan Birnbaum, then a student in Vienna. A year later he published a booklet entitled *The National Rebirth of the Jewish People in its Homeland as a Means of Solving the Jewish Problem* in which he advocated Jewish nationalistic ideas that Theodor Hertzl was to expound in his book *A Jewish State*, published in 1896. In 1897 Hertzl convened the First World Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland and that Congress adopted Theodor Hertzl’s four stage plan:

1. For the world Jewish Community to be united and accept Zionism as a liberation movement for the Jewish people. [This process was begun in the First Zionist Congress.]
2. To make the above aspiration of the people accepted globally. [This process received strong encouragement through the Balfour Declaration in 1917 when the British supported a homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine.]
3. By immigration of the Jewish people to Palestine. [After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire both England and France controlled the Middle East and the Jewish immigration to Palestine developed in several stages.]
4. In 1948 Israel was established under the sanction of the United Nations as a Jewish State in Palestine. [This reflected, among other things, the West’s sense of guilt over the Holocaust and the killing of more than 6 million Jews in death camps and gas chambers. Few in the West asked: “What will happen to the Palestinian Arab Christians and Muslims of Palestine?”]

For Israeli Jewish people, May 15, 1948, is an independence day and a day of celebration. For Palestinian people, it is a day of “Nakbah” or “Catastrophe,” because Israel was created and built by the expulsion of more than 800,000 Palestinian Arab Christians and Muslims from historic Palestine. More than 415 Palestinian Arab villages and towns were destroyed—many simply bulldozed. This little known historic fact is very important for understanding Christian Zionism.

Christian Zionism emerged within this context and can be defined as Christian support for Zionism. The term “Christian Zionist” was apparently first used by Theodor Hertzl to describe Henri Durant, the Swiss philanthropist and founder of the

Red Cross. Durant was one of only a handful of Gentiles to be invited to the First World Zionist Congress.

The situation on the ground today in Israel and Palestine looks like this: First, the Israeli population has—within its border of 1948-1967—6.5 million people. Of these, 5.5 million are Israeli Jews and 1 million are Palestinian Arabs, all citizens of the State of Israel, including many Palestinian Christians. Second, in the 1967 War, Israel captured and occupied the rest of the Palestinian land of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza. The West Bank and East Jerusalem have a population of 2.7 million Palestinian Arabs—Muslim and Christian, and the Gaza area has 1.3 million Palestinian Arabs—Muslim and Christian. Christian Zionism, ignoring these realities, teaches that the land belongs exclusively to Jewish people. The fact that 4 million Palestinian Arabs have churches 2000 years old or mosques 1300 years old is treated by Christian Zionists as though they are there against the will of God and they must be removed, violently if necessary. The question for American preachers and teachers is, “What is to happen to the 5 million Palestinian Arab Muslims and Christians who live in Israel and the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, and who belong to the land like every human being that lives on this planet earth?” If we support the Christian Zionist plan, then we must understand that we are, in fact, supporting ethnic cleansing and pure racism.

If we do not support ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in their native land, then we must cast aside our indifference and ecumenical politeness, address in our pulpits and in our Sunday Schools the heresy of Christian Zionism, and show in disciplined Christian love that Christian Zionism’s exegesis is deeply flawed. At the same time we must speak a word of justice for both the Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs. They must share the land and live together as brothers and sisters within the geographical boundaries of Israel and Palestine. I challenge pastors to visit the land and the people but most of all through preaching and teaching to work for justice, reconciliation, and peace between the Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs.

We in the United States who are friends of Israel can help Israel make peace with Egypt and Jordan—and we did—and I hope we can help Israel make peace with Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and all of the Arab countries as well. If we fail to make peace between the Israeli Jews and the Palestinian Arabs, then the war will continue according to the American Christian Zionist agenda that wants to move toward a speedy battle of Armageddon and wants the present bloody war to continue to destroy both Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs. Theology does matter because today the American Christian Zionist theology is influencing our American policy in the Middle East to become more militaristic and bloody. We can ignore Christian Zionist theology to our own peril.

Notes

1. *Christian Science Monitor*, July 7, 2005, 17.
2. *Jewish Vintage Library*, <http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/Zionism/Zionism.html>